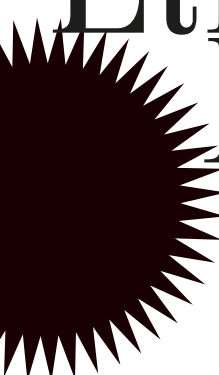


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# Extremism: Destruction of Democracy and Ethno-confessional politics

## AN ANALYSIS OF SERBIA'S RIGHT-WING ATTITUDES



**HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA**

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*This analysis is based on interviews with sympathizers and members of right-wing groups, organizations, and political parties. Sociologists Milena Toković and Aleksandra Marković, along with psychologists Jarmila Bujak Stanko and Izabela Kisić participated in constructing the questionnaire. In the preliminary stages, sociologist Milena Toković participated in data analysis. The interviews with respondents were conducted by Iskra Nikolić, a sociology graduate.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, right-wing, populist and extremist populist parties and politicians have become an important factor in the Western Hemisphere and, in many cases, they have come to power or entered institutions (either as the opposition in parliaments or as partners in the executive branch of power). In Serbia, this process started more than four decades ago, when Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and his nationalist-populist policy caused the wartime disintegration of Yugoslavia and massive war casualties. Since then, ethno-confessional nationalism has been the main ideology, while political elites have been keeping Serbia far from the rule of law, the values of pluralism and respect for minorities and human rights. Instead, corruption, the government's ties with criminal groups and control over the media create a toxic social atmosphere that obstructs any change.<sup>1</sup> The media are dominated by a strong narrative against the European Union and NATO.

Russia's strategic interest in the Balkans is to keep Serbia in a state of latent conflict as long as possible. The Serbian government

does not oppose Milorad Dodik's threats of secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina; it maintains ties with pro-Russian and pro-Serb parties in Montenegro and tries to maintain the status quo in Kosovo. Russia's malignant influence has deeply penetrated into all state and social structures.<sup>2</sup>

The armed attack against the Kosovo police, which was carried out by the paramilitary group led by Milan Radoičić in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo in September 2023 and in which one Kosovo policeman and three attackers were killed, pointed to the danger of a wider action by armed groups under Serbian control and the fragility of the entire region. After the Banjska attack, Radoičić took refuge in Serbia and admitted his responsibility for staging the attack on police officers in northern Kosovo. However, he was released but he was released from custody after less than 24 hours. The court that ruled on his release ordered him not to leave his home. Interpol issued a warrant for Radoičić and 18 other persons who participated in the Banjska attack at the request of the Kosovo police.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See more in : "Srbija: geopolitičko i vrednosno opredeljenje", Helsinški Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade 2024. <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/iagainszvestaj%202023.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> About Serbia's geopolitical orientation, Russian influence, relations with the EU and in the region, Serbian imperial nationalism and security structures, see the report "Serbia: Geopolitical and Value-Based Determination", Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Srbija: Geopolitičko i vrednosno opredeljenje,

In February 2024, a video appeared on social media on the occasion of Milan Radoičić's birthday celebration at the most exclusive ski resort in Serbia – Kopaonik. In this video several men can be seen holding a wide banner with the inscription "Happy Birthday, Commander!". One man appeared in front of the banner. He was filmed from behind, but judging by his build this was Milan Radoičić.<sup>4</sup> Radoičić is a Serbian businessman and, until the Banjska attack, he was the Vice-President of the Serbian List in Kosovo, the party controlled by official Belgrade. Until the publication of this report, the court proceedings against Radoičić and his group have not started. In the meantime, the photo of Milan Radoičić with the Serbian Ambassador to the United States, Marko Đurić, in a restaurant was published. The date of the photo has not been released.

## THE SUBJECT OF THE ANALYSIS

The anti-democratic and authoritarian behaviour of the Serbian authorities, the violation of human rights and the dominance of ethno-confessional identity policy<sup>5</sup> pervade all spheres of institutional and social life, which makes it very difficult for research to distinguish between extremist groups and the mainstream when it comes to the study of extremism. Namely, while democratic societies show strong resistance to right-wing extremism, in Serbia it spreads

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2024, <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj%202023.pdf>

4 "Nemanja Šarović objavio snimak na kojem se vidi vatromet na Kopaoniku, navodno, u čast rođendana Milana Radoičića: Srećan rođendan, komandante", *Danas Online*, 22. februar 2024, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/milan-radoicic-nemanja-sarovic/>

5 See more about identity in "Srbija: izgradnja države, držvanog i nacionalnog identiteta", *October*, 2023, <https://helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/HB-Br169.pdf>

through society from the top and is socialized, which is reflected in the frequent hate speeches of the politicians in power, the promotion of convicted war criminals and their participation in public and official life and cooperation with the ruling parties, the impunity of extremists, the non-implementation of laws and the like.

Therefore, researchers are faced with numerous questions and challenges. While American and European researchers are focused on the causes of the retreat of democracy and the entry of extremism into the mainstream, the ideology that is characterized by "anti-democratic opposition towards equality"<sup>6</sup> has been dominant in Serbia since the late 1980s, which makes it extremely difficult to create a strategy for the prevention and suppression of extremism.

In this analysis we have examined different dimensions of the narratives of right-wing and far-right groups, organizations and political parties in Serbia. Extremism in Serbia is associated with exclusive ethno-nationalism, clero-nationalism, patriarchal values, authoritarianism, xenophobia, racism and conspiracy theories. These dimensions of extremism have been in the focus of the Helsinki Committee's research for more than two decades. They are intertwined and the list of the components of an extremist ideology is not final.

The analysis of extremist narratives in this research is based on 15 in-depth interviews with fans and members of right-wing

6 It is known that it is difficult to come up with a single definition of extremism. Here we have used the definition offered by C-REX: a specific ideology characterized by 'anti-democratic opposition to equality'. <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-right-wing-extremism.html>

groups, organizations and political parties.<sup>7</sup> In-depth research related to extremist groups is very difficult due to the impossibility of approaching their members for research purposes. Investigative journalists and the media mostly deal with them, but those texts mostly refer to actions, connections and actors of right-wing organizations and less deal with in-depth examination of their value orientations. The respondents' answers were interpreted and analyzed in relation to events, phenomena and policies in a specific social environment. This analysis is important not only for the recognition of extremist orientations, but also for the detection of their active potential to cause disasters in Serbia and the region.

## IDENTITY

The right-wing ideologies in Serbia are shaped by a specific historical, cultural and political context.<sup>8</sup> Their key identity-related characteristic is strong ethno-confessional nationalism, which is derived from the nation's war past and geopolitical challenges, and is based on the group's identity, developed around the common points – the myth of common origin, language and

religion, and has ideological roots in nativism and supremacy. As a rule, other basic characteristics of identity policy include traditionalism, which is aimed at preserving the traditional religious, cultural and social norms, whereby tradition is the main basis for the identity and values of the of community identity and values: Euroscepticism and anti-globalism as a reflection of the desire to preserve local identity and sovereignty, as well as the attitudes towards, laying emphasis on the preservation of ethnic and cultural homogeneity; authoritarianism as a value that promotes strong leaders, and the need for the preservation of order and stability.<sup>9</sup> In its more extreme and violent-extremist variants, in particular, right-wing ideology also includes anti-democracy, toxic masculinity, anti-feminism, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, fluid boundaries vis-a-vis hate crimes and terrorism (e.g. genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing).<sup>10</sup>

The basic elements of identity policy can also be found in the respondents' answers. As the basic dimensions of their identity they mention "healthy patriotism" and devotion to their country, its tradition, family values, culture, Saint-Savaism, heritage, history, church, and alphabet.

Almost all respondents express a deep-rooted and emotionally saturated perception

7 In-depth semi-structured interviews with respondents were conducted from December 2022 to December 2023. The total of 15 interviews was conducted. The average interview lasted one hour and a half. The longest interview lasted two hours and the shortest 45 minutes. The respondents were selected by a non-probabilistic purposeful sample, that is, by the selection method based by the recommendation chain.

8 *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2020, <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/desni%20ekstremizam.pdf>  
*Uspod desnice: slučaj Srbija Ekstremizam, terorizam, strani borci*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2022, <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/Uspod%20desnice%20-%20slucaj%20Srbija.pdf>

9 *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2020, <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/desni%20ekstremizam.pdf>

Carter, E. (2018). *Right-wing extremism/radicalism: Reconstructing the concept*. Journal of Political Ideologies

10 Buljubašić M. (2022) *Nasilni desničarski ekstremizam na Zapadnom Balkanu: Pregled izazova pojedinih zemalja u oblasti P/CVE*, RAN, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran\\_vrwe\\_in\\_western\\_balkans\\_overview\\_072022\\_rs\\_0.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_rs_0.pdf)

of the Serbian people as exceptional and unique and, in some cases, implicitly superior based on various exclusively positive ethnic self-stereotypes. The complex and varied ethnic self-perceptions of the respondents point to the uniqueness of the Serbian people in various spheres:

- Psychological characteristics and attitudes, whereby stubbornness, cleverness, empathy, humaneness, love of freedom, courage, fairness and conservatism stand out<sup>11</sup>
- Common culture and history, which include such elements as the status of victim, history of the suffering of the Serbian people, injustice inflicted on them, as well as Patron Saint's Day, folklore, traditional customs, the Nemanjić cult and the Kosovo myth.<sup>12</sup>
- Faith, as the key element of Serbian identity, its foundation and protector, its cohesive factor, but also the point of difference vis-à-vis other nations.<sup>13</sup>

11 These are some answers of the respondents:

"Th", "Our people have a lot of empathy", "We are one of the more humane nations", "What is interesting about our people is their stubbornness and shrewdness. That is what I appreciate about our people; it is something specific for our people and distinguishes us from others; on the other hand, in comparison with the West, we are still quite conservative and state-oriented"

12 For example: "What sets us apart and unites us are the Golgothas we have experienced throughout our existence". "Only someone has taken it out on us and we have not done it to anybody." "What distinguishes the Serbs from others are their culture, the Patron Saint's Day, the cult of Nemanjićs and the Kosovo myth."

13 For example: "Our people have been shaped by Christian culture, which distinguishes them from some other nations, particularly the eastern ones. In essence, all nations link their identity to religion", "Our Orthodoxy has been raised to such a level that the founders of our state – the Nemanjićs have been raised to the status of saints and, in this way, our nation, together with the Church, obtains its directions and ideals. Saint Sava is still an important figure".

- The peculiarity of the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet,
- Well-known sportsmen and theologians, who additionally contribute to the recognition of the Serbian people<sup>14</sup>

In the self-perception of their position (by defining themselves on the right-left scale), the respondents are full of contradictions, which is evident when all individual interviews are viewed as a whole. They had the task to position themselves on the scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right). The responses ranged from 5 to 8, highlighting the individual nuances in the self-perception of their political affiliation. There was a noticeable clustering around the rating 5<sup>15</sup> which represents the centre, that is, the centre ideology. This shows that the respondents do not perceive themselves as the right, especially not as the far right, which they reject as "inadequate and excessive" in their answers. They perceive themselves as moderate and this is for them a "healthy", "real" and "original" right wing, while extremism is rejected and condemned. For example: "There is no healthy right in our country. In America, there are the Republicans, a healthy, moderate, traditional, conservative party. In our country the right-wing attitudes imply misogyny and chauvinism to a

14 One respondent explains this: "We see that we are the world champions in tennis, we see that we are the world champions in basketball, What Serbia and Serbdom represent for me: when you come to Japan and say 'Đoković', and then the Japanese turns to you and says 'Đoković' that's for me. When you come to America and say 'Bishop Nikolaž', they say 'Ooo', everyone reads him?".

15 The average rating of their assessments is: 5.7; 9 respondents. answered the question with the following ratings: 8 (1 respondent), 7 (2 respondents), 6 (2 respondents), 6.7 (1 respondent), 5.5 (1 respondent), 5 (2 respondents), The question was: "In politics, the terms 'left' and 'right' are often used, How would you position yourself on this scale?"

degree, as well as some things that should not necessarily be right-wing ones. We need a good, moderate right-wing party. To safeguard national interests as well as moral, traditional values, but not to exaggerate in that sense.” The respondents also believe that the wider society has a negative attitude towards the right and misunderstand that ideological orientation. They equate it with violent, extremist ideologies and want to distance themselves from it. “People think that those with such political orientation are some bearded people who live in the middle of nowhere, in a cave, and who beat women.”

One explanation of this contradiction is the transition of the right to the mainstream position, that is, the normalization of the right-wing world view and the relativisation and decriminalisation of extremism. Second, the confusing behaviour of right-wing protagonists, who often say one thing and do the opposite, which is best evidenced by the actions of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which balances between the European Union and Russia, as well as by numerous other “right-wing” organizations and political parties, which do not react when their nationalist interests are endangered.

The answers of the respondents also point to the inadequacy and obsolence of the division of political ideologies into left and right only. For example: “The terms (left and right) are quite intertwined and often vaguely defined”; or: “In fact, the terms ‘right’ and ‘left’ are somewhat clumsy. I don’t use them. We could confine them to some more cultural terms.” This is in line with the contemporary trends in the understanding

of political orientations<sup>16</sup> as well as the publicly expressed views of some right-wing leaders in Serbia<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, many political parties and organizations, which declare themselves as left-wing share the same ideological attitudes towards the European Union, NATO and Russia right wingers. The consequence of populism is the relativization of the political spectrum or, in other words, moving the centre towards the right pole. The left was “killed”, because its patterns became obsolete and compromised.

During the last years, many right-wing organizations tried to “beautify” their image in order to attract as many supporters as possible. Thus, they opt for humanitarian work, animal protection and the like. In addition, due to long-term populist politics, manipulations and blunting of the critical edge, citizens are becoming increasingly less able to recognize such narratives. Thus, one of the respondents’ typical answers is: “Patriotism is to plant flowers, pet a dog, say a kind word to someone, pursue an idea, help an old women carrying a heavy load, give preference to a pregnant woman with a child.” However, it is about the fundamentals of humanism, decency, humanity, civic responsibility, rationality and economy and not about “patriotism” in itself, as is interpreted by right wingers.

All respondents show a strong emotional attachment to Serbia and deep incorporation of national belonging into their own identities. They interpret the connection between the state and national identity in a naturalistic way, as something inherent

16 Goati V. (2007) *Političke partije i partijski sistemi*, Norwegian People’s Aid, Podgorica

17 Cvetković Lj. (2022) ‘*Novi početak*’ za desnicu u Srbiji, Radio Free Europe, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-izbori-desnica/31801289.html>

and natural. They perceive national belonging as something that is derived from existence itself, from biological origin and genetic heritage regardless of other factors or influences. This perspective emphasizes the idea that the attachment to the nation and national identity are deeply rooted in a person as part of his nature and that this is part of the natural order of things, as is explained by the respondents. "I was born here and my identity was created here. I could imagine my life somewhere else, but I would not be attached to another nation. I would consider this not to be natural. A man can be a cosmopolitan but, in essence, he carries patriotism in himself, he cannot be separated from it." Or: "In an absolute sense, Serbia represents for me the way of life which is given to us at birth." This naturalistic understanding contributes to the depth and strength of the respondent's connection with the nation: "I am strongly attached to my origin and national belonging." Or: "I sympathize with some positive and negative things, and the successes and failures of the society or the nation. I experience this. It is important to me."

All correspondents recognize the importance of socialization as an additional, secondary factor that contributes to the development of national attachment and the national component of identity. The respondents emphasize the agents of primary socialization – family and parents – as the most important factors that shape their national attachment and the national identity component. For example: "Ever since I remember, that is, since my childhood. I grew up in a theological family, my uncles, fathers, brothers. I am infatuated with Serbianness". Or: "Momo Kapor (writer) has a nice quotation: 'Patriotism is a matter of home upbringing', so that it largely comes from

the family, that is, upbringing, simply in that family story and how our family was tied to the faith of the country and vice versa". This in-depth analysis reveals the multi-layeredness and complexity of the factors that contribute to the building of identity, points to their interconnection and emphasizes how the primary agents of socialization are essential for ideological socialization.

In addition to the family in which they grew up, the respondents also emphasize the agents of secondary socialization – school, extracurricular activities, sports activities, peer group, environment, neighbourhood and profession as the significant factors in feeling attachment to the country: "At school, as children, we always recited various epic and lyrical poems at school events, which always awakens my emotions"; "In the group in which I sing, all my affinities towards our people and our nation were born. Through my performances and encounters with our people both here and abroad, I began to develop a deeper feeling for our nation. So, through music" I was able to understand some things: that our people are heroic, that we crossed Albania, that we lived through various wars". The goals, contents and means of socialization are determined by the sources of socialization, which include culture and society. They prescribe the norms, standards, values and beliefs that the child will adopt while growing up."<sup>18</sup> Through institutionalization, these contents become formally incorporated in the institutions such as the educational system, religious organizations, media and the like. Thereafter, the agents of socialization act according to these these institutionalized norms and values in order to transmit certain contents to individuals.

18 Rot, Nikola (2008). *Osnovi socijalne psihologije*. Belgrade: Institute for Textbooks

## THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS, ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE GOVERNMENT AND INTERNAL POLICY

When considering the desirable system of government, the respondents highlight the importance of the democratic principles, respect for civil rights and freedoms, various combinations of the systems of government, as well as a civil state with an enhanced national identity. In the respondents' answers, one can feel the tension between the awareness of "socially desirable answers" and the level of authoritarianism and enhanced national identity. As expected, the respondents show high levels of authoritarianism and emphasize the importance of having a strong and capable leader, especially for the preservation of the national interests in our lands.

When considering the answer to the question whom they see as a capable leader among the current politicians, the respondents were very critical of the current political actors, that is, they believe that there is currently no (sufficiently) capable leader. Such scepticism is rather the result of the glorification of the national past and historical figures to whom the current politicians are no match than the result of the realistic assessment of their political and leadership potentials.

The respondents mentioned the most prominent historical figures: Prince Lazar, Vuk Branković, army commanders Stepa Stepanović and Živojin Mišić, King Uroš Nemanjić, Emperor Stefan Dušan, King Milutin, Mihailo Obrenović, Karađorđe Petrović, King Petar I Karađorđević. The respondents point out that they do not recognize the desirable qualities that adorned

the mentioned historical figures among the politicians of recent times.

However, the respondents singled out several politicians on the current political stage in whom they recognize at least the hints that they will be capable leaders of potential leaders: Aleksandar Vučić (Serbian President, Serbian Progressive Party), Miloš Jovanović (New Democratic Party of Serbia), Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (Oathkeepers), Filip Blagojević (New Democratic Party of Serbia), Draško Stanivuković (Mayor of Banjaluka, Party of Democratic Progress, Republic of Srpska) and Jovana Stojković (I Live for Serbia Movement).

High authoritarianism has been the constant since the first psychological and public opinion surveys in our region, especially in the right-wing political spectrum, but the latest results, although not very surprising, show that young people increasingly support authoritarianism. According to the results of the mentioned 2023 survey conducted by the Youth Umbrella Organization, exactly 60 percent of young people believe that Serbia needs a strong leader who will be followed by the people, which is the highest percentage in the last six years.<sup>19</sup> Such results point out that support for high authoritarianism is no longer typical for right-wing respondents, but is becoming characteristic for the younger population, in particular.

The status of Kosovo is one of the most important political and even identity issues in the right-wing political spectrum. "The heart of Serbia", "the most expensive

19 "Istraživanje: Mladi nemaju poverenje u institucije, veruju u crkvu i vojsku", Boom93, 11. August 2023., <https://boom93.rs/info/drustvo/istrazivanje-mladi-nemaju-poverenje-u-institucije-veruju-u-crkvu-i-vojsku>



Serbian word”, “Holy Serbian land” ... “the artery” ... is the pivotal point of the articulation and self-affirmation of national identity and pride, as well as suffering. Assessing the current government’s attitude towards Kosovo, the respondents give extremely ambivalent and undefined answers in which they neither approve nor disapprove the current government’s actions. The respondents state that this is about a complex and not easily solvable issue, a “hot cake” where global geopolitical influences clash with each other. Thus, in the coming years, one can expect the development of extremely “unpredictable” scenarios. It can be said that the respondents’ ambivalence represents a momentous point in the oscillation between the rational status quo insight and the emotional state caused by the frustration not to achieve the desired state of affairs.

All respondents emphasize the influence, that is, “pressures” by the West and the European Union regarding the status of Kosovo. In a certain sense they understand the behaviour of political actors, but cannot fathom the government’s moves. Thus, they relativize its neutral position, that is, its “sitting on two chairs”. The respondents criticize the government for insufficient transparency and the “concealment of the real truth”. There is also the opinion that once the attitude towards the European Union is defined, the attitude towards Kosovo will be defined as well.

It is about the inconsistent and, to a degree, utterly hypocritical attitude of the current political elite towards the status of Kosovo and, in particular, towards the Serbs living in the enclaves, especially those in the north. This confusion is particularly illustrated by Serbia’s recent behaviour

regarding the vehicle registration in Kosovo, that is, the use of Serbian licence plates. The case “KM remains, no surrender”, due to which we have recently been in the situation to consider an armed conflict at the border, has been “overcome”. It has even been praised because the final and absolute abolition of Serbian licence plates is in the best interest of Kosovo Serbs and the exercise of their rights and freedoms. In addition to the “plate case”, there are also numerous other situations in which the government has shown inconsistency, not only in the implementation of the proclaimed indisputable and necessary policies, but also in the preservation of national identity.

On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents openly criticizes the government for not “showing its teeth” to the West and not fighting more transparently for the preservation of the Kosovo identity. This more extreme and probably more militant right-wing attitude towards this very important state issue is becoming increasingly more prevalent not only in the declared right-wing political spectrum, but also on a wider scale. According to the mentioned 2023 survey conducted by the Youth Umbrella Organization, the majority of young people supported for the first the return of control over Kosovo by using military force, which confirms an exceptional trend in public opinion towards the right and not only the radicalization of the right.<sup>20</sup> In recent months, Serbia has been flooded with the typical murals with the striking message “When the army comes back to Kosovo” which appeared on the

20 “Istraživanje: Mladi nemaju poverenje u institucije, veruju u crkvu i vojsku”, Boom93, 11 August.2023, <https://boom93.rs/info/drustvo/istrazivanje-mladi-nemaju-poverenje-u-institucije-veruju-u-crkvu-i-vojsku>

surfaces which could not be reached at least without the tacit approval of the local police authorities, communal police and competent local institutions. The intensity of the militant approach to solving this “problem” oscillates in proportion to the growth of Russophilia in the public opinion, that is, to increasing distance from NATO, the United States and the European Union.

The recognition of Kosovo’s independence by official Belgrade would extremely disappoint the respondents, but they think that the current government is still not ready for such an option or the annexation of northern Kosovo. The respondents perceive the current government’s strategy as the prolongation of the status quo and time gaining.

In proportion to the expressed ambivalence towards the current status, the relationship of the Serbian state towards Kosovo, as well as the prospects for solving this problem, the respondents presented various ideas about what should be done in the future. There is a wide range of personal proposals – from a long preservation of the status quo, insistence on the preservation of the country’s sovereignty and integrity, and the preservation of northern Kosovo to the policy of Serb resettlement in Kosovo and Metohija.

Although the respondents, at least declaratively, do not support war and armed conflict, and prefer the settlement of the conflict by diplomatic means, most of them answered the direct question: “If a conflict over Kosovo and Metohija does occur would you be ready to go to war?” that they would support the war if it is a defence war and if it is the last option. If the Serbian people in Kosovo, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro are endangered, the

respondents think that they will be ready to defend the territory. The conative dimension of the identity attitudes is evidently very pronounced, but what is indicative is the “territorialization” of the potential Serb endangerment and legitimization of the potential armed action “in all areas where Serbs live” on the pretext of a “defensive” or “just” war. This territorialization of the endangerment of Serbian interests” can also be analysed in the context of the “Serbian World”, a paradigm that has been promoted by the current government over the last ten years and has been pursued by the people that have politically grown up in the vortex of the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia and “Greater Serbian” ideas. This will be dealt with in detail later on.

As befits the right-wing views, the “Serbian Piedmont” holds a high place in the value hierarchy, so that the respondents not only positively assess the relations between the Republic of Srpska and Serbia, but also believe that good relations should also be maintained in the future and that special attention should be devoted to the people who live there. The respondents understand the complexity and interdependence of Serbia’s relations with the Republic of Srpska and Kosovo and Metohija, while some of them perceive both territories as “Serbia’s line of defence”..

Since its creation, the Republic of Srpska has been considered the pivot of Serbian identity and the embodiment of Serbian sacrifice, courage, honour and dignity. The spiritual leaders of the Serbian right-wing have always emphasized the significance and role of the Republic of Srpska and this narrative has continuously and intensively been manifested and emphasized for more than three decades. This is what

Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral already said in September 1994: "The people and the Assembly of the Republic of Srpska are today protecting the honour and soul of the Serbian Orthodox people, not with empty words and dishonourable compromises, but with their own blood and lives, which they sacrifice before the whole world for the defence of everything that is honourable and holy in this people, for the defence of Orthodoxy as a whole (...) Today, in Bosnia and Herzegovina a battle is being fought for the golden freedom and honour of Orthodoxy as a whole, for the soul and justice of the whole world, for the sanctity of the godlike human dignity".<sup>21</sup> Over the last ten or so years, the multi-decade narrative emphasizing the significance of the survival of the Republic of Srpska for national identity, has been raised to a higher, more operative, more constructive and more integrative level, which is testified by the statements given by the then Serbian Patriarch Irinej in May 2014 that the Republic of Srpska should join Serbia, because "there are many reasons for this".<sup>22</sup> On that occasion, he also said that he would not be surprised if a referendum on its secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina was held in the Republic of Srpska and that the Republic of Srpska joined Serbia: "This is the process that has already started. If Kosovo could secede from Serbia why the Republic of Srpska could not secede from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia? We have many more reasons for this because, by seizing Kosovo two Albanian states are too be created, while

21 Mitropolit Amfilohije Radović, "Ko je Boga izneverio, izneveriće i nas" (Pravoslavlje, 1-14 September 1994) (SCuR, 121).

22 "Patrijarh: Republika Srpska da se pripoji Srbiji, Vučić da podigne psrnulu naciju!", Tel-egraf, 13 May 2014.

Serbia and the Republic of Srpska would be one Serbian state, a single Serbian state as it had been for centuries".<sup>23</sup> Here we could also list the statements by other indisputable spiritual authorities such as Bishop Irinej of Bačka, for example. In 2015, he said that the river Drina does not separate, but "unites the Serbian people from both banks of the river". He added that it could be said that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia are a single entity and represent an "essential unity and a common organic belonging to the whole Orthodox world".<sup>24</sup>

As for the previously mentioned authoritarianism, Patriarch Irinej's statement from 2017 is also indicative: "We love our homeland, wherever Serbs live, that is, Serbia, whether they live in Bosnia, Montenegro or elsewhere. I say to my brothers from the Republic of Srpska – Protect the Republic of Srpska and the one who leads the people of Srpska today, because this is the only way for Serbdom to survive."<sup>25</sup> And just Milorad Dodik, "the one who leads the people of Srpska today" and who has been in power for 30 years, longer than all other public figures in the whole "Serbian World", is the recipient of probably the greatest number of church decorations, including the Order of Saint Sava, Order of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing, Order of Holy King Milutin,

23 "Patrijarh Irinej: RS da se pripoji Srbiji", Naše novine, 16 May 2014.

24 "Patrijarh Irinej: Republika Srpska je srpska država", Blic, 19 October.201., <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/patrijarh-irinej-republika-srpska-je-srpska-drzava/112kfz>.

25 "Patrijarh Irinej: Gde god žive Srbi, to je Srbija, braća iz Republike Srpske da čuvaju RS i onog koji danas vodi narod Srpske", NSPM, 25 October 2017, <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/patrijarh-irinej-gde-god-zive-srbi-to-je-srbija-braca-iz-republike-srpske-da-cuvaju-rs-i-onog-koji-danas-vodi-narod-srpske.html?alphabet=l>

Order of the Diocese of Timișoara and Order of Holy Bishop Nikolaj.

In May 2019, at Patriarch Irinej's invitation, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, together with Milorad Dodik, Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, attended the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Immediately after taking office, Patriarch began very intensive cooperation with the political leadership of the Republic of Srpska. In April 2021, the Patriarch hosted the Easter reception in Belgrade for the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, and the leadership of the Republic of Srpska. A few months later, in mid-July 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met in Belgrade with Patriarch Porfirije and the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik. The meetings of these three national leaders will become a very intensive and regular practice.

Serbia's attitude towards Montenegro is exclusively interpreted through the right-wing prism of stereotypes according to which it is about the same people and that the difference between the so-called Montenegrins and Serbs was created by some kind of "engineering, backed by Western influence and the influence of Milo Đukanović". According to the respondents, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) played a very significant role in the protection against a very aggressive denial and suppression of Serbian national identity, as well as the reduction of artificial divisions in Montenegro. As for the SPC position in Montenegro, the respondents positively evaluated the litanies and the struggle of the Serbian people to preserve the SPC status in Montenegro. Most respondents took part in the litanies

and, in that context, positively evaluated Metropolitan Joanikije whom they perceive as a prominent and important figure in the mentioned processes.

The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the preservation of Serbian identity in Montenegro is undeniable, intense and rather aggressive. The enthronement of Metropolitan Joanike of Montenegro and the Littoral at the Cetinje Monastery in early September 2021, which was accompanied by two-day protests, clashes between the citizens and the police, and the use of helicopters of the Army of Montenegro and "armoured mantle" to accompany the Metropolitan and the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, showed all the complexity and seriousness of the conflict of nationalist policies. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić rejoiced that, despite a serious threat, "something that was planned could be put into practice".

The attitude of the Serbian Orthodox Church towards Montenegro and Montenegrins is probably best illustrated by the March 2022 statement made by Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral when he commented on the conflict that started in Ukraine. He said: "Naturally, many world's power brokers saw their interest there. As you can see, there are too many lies. We must sympathize with the Orthodox people in Ukraine and, first of all, we must pray to God for that people who, unfortunately, came into conflict with each other. And that does not seem unknown to us: there are many divisions and quarrels in our country. Montenegro has also been planned to become little Ukraine".<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> "Joanikije: Crna Gora je projektovana da bude mala Ukrajina", *Politika*, 13 March .2022,

During the past years, Belgrade succeeded to destabilize and polarize Montenegrin society through its media, cultural and educational policies. At present, there is a very intensive campaign by Belgrade's media and all political actors, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, in particular. During his recent visit to Montenegro, Patriarch Porfirije told the citizens that he felt the need to support them to resolutely express "their identity as the believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church, speakers of the Serbian language and glorious members of the Serbian people."

### THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE CHURCH AND TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

Traditionally, ever since the public opinion survey conducted in the 1990s, that is, since the beginning of the post-socialist transformation, revitalization of religion and, in particular, desecularization after the democratic changes in 2000, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been enjoying the greatest confidence among the people. It is traditionally followed by the army, that is, the Serbian Armed Forces. In certain periods, the order of preference on the list of the trusted institutions was changed, so that the army took primacy. However, it is undeniable that the majority church in Serbia enjoys a high, stable and hardly surpassable reputation. If we analyse and compare these results with the level of authoritarianism accepted by an average Serbian citizen, we should not be surprised by a high level of trust in these autocratic, hierarchical and traditionally organized institutions.

<https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/501900/Joanikije-Crna-Gora-je-projektovana-da-budemala-Ukrajina>

The respondents present the stereotypical views on the historical, social, political and identity importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church for the survival and durability of national identity. The Church represents "the most important historical institution", the guardian of security and the guardian of Serbian identity and traditional Serbian values; it is "the pivot of the Serbian nation" and "the way of life". Special emphasis is laid on the church's continuity and its role in maintaining unity during hard times, preserving the people's religious and national identity during communism, as well as preserving the religious and national identity of the diaspora.

The tendency of having great trust in the mentioned institutions is also confirmed by the current survey. For example, according to the 2022 survey of the Youth Umbrella Organization, young people generally do not trust institutions. It is noticeable that only the Serbian Orthodox Church has significantly improved its image among young people in comparison with the previous surveys, although the army is better positioned. The same order of confidence was also confirmed next year.<sup>27</sup>

However, in addition to great trust in the Church in comparison with other institutions, the respondents express a critical attitude towards certain processes that take place in the church and concern its

<sup>27</sup> In this case, it is about the surveys conducted by the Youth Umbrella Organization in 2022 and 2023. "Istraživanje: SPC jedina institucija u koju je poraslo poverenje mladih", Novi standard, 12 August .2022, <https://standard.rs/2022/08/12/istrazivanje-spc-jedina-institucija-u-koju-je-poraslo-poverenje-mladih/>; "Istraživanje: Mladi nemaju poverenje u institucije, veruju u crkvu i vojsku", Boom93, 11 August 2023, <https://boom93.rs/info/drustvo/istrazivanje-mladi-nemaju-poverenje-u-institucije-veruju-u-crkvu-i-vojsku>

functioning. Being aware of the social and political dimension of the institutional and organizational structure of the majority church, the respondents provide a series of incoherent yet justified criticism, which are mainly the believers' reactions to media-covered and publicly known affairs and behaviour or public appearance of church officials. Among the "objections", mention was made of corruption, personal interests of certain church officials, conservatism, inflexibility, hierarchical decision-making system of the Church, as well as the lack of pluralism of opinion. As was expected, the objection to the Church's conservatism and authoritarianism was mentioned by a respondent who is a theologian, who is a connoisseur and probably personally involved in the functioning of the church organization. Such an objection is characteristic of right-wing members, who are syndromically close to the hierarchical organizational structure of an authority, "a firm hand" and the command line of responsibility, the uniformity of opinion and the like. However, the criticism of corruption and the usurpation of authority in the Church is something that seriously compromises the proclaimed historical and identity role and significance of the majority church in Serbia.

As the religious role models, the respondents mentioned the general theological authorities or, we can say, the "classics" such as Jesus Christ, Saint Sava and a number of saints. As was expected, as the real-life authorities, the respondents mentioned the indispensable Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović and monk Arsenije Jovanović. Much has so far been written about the authority of Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović and it is difficult to ignore their real influence over the

past decades not only on monasticism and episcopate of the Church, but also on high-ranking secular authorities.

What is common to all respondents is that they single out Patriarch Pavle whom they respected the most, His predecessors German and Dimitrije also command great respect. Patriarch Pavle's authority takes on the dimensions of a personality cult; his extraordinary modesty and frugality, us of public transport in the city and the like have become a legend. Anecdotes about his life, including the story about a two-square-metre auxiliary room in the Patriarchal court which he chose for his accommodation, despite the rooms with expensive period furniture, have created the mythical image of this ascetic spiritual leader.

The respondents' role models also include writers and poets from whose works the believers draw significant religious elements. (Dostoevsky, Pekić, Andrić, Šantić) as well as the highly influential psychotherapist Vladeta Jerotić who was also a lecturer in "pastoral psychology" at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. His statement that "his youth gave him father Justin" and that "God gave fathers Nikolaj, Tadej, Justin and Pavle to Serba" is illustrative.<sup>28</sup> It is noticeable that this statement covers almost all mentioned authorities.

Certain epithets of the current Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Porfirije, cause controversy and the respondents express different opinions: there are those

28 "Imao je ljubavi , dobrote i humora. Često su ga i političari zvali da posreduje gde su oni nemoćni..." 10 godina bez patrijarha Pavla", Nedeljnik, 15 November 2019, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/imao-je-ljubavi-dobrote-i-humora-cesto-su-ga-i-politicari-zvali-da-posreduje-gde-su-oni-nemocni-10-godina-bez-patrijarha-pavla/>

who respect him immensely, but there is also a good part of the respondents who criticize him. What they object to are his relationship with top state officials and the attitude towards the issue of Kosovo and Metohija and the issue of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. A close connection with the authorities is obviously not approved by the respondents, but it is evident that they express serious scepticism that the Church can become free of political pressure. Although the election of the Patriarch is a political and not ecclesiastical matter, the respondents seem to be aware that things may not function (for a long time) as prescribed by the norm. Thus, they show some reserve toward something in which they believe and which still functions as it should. .

As for the Patriarch's attitude towards Kosovo and Metohija, it is symptomatic that many supporters highlight the terms "territory" and "regret" for the jurisdictions of North Macedonia and Kosovo. This narrative represents a continuity with the rhetoric of "defensive war" and "cross-border jurisdiction of the Serbian Church" during and after the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia and criticism of Slobodan Milošević's "traitorous" politics, while at the same time laying emphasis on the preservation and unity of national identity. More about this will be found in further text.

The respondents' opinions are also divided on Patriarch Porfirije's public activities, that is, his trump card of the image "a man of the people" and "a man of his time". His directness and accessibility delight some respondents, while others are bothered, which is in line with the contradictory and frequently ambivalent and even opposite reactions of the public to his media

appearances, accounts and posts on social media and the like. In any case, according to the survey by the Youth Umbrella Organization, when it comes to the personalities at the head of the surveyed institutions, young people gave the highest average score to Patriarch Porfirije<sup>29</sup>

When it comes to the persons/institutions/groups that harm the reputation of the Church, the respondents give a list of social actors, which could be conditionally yet analytically useful and could be classified into several groups: 1) internal (intra-church) influences and zealots; 2) international: the Western influence (capitalism, Western values, such as individualism); 3) secular: political influence (including President Vučić) and the sphere of education (an attempt to abolish religious education and the lack of permanent jobs for religious teachers); 4) civil: citizens' associations and media. Due to the divergent responses and interpretations by the respondents, the grouping has been very conditionally done; the separation of liberal and civil groups of social actors who damage the Church's reputation is especially controversial, but it is clear that the respondents are aware of the negative image left by the usurpers of spiritual authority, such as church officials and dignitaries, as well as the existence and activities of fundamentalist and extremist groups within the religious community. are promoting. The citizens' associations which, under the umbrella of the Church, spread discriminatory and extremist views are also considered very harmful for the

29 "Interesantno je da je najlošije ocenjena premijerka Ana Brnabić." "Istraživanje: SPC jedina institucija u koju je poraslo poverenje mladih", *Novi standard*, 12 August 2022, <https://standard.rs/2022/08/12/istrazivanje-spc-jedina-institucija-u-koju-je-poraslo-poverenje-mladih/>

reputation of the Church. The same applies to the religious content or authority that are extremely critical or are used by media for unethical purposes. The respondents have a critical attitude towards the increasingly evident and publicly demonstrated and emphasized influence of secular authorities on the majority church, including the regular presence of the Serbian President at the sessions of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, enormous financial support for the church infrastructure and social programmes for church officials, as well as the alleged usurpation of the educational system for restraining the influence of the religious authority in the secular sphere and the endangerment of the existence of church officials.

### THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL ASPECT: FOREIGN POLICY

As expected, the majority of the respondents perceives the West and the European Union as the greatest foreign enemies of the Serbian people in the context of the geopolitical order and system. Among the specific countries they mention the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the Vatican, while the reasons for considering them to be hostile can analytically be divided into three groups: internal, Serbia's geostrategic position and the psychological characteristics of the Serbian people (spite, defiance, stubbornness); globalist, the capital structure in the Western countries and "Westernization", that is, the imposition of Western culture (Coke, pornography); geostrategic-interest, the West's legalized lobbying and foreign policies of these countries (bombing, the Kosovo issue). Political organizations, such as NATO and non-governmental organizations are also perceived by the respondents as the enemies of the

Serbian people. As for the ethnic groups in the region, they show the greatest distance towards the Kosovo Albanians and Croats.

The respondents evaluate Serbia's attitude towards the European Union as paradoxical, full of contradictions and self-interest. Paradoxes are seen in the very problems within the European Union and the situation that "more and more countries wish to leave the EU, while Serbia wants to join it". However, in addition to emphasizing geopolitical tensions, the respondents point to the necessity of economic cooperation.

What the respondents especially criticize about the relationship between Serbia and the European Union are unequal power relations, "Serbia's vassal position vis-à-vis the EU", "conditionality policy" and, in this context, "disproportional relations", while Serbia's neutral position is considered as positive. As for the unequal power relations, the respondents believe that Serbia has a more concrete attitude towards the European Union than the European Union has towards Serbia.

Here it will be useful to recall how the spiritual leaders viewed Serbia's European integration, that is, what attitudes towards Europe and Serbia's relationship with the European Union. In early 2004, Bishop Atanasije Jevtić of Banat said the following: "Gentlemen, who came to visit us in nineteen fourteen on tanks? Europe! Who came to us in nineteen forty-one? Europe! Who came to us in nineteen ninety-nine? Europe! Is that Europe? We will have to free ourselves from such Europe for another two centuries. We will have more uprisings<sup>30</sup> Then, for example, three years later,

30 "Vreme, kruna, mač i mantija", *Vreme*, 19 February 2004, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view>.



Bishop Artemije pointed to the complexity of the issue of global and national interests in the following way: “Due to its motives, personal interests and the need to make a breakthrough in the East and endanger Russia, the international community is not doing its job in Kosmet”.<sup>31</sup> The continuous and very harsh anti-European position of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is primarily based on the thesis that Serbia must sacrifice Kosovo and Metohija in order to become a member of the European Union, was indicated several times. For example, when the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church told the President and the Government of Serbia at the end of 2011 that “the Church expects and asks them not to abandon the Serbian people in Old Serbia for the sake of the chimera called the status of a candidate country for EU membership” and that “the ideologized and mythologized EU has an alternative”.<sup>32</sup> The words of Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral are also well known. According to him, the conflict with the United States and the European Union is a new crucifixion for the Serbian people. It is also worth mentioning his assessment that the Serbian Church and society are faced with “the children from a monstrous marriage of a radical secular consumer mentality, whose battering ram is NATO, and the spiritual wasteland of communist-Bolshevik atheism”.<sup>33</sup> The West, the European Union, but also “Europe” itself, the United States and NATO, in particu-

lar, are the main culprits for the suffering and tragedy of the Serbian people. NATO intervention is the most frequently used argument against the West but, at the same time, it is held that “Serbia resisted the world’s largest army for 77 days” and that, as emphasized by Nebojša Katić, “Serbia did not only defend its right to exist as an independent state. It did not only defend its honour and dignity. It also defended the honour, dignity and memory of millions of its ancestors who did not think that their sacrifice was meaningless and did not hold onto real political calculations”.

The attitude towards the United States (US) is traditionally more distant than towards the European Union, although both of them are often mentioned as the stumbling blocks in resolving the Kosovo issue. Some of the respondents express more radical views such as, for example, the severance of all relations with the US, “with the exception of necessary diplomatic relations (visas, residence permits)”. As for the desired result of the US presidential election, the respondents believe that the Serbia-US relations would be much better if Trump, not Biden, was the head of the country. The respondents also point out that it promotes the wrong image of Serbia in the world.

Syndromically, on the other hand, great support to Russia and a positive attitude towards the Russian Federation, Russian people, Russian Orthodox Church and Vladimir Putin himself, are supported by the mentioned anti-European and anti-Western “arguments” that are very substantively illustrated by the statement of Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral in March 2022: “In many ways, the long struggle of Orthodoxy against iconoclasts resembles the struggle

<http://www.pravda.rs/2007/09/25.php?id=368709>

<sup>31</sup> Pravda, 25 September 2007.

<sup>32</sup> “SPC: Kosovo važnije od evropske himere”, Danas, 3–4 December 2011; “Ostanimo uz narod”, Večernje novosti, 3 December 2011; “Ne ostavljajte svoj narod na Kosovu”, Pravda, 3–4 December 2011.

<sup>33</sup> “Istraživanje bogoslovskih puteva”, Danas, 30–31 May 2009.

of Orthodoxy against atheism and communism, that is, godless ideologies of our time. And this struggle has been going on for over a hundred years, since that evil came to us from Europe, protestant Europe – that evil of godlessness, atheism and communism. And this struggle continues and has claimed too many victims. Just imagine how many in Russia and, unfortunately, in our country. And among all Slavic people”.<sup>34</sup>

The respondents predominantly consider the relationship between the Russian and Serbian peoples as being brotherly and friendly. What keeps them maintaining friendly relations are their common culture and religion and, in a positive context, they also mention mutual political affinity, cooperation in the military industry and gas transit. They state that a lot can also be done in the fields of art and film, as well as in the field of culture in general in the context of Serbian-Russian brotherhood. Most respondents have travelled to Russia and have positive impression of their trip.

The dominant ideology in Serbia is still nationalism, while liberal values are perceived as a threat to its identity and culture. When the Serbian Progressive Party, which is historically deeply connected to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, came to power, the shift towards Russia was accompanied by a simultaneous distance from European integration. The pro-Russian conservative bloc in Serbia relativizes the official orientation towards the European Union and emphasizes the internal identity conflicts. It is made up of a wide variety of institutions, organizations, interest groups

34 “Joanikije: Crna Gora je projektovana da bude mala Ukrajina”, *Politika*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/501900/Joanikije-Crna-Gora-je-projektovana-da-bude-mala-Ukrajina>

and individuals, the Serbian Orthodox Church, through certain political parties and movements, citizen’s associations, parts of the academic and cultural elites, as well as media. Their proximity with Russia is obvious and is often emphasized to the point of identification. There are also justified indications that a good part of this trend is directly or indirectly financed by Russia, although there are no reliable data due to the non-transparency of financial support.

On the other hand, it is important to point to the continuous rhetoric of spiritual leaders as the pivot of right-wing interpretations, articulations and legitimizations. Patriarch Irinej’s statements, such as the one from November 2012, are well known: “Let us return to the spiritual values that were guided by our spiritual history. That faith oriented the Serbs towards the East. We should tie our little boat to the big ship of our great Slavic brotherly people with which we are linked by blood and religion.”<sup>35</sup> The strong link of the Serbian Orthodox Church to Russia, not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, is continuously confirmed and strengthened at various levels: the mutual awarding of decorations to religious and secular authorities, assistance in the construction of the Saint Sava Church, historic visits by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, restoration of the necropolis, unveiling of the monument to Russian Emperor Nicholas II Romanov, bringing of the Holy Flame and so on.

As expected, when it comes to the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and the war in Ukraine, the majority of respondents support Russia,

35 “Ko je kriv za ubistva i progon?”, *Večernje novosti*, 26 November 2012.

justify Vladimir Putin's action as the fight against terrorism and that Russia was forced to enter the war or that it did not enter the war voluntarily. Even those who consider Russia's action to be "unpremeditated and hasty" believe that the conflict was inevitable. The respondents further mention that "Putinophilia", namely respect for a "firm hand and authority", is also close to our people. In their answers, they put an emphasis not only on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but also look at the entire war more broadly, as a conflict between Russia and the Western powers and organizations, primarily NATO. In this context, they believe that Russia's action vis-à-vis Ukraine was "expected and provoked".

The justification for the war has very deep and probably not historical, but certainly spiritual roots in the right-wing key. The development of the philosophical and theological concept of "just" war, which can also be recognized under the aegis of both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, served primarily for the spiritual legitimization of the formation and homogenization of nation states after the collapse of the federal frameworks, but also for the preservation of the existing or return of the former jurisdictions that exceeded the newly established national frameworks. Proportionally to its international influence, especially within the regional framework, as well as the institutional and even economic power, the scope of that concept differs and reflects the state's military and economic power rather than the church's spiritual power. The blessing of military interventions is characteristic of the heads of both churches, but "just" war has the function of "preventive" war in one and the function of "defensive" war in the other.

The provision of support to the pro-Russian forces in the conflict in Ukraine was already very popular in its initial phase. So, the members of the Serbian Honour took part in the Cross Procession in support of the suffering Russian people in Ukraine, which was held in Belgrade on 11 May 2014,<sup>36</sup> while the Patriotic Alliance of the Serbian Radical Party, Honour and Ours staged a protest under the motto "Stop killing the Russian children in Donetsk, Luhansk and Slavyansk" in front of the premises of the EU Delegation in Belgrade.<sup>37</sup> The Serbian National Movement 1389 also expressed its profound solidarity with the suffering of "our fraternal people in eastern Europe" and fully supported "the brothers and sisters who are fighting against the greatest present-day evils".<sup>38</sup>

In Serbia, Russia is somehow perceived as a counterpower and counterbalance to the West, especially NATO. The Russian Federation and the Russian Orthodox Church have a strikingly distant attitude towards NATO. The statements by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia are known. For example, during his meeting with the Serbian Minister of Justice, Nikola Selaković, in Moscow, he expressed "concern about the situation in Montenegro and its path towards NATO. (...) We see that the people are against joining NATO and that these protests are suppressed." Assessing that today there are very few truly sovereign countries in Europe and that the countries that have preserved their

36 "Krsni hod podrške ruskom narodu", Srbski Obraz, 11 May 2014, <http://www.obraz.rs/?p=1265>

37 "Održan protest protiv zločina NATO-kijevske hunte", Srbski Obraz, 13 June 2014, <http://www.obraz.rs/?p=1356>

38 "Podrška narodu Donjecke republike, SNP 1389, 5 June 2014, [http://www.snp1389.rs/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=878:2014-06-05-13-15-09&catid=36:vesti](http://www.snp1389.rs/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=878:2014-06-05-13-15-09&catid=36:vesti)

sovereignty to a significant extent are now suffering from the pressure and negative attitude by the European majority.” He pointed out that Russia today is a fully sovereign state and uses its sovereignty for its own protection and for the protection of its friends.<sup>39</sup>

Naturally, this attitude should be viewed in the context of Russia’s return to the international stage, which is particularly visible in its rivalry, like in the Cold War, with the West regarding the war in Syria, the war in Ukraine, as well as the Balkan zone of interest.

There is certainly much debate about Serbia’s alternative integration processes in the context of the issue of Kosovo identity. In other words, just as Kosovo does not have an alternative, the European and NATO definitely have. The syndromic connection between Serbia and Russia, that is, between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, in the context of Montenegro, is probably best illustrated by the sharp reaction of Metropolitan Amfilohije, who even cursed Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović because of his policy towards Russia: “May he who is not loyal to the same-language, same-blood Russia have the living flesh fall off him, may he be cursed thrice and three thousand times by me. This is what St Peter of Cetinje left to his Montenegrins, and it would be good if the current Prime Minister of Montenegro read these words at a time when he, for the first time in history, imposed sanctions on Russia.”<sup>40</sup> Metropolitan Amfilohije repeated similar criticism of the Montenegrin author-

ities for siding with the European Union and introducing sanctions against Russia at the procession led by him together with the bishops and priests of the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches. He also said that “they are actually planting a firebrand in order to burn people alive in Odessa”.<sup>41</sup>

As the public opinion surveys show, the majority of Serbian citizens perceive Russia as a friendly country. This is also reflected in the statements of officials who often refer to Russia as a “brotherly country”. “Russia was with us at the crucial historical moments”, said the then Technical Minister of the Interior, Aleksandar Vulin, as a guest at one TV station with national frequency.<sup>42</sup> In the meantime, Brussels and Washington are calling on Serbia to join the imposition of international sanctions against the Kremlin. Serbia is the only Western Balkan country which has not imposed sanctions against Russia. Otherwise, official Belgrade supported several UN resolutions against the Russian invasion.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, the respondents believe that the Serbian government has so far made good moves and they also are against the imposition of sanctions against Russia. The respondents also explain such moves by the fact that we live in a “specific, traumatic region” and that we are aware of all the negative side effects of the war, such as hyperinflation and the like. The respondents are aware that there is external pressure to understand a different stance. However, they believe that the Serbian government maintains a good balance

39 “Patrijarh ruski Kiril zabrinut zbog Crne Gore”, *Mondo/Agencije*, 31 Decembar 2015, <http://mondo.rs/a862023/Info/Ex-Yu/Patrijarh-Kiril-Brinem-zbog-stanja-u-Crnoj-Gori.html>

40 “Dabogda ti živo meso otpadalo!”, *Kurir*, 30 April – 2 May 2014

41 “Amfilohije falsifikovao izjavu Karla Bilta?”, *Naše novine*, 16 May 2014.

42 “Vulin: Protiv Srbije se vodi hibridni rat”, *RT Vojvodina*, 19 April 2022, [https://rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/politika/vulin-protiv-srbije-se-vodi-hibridni-rat\\_1333918.html](https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/vulin-protiv-srbije-se-vodi-hibridni-rat_1333918.html)

between the West and Russia, and between Russia and Ukraine, and that it is best to maintain a neutral stance in the future. In addition, they do not support sanctions, because they justify Russia's moves, but most of them condemn aggression.

Numerous public opinion surveys show that Russophilia is no longer only the characteristic of the right-wing political spectrum and that the cult of Vladimir Putin, anti-Westernism and anti-Europeanism are not only a part of the rhetoric of right-wing organizations and individuals, but have become a widespread and dispersed syndrome in the wider strata of the Serbian population.

According to the NSPM survey, which was published in July 2022, the overwhelming majority of Serbian citizens oppose the imposition of sanctions against Russia, NATO membership and EU membership if it requires the recognition of Kosovo. Even 84 percent of citizens think that sanctions against Russia should not be imposed, while 60 percent of respondents think that this should not be done even if the European Union threatens Serbia with sanctions. When asked who should be Serbia's main foreign policy partner and supporter, 35 percent of the respondents do not know what to answer, about 25 percent mention Russia and 21.4 percent the European Union, that is, Germany.<sup>43</sup>

According to the June 2022 Demostat public opinion survey, the dominant opinion of Serbian citizens (40 percent of the

43 "Istraživanje: U Srbiji 84 posto građana protiv sankcija Rusiji", *AlJazeera Balkans*, 28 July 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/7/28/istrazivanje-gradjani-srbije-protive-se-uvodjenju-sankcija-rusiji-i-clanstvu-u-nato-u>

respondents) is that Russians are closest to Serbs. As for the world leaders about whom the Serbian citizens have the best opinion, Vladimir Putin dominates (45 percent of the respondents). Also, 40 percent of the respondents believe that Russia is Serbia's most important foreign policy partner.<sup>44</sup>

According to the 2022 survey by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, the public opinion in Serbia did not significantly change despite the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Like in the previous years, about a half of the Serbian population perceives Russia as the closest foreign policy partner. According to the author of this survey, the differences in the foreign policy views depend on the TV stations and media followed by the population. The promotion of Russia does not come from the Russian media such as Russia Today or Sputnik. The radical Russian narrative comes primarily from the major government-controlled media and tabloids.<sup>45</sup>

According to the survey conducted by the CRTA (Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability) in late February and early March 2023, there are no major changes in the public opinion relating to Serbia's foreign political relations and the Kosovo issue: "Their hearts are turned towards Russia and their wallets pointed to the West." Sixteen percent of the citizens think that Serbia should impose sanctions against Russia, which is the same percentage as in November 2022.

44 "Istraživanje Demostata: Spoljno-političke orijentacije građana Srbije", *Demostat*, 5 June 2023, <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/istrazivanje/spoljno-politicke-orijentacije-gradana-srbije/1512>

45 "Istraživanje BCBP: Proruski sentiment trese Srbiju", *VOA*, 14 December 2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-kosovo-eu-rusija-mnenje-ukrajina-odgovornost/6876558.html>

Forty four percent of the respondents believe that Serbia should turn towards the West, while 43 percent of them are in favour of stronger ties with Russia. The survey also showed that Russia is perceived as the most important political (34 percent) and security partner (42 percent), while the European Union is perceived as the most important economic partner (44 percent).<sup>46</sup>

However, somewhat different results, that is, the possible occurrence and development of slightly different trends in the public opinion regarding the perception of the relationship towards Russia, are shown by the survey conducted by the Institute for European Affairs in May 2023. According to the data, resistance to the imposition of sanctions against Russia is decreasing, while 42 percent of the citizens view the Russian aggression against Ukraine as unjustified. Also, the average rating of the relationship between Serbia and Russia was 3.86, which is a decrease compared to the previous surveys. The relationship between Serbia and Russia is rated as better by younger people aged between 18 and 29 and people with secondary education and living in suburban settlements, while the residents of Belgrade with higher education and aged between 45 and 59 gave it lower ratings. President Aleksandar Vučić is still perceived as the politician who works the most on the relationship between Serbia and Russia, but a drop from 53 to 32 percent was still recorded. Russia is perceived as Serbia's friend by 71 percent of the respondents, but there is a noticeable downward trend in comparison with the previous years.<sup>47</sup>

46 *"Istraživanje: Građani Srbije srcem okrenuti ka Rusiji, novčanikom ka Zapadu", N1, 3 March 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/istrazivanje-gradjani-srbije-srcem-okrenuti-ka-rusiji-novcanikom-ka-zapadu/>*

47 *"Istraživanje: U Srbiji opada otpor uvođenju*

Although the majority of the respondents perceive the relationship between Russians and Serbs as friendly and fraternal, some respondents are sceptical and question as to whether such a relationship is mutual and how much the Russian people have heard about Serbia and how important it is to them. According to some respondents, Russians look after their own interests, especially in politics, so that among the answers there is also mention of the relationship based on self-interest. However, compared to the relationship with the West or some other Eastern countries, the relationship between the two countries is positively assessed.

The mythologization and glorification of the friendly relations and, in particular, protective attitude of "Mother Russia", "an Older Brother" have assumed incredible proportions over the past ten or so years, so that numerous facts that absolutely deny the dominant "friendly" narrative are overlooked, suppressed, ignored and unsaid. Some respondents are aware of the indisputable historical details that do not speak in favour of the unconditional and absolute loyalty of this friend. So, for example, it has already been forgotten that Russia recognized the statehood and independence of Slovenia and Croatia in mid-February 1992, just one month after the enemy countries, namely the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Austria, the Vatican and the European Union and even before the most hated and hostile United States, which did so on 7 April 1992. Russia was also a signatory to the UN Security Council Resolution 757, dated 30 May 1992, whereby all signatory

*sankcija Rusiji", 021, 8 November 2023, <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/357870/Istrazivanje-U-Srbiji-opada-otpor-uvođenju-sankcija-Rusiji.html>*

countries undertook to prevent the “import into their territories of all commodities or products originating in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)”. The countries also undertook to deny permission to “any aircraft to take off from, land in or overfly their territory, if it is destined to land in or has taken off from the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), unless the particular flight has been approved for humanitarian and or other purposes.” Resolution 757 also anticipated that the signatory countries should prevent the participation in sporting events on their territory of persons or groups representing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and suspend scientific and technical cooperation and cultural exchanges and visits involving persons or groups officially sponsored by or representing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Russia also signed UN Security Council Resolution 787, dated November 1992, which “condemned all violations of international humanitarian law, including in particular the practice of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and the deliberate impeding of the delivery of food and medical supplies to the civilian population of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina”. It also prohibited “the transshipment of crude oil, petroleum products, coal, energy-related equipment, coal, steel, other metals, chemicals, rubber, tyres, vehicles, aircraft and motors of all types”. It also called upon all states “to take all necessary steps to ensure that none of their exports are diverted to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”. These measures had a drastic effect on the decline in the standard of living of the citizens of the FRYs and the collapse of its economy. The UN Security Council abolished the sanctions in November 1996.<sup>48</sup> Today, many

48 “Da li je Rusija zaista uvek bila uz Srbiju?”,

people are surprised by the fact that in mid-2015 the Russian Federation recognized the Kosovo passports, albeit due to “special cases”, that is, pressure from the IOC. The head of diplomacy, Ivica Dačić, pointed out that Moscow’s decision “does not mean an introduction into the recognition of Kosovo documents”.<sup>49</sup>

The concepts of the “Russian World” and the “Serbian world” are differently defined and interpreted, from the syntagms related to identity, the unification of culture and the spread of influence wherever the mother tongue is spoken regardless of the territory, to an ideological doctrine and a set of values promoted in accordance with the interests of the state. While one group considers it to be a legitimate concept, another group warns against the ideological use of the term in the context of wars and territorial claims.

The respondents have both positive and negative attitudes towards these concepts. A negative attitude stems from its frequent use or, as they say, its abuse in a populist political world and putting these concepts exclusively in a region merging context, while the respondents advocate for the meaning of the term referring to the cultural rapprochement of peoples and their common identity. They link the concept to the unification with the Serbian people in the diaspora and the preservation of peace and tradition and the connection with that people. They believe that this concept is

RSE, 25 April 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-saveznistvo/31818687.html>

49 “Rusija morala da prizna takozvani kosovski pasoš”, B92, 1 August 2015, [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=08&dd=01&nav\\_category=640&nav\\_id=1022227](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=08&dd=01&nav_category=640&nav_id=1022227)

condemned in the West, because it promotes the ideas that are contrary to the values of individualism and thus the globalist system.

The term “Serbian world” was first officially promoted in Serbia by Aleksandar Vulin when he was the defence minister. In late September 2020, Vulin stated that “Vučić should create the Serbian world. Belgrade must rally all Serbs within it and around it, while the President of Serbia is the President of all Serbs”. Thereafter, as the Minister of Internal Affairs, he appeared on one of TV channels with national frequency (9 April 2021) and explained that the current geopolitical situation is not favourable for the unification of all regions where Serbs live, but he believes that it will happen in ten, twenty or fifty years: “Wherever they live, in Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of Srpska. We need to take care of the entire Serbian people from one centre, which is Belgrade, and I do not see what is controversial about that.” President Aleksandar Vučić also did not see anything controversial about that and assessed the negative reactions to Vulin’s statements as a campaign against Serbia.

The Belgrade officials claim that the political elite, which has been in power since 2012, has no territorial aspirations towards its neighbours and that it is only concerned about the citizens of Serbian nationality living in the states created after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Some officials in the region have characterized this phrase as a euphemism for Greater Serbian politics.

The “Serbian world” concept causes various reactions and evokes concrete associations with the nationalist rhetoric that dominated during the last decade of the 20th

century and was associated with the concept of “greater Serbia”. We can find very deep and important historical traces of this concept in numerous statements by spiritual leaders at the end of the last decade of the 20th century. In his November 1991 letter sent to the President of the Yugoslav Peace Conference in The Hague, Patriarch Pavle wrote the following: “The territories where the Serbian people have been living for centuries and where they constituted an ethnic majority until April 1941, before the genocide against them committed by the Quisling regime, cannot remain within any independent Croatia, but must be under the same state roof with present-day Serbia and all Serb krajinas”.<sup>50</sup> In April 1992, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral spoke about the “Serb lands” in the following way: “The backbone of those United Lands is already known and is taking shape once again despite all difficulties – it consists of Serbia and Montenegro. These lands also include eastern Herzegovina, a good part of Bosnian Krajina, Serb Krajina... The contours of these Serbian lands could already be glimpsed amidst all these events and it is only a great misfortune that the scream and cry of Serb Krajina were not heeded at the right moment...”.<sup>51</sup>

In March 2002, a whole decade after this statement by Metropolitan Amfilohije, Bishop Atanasije (Jevtić) of Banat lamented over the lost, that is, betrayed Serbian territories: “All of a sudden they turned out to be peacemakers. In fact, they surrendered to the AVNOJ borders. To the AVNOJ tomb of this people. This country. They betrayed the

50 Patrijarch Pavle’s letter to Britain’s Lord Carrington, President of the Yugoslav Peace Conference in The Hague, “Onima koji su pokrštavali i zatirali Srbe ne može se verovati”, *Pravoslavlje*, No. 591, 1 November 1991.

51 Duga, 20 April 1992.



Serbs in Macedonia, several hundred thousand. There is no word about them. They will write feuilletons in newspapers. They betrayed Serbs in Krajina, Serbs in Montenegro, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. What will happen to Serbs in Kosovo, Old Ras, northern Bačka?”<sup>52</sup>

Although in early November 2008, as the Deputy President of the Serbian Progressive Party, he tried to deny that he ever said it must be remembered that the current President of Serbia, the former mouthpiece of the Serbian Radical Party, stated the following at the Patriotic Congress held in late January 2000: “We neither wanted nor do we want anything that belongs to someone else; we only want what is ours, Serbian, and that is Karlobag, Ogulin, Karlovac, Virovitica and all those Serbian lands”.<sup>53</sup>

The presence of Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Srpska, and Andrija Mandić, President of the Montenegrin Parliament, at the election headquarters of the Serbian Progressive Party was a kind of message that the “Serbian world” is functioning and, at the same time, the demonstration that Vučić is the leader of all Serbs in the region and controls the processes, both in Montenegro and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. An even more complex, substantial, official, solemn and illustrative occasion for the demonstration of the “Serbian world” took place at the ceremony of presenting awards to meritorious citizens and institutions. It took place in the building of the General Secretariat of the President of the Republic

52 Bishop Atanasije of Banat, “Tako je govorio Atanasije: Izvodi iz kazivanja vladike banatskog pred kamerama NTV Studija B”, NIN, 20 March 2002.

53 “Aleksandar Vučić o granici Karlobag–Ogulin–Karlovac–Virovitica”, Istinomer, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2CUONXlxQ8>

on the Statehood Day in 2024. The first row, next to President Aleksandar Vučić and his wife, was occupied by Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Srpska, Nenad Stevandić, President of the Assembly of the Republic of Srpska, and Andrija Mandić, President of the Assembly of Montenegro.<sup>54</sup>

China is still perceived as one of the leading powers on the world geopolitical map and the majority of the respondents positively assess the relationship between Serbia and China and express their sympathy for the Chinese people. The respondents also link good relations with China with mutual benefits. At least according to the surveys, not only the right-wing spectrum but also the general population increasingly perceive China as a friendly economic and foreign policy partner. According to the June 2022 Demostat survey, Serbia’s most important foreign policy partner is Russia (40 percent of the respondents) and then the European Union, which is put in the foreground by almost every third respondent (30 percent), while China holds the third place in the opinion of every fourth respondent (24 percent).<sup>55</sup> As a foreign policy partner, China is even better positioned according to the public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy that same year. According to it, about half of the Serbian population perceives Russia as the closest foreign policy partner, while China

54 “Predsednik Vučić uručio Sretenjski orden Galeriji Doma Vojske Srbije Beograd”, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 15 February 2024, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/20967/predsednik-vucic-urucio-sretenjski-orden-galeriji-doma-vojske-srbije-beograd20967>

55 Demostat survey: Spoljno-političke orijentacije građana Srbije, Demostat, 5 June 2023, <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/istrazivanje/spoljno-politicke-orijentacije-gradana-srbije/1512>

is put in the second place and the European Union in the third place.<sup>56</sup>

In his recent interview for the Chinese media in Belgrade, President Aleksandar Vučić has stated that China is a true friend of Serbia and that the peoples of the two countries always had good relations: “When Serbia was in a difficult situation, China helped it the most. As they say, a friend in need is a friend indeed.” Vučić rejected the so-called “theory of China’s debt trap” and thanked China for its support for Serbia’s development by the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>57</sup> Numerous agreements were signed, different projects and investments were announced, a lot was realized, but a lot remained only “on paper”. Emphasizing Serbia’s cooperation with China took on comic proportions at one moment, because the President addressed the public in Chinese,<sup>58</sup> but so did some members of the ruling party in the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>59</sup>

However, some respondents are critical of the relationship between Serbia and China and point to “China’s imperialist tendencies”, cultural differences and mismatch of the values between China and Serbia in the labour sphere, whereby the exploitation of

workers and China’s environmental ignorance are explicitly mentioned.

This critical attitude towards the “steel friendship” between China and Serbia was largely contributed by the increasingly frequent reports on the position of workers in Chinese companies in Serbia, which reach the public. Reports on the exploitation of workers in Chinese companies raise doubts about the Chinese investors’ “benevolence” and “friendliness”, and point to the aggressive interests of the expansionist economy of the world’s giant.

## THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATIONAL MINORITIES

Ethno-confessional identification, namely interpenetration and even the equalization of ethnic (national) and confessional (religious) identity, is an extremely important identity dimension in the Balkans. Laying emphasis and (re)valuing the role of the majority church (religious community) in the preservation of national identity and self-awareness (it is about the Serbian Orthodox Church at the time of the Ottoman Empire), as well as highlighting the most apparent difference (confession) among the ethnically similar, close and related identities of the Balkan peoples, have contributed to an uncritical equalization of religious and national identity and a complete “symphonization” of the state-building role of national sovereignty and religious organization. Contemplation within these ethno-confessional limits and its initial role in understanding one’s own identity and forming social attitudes are present in the answers of all respondents in this survey to such an extent that they do not explain them, but anticipate them as the only possible paradigm. In the last

56 “Istraživanje BCBP: Proruski sentiment trese Srbiju”, VOA, 14 December 2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-kosovo-eu-rusija-mnenje-ukrajina-odgovornost/6876558.html>

57 “Vučić: Kina je najviše pomogla Srbiji kad je bilo teško”, Politika, 24. February 2024, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/601020/Vucic-Kina-je-najvise-pomogla-Srbiji-kad-je-bilo-tesko>

58 “Vučić u video poruci na kineskom jeziku potvrdio posetu kini”, TV Studio B, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLkmNS0rQ1Q>

59 “Poslanik SNS-a Luka Kebara progovorio kineski”, Vidi Ovo, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk-HOWbPADsIspitanici> gaje

decade of the 20th century, this process was particularly noticeable, because the revitalization of religion after the continuous process of atheizing society was perceived as a return to the neglected national identity. In other words, it was marked by the re-archaization of the traditional pre-enlightenment and pre-civilized patterns of identification with the authority of the church and the monarch. Today, the state symbols (flag, coat-of-arms, anthem, state holidays) support this pattern of ethno-confessional identification. At the same time, conscious disregarding and playing with one's own legal norms, as well as favouring the majority religious community in society are justified by the state by showing respect for the will of the majority, that is, by the populist and demagogic (statistical) abuse of democratic principles.

Ethnonationalism is when the ethnic community is the primary/basic unit and the state is considered as the political will of an ethnic community. Membership in an ethnic community is based on the ethnic criteria such as origin and nationality. This type of nationalism divides the inhabitants of states into "us" and "others", and "others" cannot have the same civil and political rights and are considered incapable of being harmoniously integrated into the national community<sup>60</sup>. Such nationalism is based on the belief that the meaning of every nation is the creation of an exclusive nation-state based on the "one nation, one state" principle and opposition to minority groups and foreigners in the country because they are different from the resident population.

60 Veselinović, V. (2016). "Desne političke stranke: ideologija, pojmovi, vrste", Faculty of Political Science, Zagreb University, <https://hr-cak.srce.hr/file/276939>

When it comes to national minorities in Serbia, the respondents state that they "do not bother them in general". What bothers them are extremes and the possible instrumentalization of their right to vote, which can be seen from their answers: "I don't have a problem with that. I am only bothered by extremes, regardless of the minority." Or: "I am only bothered by the moment when every minority, because it is a minority, begins to use that." Such answers mean that the respondents accept only "loyal minorities", that is, those who define themselves as members of a minority group, but "do not bother" us, so that they are sometimes desirable for the manifestation of the multiculturalism, democratic potentials and quality of the state. However, the problem is posed by self-aware and self-conscious minorities. Serbia has the formal legal models of minority treatment, but it rarely observes and applies its own laws and norms.

In the 2020 survey conducted by the Ethnicity Research Centre and the Institute of Social Sciences it is stated that, although the distance towards the Roma and Albanian national minorities is the greatest, the attitudes of the respondents from these two communities show a social distance from others". Social distance is the greatest in personal relations – marriage and neighbourhood, but is also shown in other relationships. The data show that less than one third of the respondents of Serbian nationality would accept marriage with members of Roma and Albanian national minorities, and that they would also accept marriage with members of other nationalities in the range of 46.5 percent (Bosniaks) to 61.1 percent (Slovaks).

The discrimination of minorities is very present in the lives of members of minority communities. According to the survey, Serbian society is “burdened by discrimination on a national basis”. The data show that about 60 percent of the respondents of Albanian nationality and about 56 percent of the respondents of Bosniak nationality were faced with discrimination on a national basis more than ten times in informal contacts with members of other national communities. The same discrimination was experienced by even 66 percent of respondents of Roma nationality and about 56 percent of respondents of Croatian national minority. The respondents of Albanian, Bosniak and Roma nationality pointed to frequent discrimination by the police. The majority of respondents, members of all national minorities, believe that they do not realize the recognized rights to education, culture, official use of their language and script, as well as information through or with the help of the national councils. On the other hand, “it is noticeable that the respondents who are members of all national minorities, with the exception of the Albanian minority, are more attached to Serbia than to their home country”.<sup>61</sup>

The respondents’ attitudes towards the Roma are specific relative to the attitudes towards other national minorities. This specificity stems from a broad social framework characterized by prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards the Roma. Such a relationship is the result of decades-long socio-economic vulnerability,

61 “Međuetnički odnosi u Srbiji: Ko je s kim najprisniji i ko je od koga najviše distanciran?”, Radio Free Europe, 30. September 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/odnosi-izme%C4%91u-etni%C4%8Dkih-zajednica-u-srbiji-ko-je-za-koga-nepo%C5%BEeljan/30866403.html>

cultural stereotypes and stigmatization of the Roma, thus shaping the negative social perception of this community. The Roma are continuously the most discriminated national minority in Serbia<sup>62</sup>, which is also noticeable in this survey. Several respondents pointed to the present discrimination against the Roma and, partially, other religious and national minorities with special emphasis on discrimination in smaller towns in comparison with larger city centres. One respondent points to the significant need for continuous efforts towards the improvement of their social position in the future. However, even in the statements of support one can notice (latent) racism. For example: “I always say when I see a small Roma child that is a jinx because he was born where he was born, when he is condemned to that”; “I am not saying anything bad, but we know that you are an endangered species if you are of Roma nationality”. This paradox shows that, despite the awareness of vulnerability, prejudice and discrimination, they still persist. The specificities of the respondents’ views strongly indicate the significance of the broader social problem of Roma discrimination, against Roma, beyond the limits of certain political ideologies.

Some respondents expressed animosity towards the Croats and Albanians, such as: “I don’t like the Croats and I don’t like the Albanians.” Or: “I only have a problem with the Albanians because of our territorial problem.” It is also necessary to mention that the statements by Serbian officials not only fail to contribute to reducing the ethnic distance towards the Croats and Albanians but, on the contrary, they are frequently

62 Goran Bašić, “Romi u Srbiji”, <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2023/12/mrg-rep-romaserb-se-mar21-e.pdf>

the reason for increasing the distance and fuelling hatred and intolerance. So, the former Minister of Internal Affairs, Minister of Defence and Director of the Security Intelligence Agency, and the close and loyal associate of the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vulin, has recently called the Croats “Ustashe” and repeated this several times in the morning show on one TV station with national frequency and was even encouraged by the hosts to say so.<sup>63</sup> Naturally, the influential Serbian politician, President Aleksandar Vučić, also rarely misses the opportunity to emphasize the hostile attitude of our western neighbour and the hatred of the Croats towards the Serbs, as well as Serb victims in the Serbo-Croatian relationship.<sup>64</sup> Naturally, the former Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, does not lag behind him in such rhetoric.<sup>65</sup> The public speeches of Aleksandar Vulin as the Defence in which he called the Albanians “Shiptarians” were also dealt with by the Serbian judicial authorities, following a lawsuit filed by the National Council of Albanians. As could be expected, the Court of Appeals confirmed the decision of the Higher Court in Belgrade that the lawsuit was unfounded, that is, there was no hate speech.<sup>66</sup>

63 “Preludo i za Aleksandra Vulina: Svi su Hrvati ustaše, jedino su Kaštelani bili četnici, ali su i oni sad postali ustaše!”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27 February .2024, <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/regija/preludo-i-za-aleksandra-vulina-svi-su-hrvati-ustase-jedino-su-kastelani-bili-cetnici-ali-su-sada-i-oni-ustase-1367675>

64 “Sve zapaljive izjave predsednika Vučića o Hrvatskoj: Vi svaki dan odlikujete one koji su ubijali Srbe”, *Danas*, 7 October.2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sve-zapaljive-izjave-predsednika-vucica-o-hrvatskoj-vi-svaki-dan-odlikujete-one-koji-su-ubijali-srbe/>

65 “Izliv ustaša u mozak Vučića, Vulina i Ane Brnabić”, *Nova*, 7 October .2022, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/izliv-ustasa-u-mozak-vucica-vulin-i-ane-brnabic/>

66 “Sud odlučio: Aleksandar Vulin nije uvrijedio Albance nazivajući ih ‘šiptari’”, *Aljazeera*, 22

## THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS MIGRANTS

The respondents reveal a chauvinistic attitude of the welfare state toward immigrants – protectionism towards members of their own nation and the exclusion of foreigners using the services of the state if it does not benefit from them or the local population loses something due to them. Therefore, the respondents believe that migrants are important for the country’s labour market and economy, as well as for filling job vacancies. In this connection, they have an explicit attitude. For example: “I support their arrival, but only if they fill the jobs for which we lack people. But (...) I will always give priority and rather employ our woman as a school or kindergarten cleaner than a woman from Turkey, Afghanistan and the like”. The respondents are especially against the arrival of cheap workers which are, as they say, even “cheaper” than our workers, while the key economic issues remain unresolved: “It is generally bad. Because this means that our capitalist did not want to raise the cost of labour for our people, the residents of Serbia. Thus, the easier option is to bring in cheap foreign workers”.

On the other hand, the respondents are somewhat more in favour of the educated people coming from Russia and Ukraine who contribute to the IT sector and are culturally closer to the domestic population as the Slavic people. So, one respondent explains: “The Russians who come here are educated people, the people who have helped us with software. For example, I have Russian friends who came here and work in the IT sector; they are engineers

December 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2021/12/22/sud-odlucio-aleksandar-vulin-nije-uvrijedio-albance-nazivajuci-ih-siptari>

who fled from war. They would stay here – the culture suits them, so that Russians, Ukrainians and others who do not come here for bread and butter, can contribute to us at some higher level due to their intellectual abilities”. As the positive sides of their arrival, they mention their contribution to a purchasing power increase, payment of taxes and the like, as can be seen from the answers of the respondents: “More citizens, more taxes and more productive and employed people cannot harm the Serbian economy. “This is certainly good for the Serbian economy. The Russians, who have a high purchasing power, have de facto increased purchasing power.” On the negative side, they emphasize that there are no Serbian citizens in Russian firms. For example: “A Russian company has come. It has been given the best possible conditions for doing business here. It pays excellent salaries, probably 3,000 euros, but whom does it employ? Its people, which I strongly disagree with.”

Xenophobia, defined as fear, hatred or hostility towards groups that position themselves as foreign and different, can also be found in the respondents’ answers.<sup>67</sup> The respondents define “culturally unacceptable” migrants like this: “If, for example, 50,000 Iranians, Afghanistans and Pakistanis come here, we will have great problems. I once saved three girls from such maniacs. Those who come from an illiterate region do not contribute to our economy”. The arrival of people from the Middle East is solely negatively evaluated by the respondents, while Islamophobia, ethnonationalism and protectionism are also very pronounced. For example: “They hold us back, since they

are actually the people from third world countries. As for the life of our people and finances this is a minus”. Migration is perceived as the Islamization of Europe, which was mentioned by some respondents: “Why they who are Muslims and belong to such people do not go to the familiar neighbouring countries which are much richer than the European ones. Such as the Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar. “Why don’t they go there to their people, brothers. Instead, they have walked thousands of kilometres and have come to us, other people. A negative attitude is especially expressed towards migrants from the “Turkish civilization”, “young and military fit”. In their answers the respondents also point to security threats.

Most of the respondents do not see Serbia as a country that could accumulate various peoples and nationalities, nor do they see their country as a fertile ground for multicultural society. One respondent explains: “If one million Chinese or one million Buddhists or one million Muslims come at this moment, I think that the question that imposes itself is how this will affect our culture. Society is a living organism and the question is how one culture will react to another.” The respondents mostly express cultural racism towards migrants. The emphasis is on maintaining a monocultural and mononational state, nurturing one’s own culture and preserving the ethnos, as can be seen from the following answer: “I am not enthusiastic about mixing. However, there is something in those differences. When you go to Japan or China, you see that they are all Chinese, or that they are all Japanese.. After all, everything has some sense, some culture. I would sincerely like that the nations, not Americans and those newly created nations, but the autochthonous ones with different traditions, remain

67 Mudde, C. (2000). *The ideology of the extreme right*. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press.

ethnically pure as much as possible. Naturally, I am not a racist, I would not force anyone to go away or not to come here. But I would simply like certain ethnoses to be preserved.”

There are rare answers which show empathy towards migrants. For example: “I feel sorry for those people who have to leave their homeland in such a way. I am very sorry when I hear how they manage to come here or pass through our country. It is always heard that they pass in some trucks and so on, and you know how they suffer”. However, apart from the expressed empathy there is also a security concern. “I don’t have a particularly bad opinion about this, but I think that we shouldn’t let this people in without a filter. It is necessary to be careful if they have problematic or unlawful behaviour. I wouldn’t say that they should be deported, but it would be necessary to keep a little closer eye on them.”

## THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS GENDER ISSUES

The survey of the perception of women’s position and role has shown that all gender attitudes and views are solely framed within a naturalistic model of sex, with no insight into gender and its social determinants. Such an understanding of sex (and the denial of gender) proceeds from the assumption that men and women are inherently different due to their biological characteristics and evolution. The model emphasizes the biological factors as the sole determinants in shaping the differences between men and women, including the physical, cognitive and emotional characteristics<sup>68</sup>. For exam-

ple, a respondent says: “The differences (between men and women) exist biologically and according to the state of matter”.

Such perceptions and views on the nature and position of women in society are in compliance with a stereotypical patriarchal and traditionalist approach, and are characteristic of all respondents. Consequently, the perception and understanding of the position and role of women in other spheres, which are considered in this survey, are based on this survey.

The patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices relating to “male” and “female” jobs, behaviours and roles say that men are bread-winners and protectors of the family, as well as the “head of the family”. According to this model, they are responsible not only for the economic stability of the household, but are also the bearers of the family name and honour, as well as the status in the community. A man is also expected to be stable and not to show any signs of weakness or intense emotions. Tears, fear and insecurity are considered “unmanly” and embarrassing for men. Women are expected first of all to be mothers, then the pillar of the house, to provide emotional support, take care of household and children, as well as to “respect their husbands”, that is, to be obedient to male authority. Today, women in Serbia are predominantly professionally engaged, work full time and achieve high academic and professional results. However, they are expected to engage in a “second shift” of work at home, in addition to their primary jobs. According to the patriarchal view, women are (too) emotional in the sense that they feel and display intense emotions, which they cannot control. In other words, they are not sufficiently rational. This is considered as weakness, but also

68 Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, “Language and Gender”. Second Edition, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, <https://web.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/Chap1.pdf>

as a part of femininity. If women are not distinctly emotional, they are considered as “cold” and “unfeminine”. Although this is rarely explicated in idealized, romanticized and completely naturalistic representations of differences between men and women, the fundamental prejudice, which is always at the core of all of them, is that women are inferior to men and thus should be subordinated to them. This inferiority refers not only to a physical one, reflected in the well-known the “weaker sex” phrase, an emotional one – “the gentler sex”, but also to an intellectual one, reflected in numerous sayings and proverbs about “female mind”. This is also shown in the respondents’ answers: “They are always gentle and nice”, “Women are certainly weaker and should always be protected, if society were perfect”...

It is notable that the respondents have difficulties overcoming the conflict between the right-wing, traditional gender norms and the reality of modern life. This discrepancy between the proclaimed right-wing norms imposed by the naturalistic understanding of sex and changes in society is particularly evident in the area of gender relations and equality between men and women. The respondent, who is a member of one political organization, says: “We don’t try to differentiate between men and women at all. For us, quality comes first... That’s exactly why (we don’t have quotas for women and can’t attract enough women) we don’t want to make a difference, but we don’t want to disregard the differences that really exist biologically and according to the state of matter.”

Such inconsistencies pose a challenge for their ideological conviction, especially because they are the followers and not the

creators of ideology, and may lead to different coping strategies. Thus, even when they talk about the importance of women’s employment and right to work, the respondents highlight their role of a mother as the most important and most valued: “They have a great role because they give birth to a new life and thus should be extremely respected. “Women’s career ambitions and advancement are allowed, as is the freedom of choice but, at the same time, they are disapproved because of abandoning the patriarchal model. The respondents state that a working woman should be entitled to pregnancy and maternity leave, so that her role of a mother can be primary. This is illustrated by the following examples: “The twenty-first century is a Pandora’s box. A woman should work, but she should be entitled to the longest possible pregnancy and maternity leave, as well as to other mother, child and family benefits, so that she can feel fulfilled as a mother: “The primary role of a woman is to be a mother and be with her husband, children and whole family, and not in the way that is now dominant that a woman is to some extent forced to work both at home and outside.”

The respondents show some degree of ambivalence in their attitudes towards the equality between men and women; they are not sure what attitudes they should finally take. For example: “Is it a tradition for a woman that she must marry, give birth to children and belong to only one man, or is better or simpler that she has no obligation to give birth and belong to one man. I just wouldn’t know which variant is better.” Some respondents try to overcome contradictions and vagueness through conservative adaptation by supporting the traditional gender norms and values – family and society models, while



at the same time being reserved towards changes in gender roles and equality. Thus, some respondents adjust their attitudes to be in line with the changes in society, while at the same time preserving the core values of the right-wing ideology, but adapting themselves to modern tendencies: "To be honest, we need to work on reformulation; we need to relax and liberalize some attitudes, because we don't live in the time eighty or one hundred years ago. I think that these attitudes are somewhat stuck in the past. I'm not saying that everything should be changed, but that we should liberalize ourselves and be aware that we live in a democratized society despite its flaws."

One of the ways in which the followers of the right-wing ideology react to these inconsistencies is the reinterpretation of their views. This includes the adoption of certain elements of modern society which are not fully in line with traditional norms, while at the same time preserving the core right-wing values. For example, some respondents support the idea that women work outside the home, but still insist on the importance of traditional family values. Thus, two respondents clearly and consistently state that the role of a mother and wife does not have to be primary. One respondent recognizes the deeply subordinated and sacrificial position of the patriarchal wife-mother model and states that a patriarchal woman does not necessarily have to be a mother and that precisely due to such expectations of society "a woman loses herself, while another respondent highlights women's rights and free will.

The respondents were also divided over the position of women in society. Although some of them recognize the need for the improvement of their status and more

modern and fairer understanding of their role in Serbia, they notice that reality does not live up to expectations, as shown by the following statement: "In this country, women are ... belittled in a way. In the sense that women's potentials are not sufficiently used and that there is a prejudice that the house does not rest upon the ground, but on a woman. And as long as a woman's place is in the private, that is, domestic sphere nothing will radically change regardless of whether she is a left winger or a right winger. As long as she is seen in that context, she will belong there." When the respondents were asked about their understanding of a woman's role and position, the answers they gave promote respect for women, advocate for gender equality, and support the idea of a woman pursuing her career, striving for independence and not having the place only in the private sphere. A respondent answered like this: "A man and a woman should have an equal status in society. Tomorrow, I will respect my wife and try to teach my children to respect both of us."

In contemporary society in Serbia, there is also a significant number of citizens and civil society organizations fighting against gender stereotypes and advocating gender equality in Serbia. Over the last few decades, significant progress has been made in the improvement of women's position in addition to the very slow change of the traditional gender views, especially those of the younger generations.<sup>69</sup> Globalization, access to information on the internet and the influence of Western culture bring

69 Institute for Social Research, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, "Stratifikacijske i vrednosne promene u periodu društvene transformacije", 2003, "Promene osnovnih struktura srpskog društva", 2012, and "Svakodnevni život domaćinstava i pojedinaca u uslovima društvenih promena u savremenoj Srbiji", 2018.

the waves of liberal values and models for their realization. Feminism and the fight for gender equality are becoming increasingly more present, although they are often met with resistance from the more conservative parts of society, which consider them a threat to traditional values. The views on women's human rights are increasingly polarized, especially in the clash between the feminist and the increasingly more organized anti-gender initiatives. In this context, the respondents are exposed to right-wing, increasingly present anti-gender initiatives.

The increasing trend of challenging and undermining the efforts to fight against the root gender discrimination causes and effects and for gender equality, shows that right wingers use various methods to discourage women from fighting for equality.

The first method of discrediting the fight for gender equality is the misuse of the term and its misinterpretation. This is how right wingers use the term "gender ideologies". Due to the misuse of the concepts of gender studies and sociology, which refer to social and cultural sex aspects and not to biological sex in the discourse against "gender ideologies", this concept is often misrepresented as an attempt to deny the biological differences between men and women. The term "gender ideology" is used in a pejorative sense to stigmatize and discredit the gender equality concept. Sometimes it is also attributed with the attempt to legalize pedophilia and incest.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Press conference of the Coalition for the Natural Family devoted to the proposal package for the Law on Same-Sex Unions, Gender Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDD1KuX-bbw>, "Koalicija za prirodnu porodicu po svaku cenu želi da zaustavi usvajanje zakona o istopolnim zajednicama", Noizz, 2021, [https://noizz.](https://noizz.rs/noizz-news/koalicija-za-prirodnu-porodicu-zeli-da-zaustavi-usvajanje-zakona-o-istopolnim/9jw2fgt)

The discourse against "gender ideology" often includes the misinterpretation of feminism. For example, feminism is often presented as a movement that wants to subjugate men and promote hatred against them. In an effort to discredit it, right wingers also attribute extreme views to it, whereby they exaggerate or take the views of minority or radical feminist groups out of context in order to create a distorted image of the entire movement as being radical and extremist, although it is a part of the widely accepted and valid theoretical frameworks in sociology and psychology.

The frequently used methods also include associations with negative labels (e.g. feminism is labelled as a "Western invention", Western imposition of "gender ideologies", "anti-family", "immoral" or even "diabolical"), attributing social problems to feminism (when, for example, the problems such as divorce, "decline of the family" or even the moral decay of society are falsely attributed to the influence of feminism), denying the existence of gender inequality (when it is claimed that women's rights have already been achieved or that gender inequality does not exist, whereby it is tried to challenge the need for feminist activity), manipulation with religious texts (in the cases when religious texts are interpreted or abused to criticize feminism and promote patriarchal inequalities), promotion of alternative femininity models (when traditional gender roles are glorified and presented as superior, by frequently using sentimental and nostalgic images of the "good old times") and the like.

[rs/noizz-news/koalicija-za-prirodnu-porodicu-zeli-da-zaustavi-usvajanje-zakona-o-istopolnim/9jw2fgt](https://noizz-news/koalicija-za-prirodnu-porodicu-zeli-da-zaustavi-usvajanje-zakona-o-istopolnim/9jw2fgt)

The abundance of the above-mentioned opinions is present in the respondents' responses, which are homogeneous with respect to this issue. One can observe the complete rejection of the concepts of gender, feminism and all advocates of women's equality and their discrediting as a foreign influence, hidden intentions against men, masculinity and family, which can be seen from the following answers of the respondents: "I am bothered a lot by those women's organizations that persistently fight against patriarchy. I am not bothered by their fight against patriarchy, but by their ulterior motives. It is about killing the masculinity in a man"; "There is no such thing as healthy feminism because feminism pushes women to be career-oriented. In principle, feminism pushes women towards misandry. That they find their identity in abortion, misandry and career at all costs which, in my opinion, is equal to some dissatisfaction in their later life. Everything is disrupted. We no longer have healthy individuals or healthy families." Such a condemnation of "gender ideology" sometimes boils down to a violent misogynistic rhetoric: "I am completely in favour of sexual equality. I won't say gender equality on purpose. Today's public policies and today's constructivist theory are based on something that some theorists and literary critics from France blabbered about in the 1960s and 1970s and then Judith Butler, a dissolute feminist, copied them and said: "There is no such thing as sex, everything is gender."

The right-wing ideology is continuously faced with the problem how to attract women and include them to a significant extent – the more extreme the ideology, the more so. This is one of the biggest problems faced by right-wing groups, especially in the case of political parties which have problems

with massification, branding, legitimization, meeting of electoral quotas and the like.<sup>71</sup> This was also noticed by a respondent from a right-wing party: "Unfortunately, we don't attract enough women to join our party, because it has been slandered by both the former and the current regimes, which characterized as the most extreme right wingers who ever existed. The problems we deal with are not close to women. Women fight for slightly more freedom for the female population, which we, as a state-building party, do not do. For us, the country comes first. We are one the world's parties that do not have a quota for women. We do not try to +make a difference between men and women. For us, quality comes first... Just because we don't want to disregard the differences that really exist, biologically and according to the state of matter." However, the interpretation by which this issue is explained from a naturalistic and gender-stereotyped view of the "male" and "female" spheres of interest does not give a chance for its solution. In addition, these answers are also characterized by a completely gender-"blind"<sup>72</sup> reasoning, as in the case of the arguments that "sex is not a factor", thus completely ignoring the fact that women have different needs and conditions for their activities, so that uniform practices do not imply realistically equal access and opportunities for women.

71 Bujak Stanko, J., "Rodni aspekt nasilnih ekstremizama u Srbiji", Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2024, Belgrade.

72 Gender-blind reasoning refers to an approach that neglects or ignores the gender dimension in analyses, decisions or conclusions, and does not take into account gender roles and inequalities when considering various issues. Gender-blind interpretation can arise from the assumption that all people are the same regardless of their gender and that equality is achieved solely by focusing on universal aspects and not on gender-related specificities.

Some respondents believe that some women adopt right-wing ideology and even have more extreme views than men such as, for example: "They are often more extreme. I know a lot of educated women who are nationalists. I think of modern and emancipated women with a university degree who are nationalists". One respondent takes a "gender-blind" position and points out that the question of ideology is not conditioned any gender: "That question is totally unrelated to sex or gender determination. Like every human (man and woman), like any individual who can be an adherent of any ideology, a woman can also become one like a man."

Most respondents recognize that right-wing ideology is not attractive to women, because it puts them in a subordinate position. In their opinion, liberal values are closer to them, while feminism itself is closer to a left-wing orientation. For example: "Women strive for a more liberal value system. Whether this is ultimately better for society, I honestly don't know, but I think that the inclination is more towards that side. Because we live in the 21st century, the century of the bloom of various things, fad and the like. Women strive for a more liberal sense of life than a conservative one, because it reminds them of the past when they were abused and the like in harsh conservative societies." They also believe that right-wing ideology is not close to women because our society does not have a moderate right, so that right-wing ideas are wrongly associated only with extremism, with chauvinism and misogyny and not with traditional and religious values: "We lack a good moderate party. To keep national interests, to keep moral, traditional, religious values, but not to exaggerate in this respect." At the same time,

they point out that this is not the case with the "real right-wing" and should not bother women, because "real right wingers" protect men, women and children: "Women adopt right-wing ideology but, in essence, the functioning of this ideology is patriarchal. The leaders of right-wing organizations are men. I'm not going to say that women have a problem with this, they follow that other ideology. However, I think that, in essence, the real right has the programme that absolutely anticipates the protection of men, women and children."

Only the correspondents who are members of one movement state that in their organization women hold leading positions and are respected by other members. However, further explanations show that this is a female group rallied around the topic that is considered the "women's sphere of interest". "All positions are held by women. The President is a woman, the Vice-President is a woman, the Secretary is a woman"; "We have the female President of the movement, the female Deputy President of the movement, we also had the female Vice-President. We also have many women who are operatives. The male team is made up of wonderful persons, who respect us and our opinion; they are really wonderful."

The respondents' opinions vary as to whether women adopt right-wing ideology independently or under the influence of the man in their life, be it a relative, the partner or the husband. There are some who believe that women make the decision to adopt this ideology independently, stressing the importance of the factors such as their own beliefs, experiences and attitudes, and that the women they know make their decisions independently and out of their own will: "They don't make

decisions because they follow someone. Mine are mostly bandheads.” Nevertheless, the respondents highlight the inevitable influence of socialization, education, information and the family environment, which often create a complex network of influences on the formation of political views, like in the following answers: “They adopt an ideology by following someone. There are women who do this independently; they are also influenced by socialization, while the environment also has an influence. Some women accept a father figure and later look for such husbands, look for such partners who are right-wingers. Later they join the church or some organizations” “This can originate from the family and upbringing. But, this can also be done in some other way. A woman can understand and decide how she wishes to live by her reasoning. Many women wake up (ideologically).” There is also an opinion that women can adopt right-wing ideology for pragmatic reasons or personal gain: “Well, I think that this (the adoption of ideology) is an independent and calculated step. In a certain period of life, when they have no better choice, they adopt an ideology (because they benefit from it).” This aspect shows that women, like men, can be motivated by different factors when it comes to the adoption of political views, from a rational approach to a personal belief, which reflects their current life circumstances.

The respondents emphasize various reasons why women abandon a right-wing ideology. These reasons include the situation when women become disillusioned by being neglected in a professional environment, face domestic violence, or perceive the oppression of other women within a right-wing group. Some respondents point to economic reasons as the key factor, pointing

out that women can leave the organization if they feel that they can achieve better financial results elsewhere or when the movement does not achieve the expected results in elections. There is also an attitude that emphasizes the fluidity of the modern age where individuals can be disillusioned with any ideology or its representatives. This perspective suggests that disillusionment is inherent and is not necessarily attributable to external factors. It is the result of the complex and changing factors that shape ideological beliefs. This fluidity of beliefs may contribute to various reasons why women, like all individuals, may change their ideological orientation over time.

## THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS LGBTI+ PEOPLE

The right-wing attitudes towards LGBTI+ people are based on heteronormativity. This implies that heterosexuality is the only “correct” or “natural” type of sexuality and that other types, such as homosexuality or bisexuality, are deviant or minority type. This concept includes wider social, cultural and institutional patterns, which support and favour heterosexuality, while at the same time limiting, marginalizing or stigmatizing other types of sexual orientation<sup>73</sup>. Heteronormativity is present in various spheres of society, including legal norms, educational systems, media, religious institutions and the like.

In a right-wing ideology, heteronormativity, as the starting point for the right wingers’ views and attitude towards LGBTI+ people,

73 Ivana Ranković and Maja Bjeloš, “Onlajn narativi protiv “rodne ideologije” u Srbiji”, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, 2023, <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Onlajn-narativi-protiv-rodne-ideologije-u-Srbiji.pdf>

results in various forms of misconception, prejudice and discrimination, as well as the lack of support. The right-wing approaches that advocate for the preservation of “traditional” values can stigmatize or reject the people who do not fit into the heteronormative model. The persons who adopt a heteronormative frame of reference have difficulty in understanding and supporting the diversity of sexual orientations and identities. This results in the non-adoption of the rights of LGBTI+ people, limited recognition of their relationships, rejection or condemnation of their identities and marginalization. Heteronormativity also contributes to homophobic attitudes and behaviours, whereby homophobia means irrational fear, intolerance or hatred towards the persons belonging to the LGBTI+ community<sup>74</sup>. In such a context, LGBTI+ people face limited access to the basic rights such as the right to marry, the right to adopt children, the right to the freedom of expression and the right to security. The persons who are not aware of their heteronormativity are not aware of the social framework within which they function, which is derived from ideological indoctrination, upbringing, cultural norms and media representations that perpetuate heteronormative ideas.

As a consequence of all the mentioned characteristics of the right-wing understanding of the LGBTI+ population, their attitudes towards the LGBTI+ community are very homogeneous with respect to numerous issues. They are against the Pride Parade, the recognition of same-sex

marriages and the adoption of children by same-sex couples. The respondents further accuse the members of the LGBTI+ community of “extreme behaviour”, “threatening” family values and the church, “forcing” their rights in society, “public imposition of sexuality” and the like. Due to the complete internalization of heteronormativity and the absence of its conscious reconsideration, the respondents do not understand that such attitudes threaten the basic human rights of LGBTI+ people. They believe that in this way they show empathy and understanding, but that they also must protect their own rights being “at risk”: “Let them go to their gatherings, let them hang out in their cafes, let them celebrate their holidays there, or whatever they have, but don’t let them touch the church and the family. My message is: Serbian people, we can’t kill them, we can’t make them go away, just don’t let them endanger us. We do not endanger them, believe me. We don’t deny their business and marital rights or anything else. They want to get married... You know when you say that you give someone a finger and he wants a hand.”

The respondents unanimously criticize civil society organizations because they “instrumentalize” the members of the LGBTI+ community, as one of them answered: “They are used by foreign NGOs and agitate through them. This means that they are literally collateral damage. On one hand, the majority does not accept them and, on the other hand, these Soros’ partners instrumentalize them for certain geopolitical strategies.”. The conspiracy theories about the LGBTI+ community and civil society can also be found. For example: “The Pride organization is comprised of the people who make money and push certain agenda. This has nothing to do with them (LGBTI+);

74 Miloš Kovačević and Nikola Planojević, “Transfobija i homofobija u Srbiji – 2022. Izveštaj o incidentima motivisanim mržnjom prema LGBT+ osobama u Srbiji u 2022. godini”, Let It Be Known Association, 2023, <https://rs.boell.org/sr/2023/11/13/transfobija-i-homofobija-u-srbiji-2022>

this doesn't concern them and I think that they do not fight for their rights."

The majority of the respondents point out that "they have nothing against the members of the LGBTI+ population, but... "they are against the promotion of that as the supreme idea of society", referring to the fact that this type of sexuality has a negative effect on the extension of human species. The respondents are against "the introduction of an LGBTI+ ideology in education, media and everyday life". As they state, they are bothered by the pushing of the topic, ideology and media attention that are devoted to this issue. The respondents state that sexuality should be a private matter and cite the famous sentence known in public discourse: "Let them do what they want within their own four walls". Such statements point to an attempt to show tolerance, which is not sufficiently inclusive. In other words, heteronormative persons do not want to show open animosity towards LGBTI+ people, while at the same time supporting the policies and attitudes that actually limit or deny the rights of this community because this is justified by the protection of their own interests<sup>75</sup>.

## ECOLOGICAL TOPICS

The respondents dominantly point out that ecological topics are important, especially in our country, but the majority believe that

<sup>75</sup> For example: "This is not my (LGBTI+) problem. The problem is when some kind of propaganda that it should be even more accepted." or: "I don't mind if he wants to affirm himself in society as a homosexual. But it is not good for society that this is promoted as a supreme idea. (...) Because the base of society is that physical and human development, that there are more of us, so that we can survive. Any other type of sexuality that does not work on this abolishes the evolution of life and cannot be an example for us as a social entity".

they should not be a priority or misused for political purposes. Among more important topics than ecological ones, the respondents mention the issue of Kosovo and Metohija, economy, unemployment, corruption, poverty, increased number of autistic children, with autism, the issues of women, education, media and the like. Other respondents believe that ecological topics should be prioritized according to their importance.

Some respondents harbour a distinct animosity towards the current ecological movements. As for the ecological movements protesting against Rio Tinto, they are sceptic about them, stating that they do not know the real truth and that there are many paradoxical moments, among which they point to the incompetence of the actors and the misuse of the ecological topic by numerous organizations in pursuing their own interests. Some respondents are not against lithium mining, but think that Rio Tinto is problematic. According to them, one of the main ecological problems is the lack of citizens' education about environmental protection.

It is a fact that over the past years the right-wing has become increasingly interested in ecological issues and that the related topics have become a part of the programmes and agenda of right-wing political organizations and movements. This topic is especially relevant in the context of the anti-immigration policy that is advocated by the far-right in Europe and the United States.

The leaders of Spain's populist Vox party call for a "patriotic" restoration of a "green, clean and prosperous Spain"; the British National Party claims to be the "only really green party" in the country due to its focus on migration; the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany has stopped mocking climate sciences and began to warn that

“difficult climate conditions” in Africa and the Middle East will cause “mass migration to European countries in gigantic proportions”, which is why it is necessary to strengthen border control. The French National Rally (the former National Front) now has the green faction called New Ecology, while the leader of that party promises to create a “world-leading ecological civilization” with a focus on local food production. Marine Le Pen’s statements from 2019 are well known: “Environmental protection is a patriotic expression, because it is an integral part of belonging”.

The former denial of climate change has been replaced by environmental populism that seeks to connect public anxiety over the climate crisis with the contempt for ruling elites, return to traditional ideas about nature and people, and demands for the expulsion of immigrants and stronger border control. In a broader sense, it is an attempt by the right-wing to usurp the ecological issues, which have long been the exclusive domain of centre-left parties and environmental activists.<sup>76</sup>

## **INSTEAD OF THE CONCLUSION: THE POTENTIAL FOR ACTION**

Membership in certain organizations, party affiliation or affinity for a certain political party, as well as ideological proximity with certain organizations are the indicators of the respondents’ active potentials, that is, the conative dimension of their attitudes. As expected, depending on their age and social status, the respondents do not declare themselves as members of certain fan groups, but rather as club supporters. They also mention membership in some non-governmental lifelong learning organizations, the Orthodox Sports Club and the Serbs for Serbs Charity Organization. The respondents feel ideological proximity with the Serbian-Russian brotherhood and Movement for the Defence of Kosovo and Metohija. As for the political parties, they mention proximity with the views promoted by the Dveri, Oathkeepers, New Democratic Party of Serbia, Enough Is Enough and We – The Voice from the People, but with the reservation that they will not engage in politics or that they are aware that these organizations are sometimes driven by self-interest. The declared voters mention the following choices: the Serbian Progressive Party, Serbian Radical Party, People’s Party and Enough Is Enough – Sovereignists.

As far as the membership itself is concerned, the respondents’ activism was at a low level: only three respondents were the members of a political party/movement (Enough Is Enough, New Democratic Party of Serbia, I Live for Serbia). When it comes to activism, namely their participation in various social and political events, the majority of the respondents highlighted their participation in litanies. Only one

76 “Kad desnica preotme ekologiju”, The Guardian, Peščanik, 2 December 2021, <https://pescanik.net/kad-desnica-preotme-ekologiju/>



respondent actively participated in the protests against the Pride Parade although, as can be seen from the answers, the majority of the respondents are against this event.

There is a very wide and diverse spectrum of the potential institutional and organisational structures in Serbia within which right-wing programmes could be carried out. The unique platform of the “Serbian World” provides the basis for a broad front of institutions, organizations and individuals which, in addition to extremist organizations, also includes the Serbian Orthodox Church, pro-Russian parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition parties, media and part of the intellectual elite, including a large number of university professors. Far-right wingers hold significant positions in institutions and the ruling party. One of the most significant figures in this bloc is Aleksandar Vulin, the head of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) and close associate of President Aleksandar Vučić, who publicly advocates for the “Serbian World”. The Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region is headed by French-Serbian citizen Arnaud Guillon, who is linked to the French extremist “Bloc identitaire” movement.

The conditions for their actions are ripe and stimulating. The fact that the government constantly and directly incites tensions in the region, demonizes the neighbours, particularly Albanians and Croats, and spreads fear about the endangerment of Kosovo Serbs (“a pogrom is about to happen”) contributes to the strengthening of the right and encourages the radicalization of society and the creation of the atmosphere of an imminent threat. Fuelling the fear of citizens is the constant of President Vučić’s policy, which is in the service of

“conciliarity” which is, according to him, “needed more than ever”. The political factors that have an influence on the rise of the right are a high level of corruption, the ties between the government and crime, the collapse of institutions, the prevention of dialogue in society and the harsh suppression of the political opposition and civil society. The basic right-wing ideas in Serbia include ethnic homogenization, striving for the merging of state and ethnic borders, denial of anti-fascism, strengthening of traditionalism, treatment of Orthodoxy as the superior religion of all religions, resistance to the ideas of multiculturalism and the frequent manifestation of chauvinism and intolerance towards minorities and neighbours. The key terms of the radicalizing narratives are victim, vulnerability and the right of self-defence.

However, mistrust towards political organizations and leaders is very pronounced and rooted in the poorly developed civil and democratic consciousness of Serbian citizens, which is mainly due to constant and systematic propaganda based on the phrase “they are all the same” which, with the rise of political abstention, enables exceptional manipulation with extreme forms and statistics in the service of coming to power and preserving it. In addition, the election failure of the political parties, disbelief in the achievement of the set goals and questionable survival of organizations due to the lack of funding further contribute to the respondents’ decision to remain outside the formal political structures and social organizations. The prevention of the opposition to consolidate itself is generally a more effective political tool than the better organization and consolidation of the position in power. The current government is extremely skilful in preventing the

grouping of the right that has the strongest political arguments against it if we look at Serbia's current policy of preserving Kosovo and Metohija within its borders.

Thus, during the last election campaign, several nationally conscious intellectuals, close to right-wing parties, initiated the gathering of the right opposition: Matija Bećković, who is close to the NADA coalition (the New Democratic Party of Serbia and the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia), Milo Lompar, close to the People's Party (he was previously close to Dveri), Ratko Ristić, a professor at the Faculty of Forestry, who is known to the general public for his environmental activism and is close to the Dveri and Oathkeepers coalition, which is called the National Gathering, Miloš Ković, President of the Movement for the Defence of Kosovo and Metohija, who is also close to this coalition. The imperative of national unity, namely the myth of absolute unity is the key dogma of a nationalist ideology, its fundament. This is where every totalitarianism, including nationalism, builds its vision of the world. And Serbian right wingers – the most ardent advocates of unity, conciliarity and harmony, underneath of which are hostility towards individuality, personality and freedom, towards the diversity and wealth of the human world – failed this crucial test.

With the established and proven tactics, President Aleksandar Vučić has skilfully monopolized the national space, obstructed the unification of several parties on the pro-Russian far right and shut down the media for their promotion. By the monopolization of the media with national frequency, Aleksandar Vučić exploited the Kosovo issue as well as the Serbian issue in the region to the maximum, thus marginalizing the patriotic

presentation of other political parties and even kicking some of them out of the race (Dveri, Oathkeepers).

On the other hand, far right groups, which are evidently under the direct control of the country's ruling structures, adhered to the traditional discrimination and labelling methods were regularly used during the last ten years. So, for example, the posters on which certain professors at the Faculty of Political Science are labelled as "traitors" are signed by the Organization of Revolutionary Nationalists. On this occasion, certain right-wing groups supported each other on social media: "Thank you brothers from Zentropa, Identity, Bunt Kosmet, People's Patrols and Bravely for Kosmet..."<sup>77</sup>

On the one hand, it is impossible to consolidate the organized political right, while on the other hand the far right operates unhindered and intensively. The international cooperation of Serbian right wingers has also been intensified, as evidenced by the gathering that was held at the Press Centre of the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) in Belgrade in early June 2023. Although there is no mention of its organizer on the UNS website, the photographs clearly show that the role in the organization of the European Right-Wing Conference was played by Miša Vacić, the leader of the Serbian Right. The speakers included the "European right wingers": Roberto Fiore, General Secretary of the Italian party Forza Nuova (New Force), Nick Griffin, leader of the Christian Nationalist Movement from the United Kingdom, and

77 "Ko su desničari i neonacisti koji stoje iza plakata i kampanje protiv predavača FPN?", *Danas*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ko-su-desnicari-i-neonacisti-koji-stoje-iza-plakata-i-kampanje-protiv-predavaca-fpn/>

Klaus Kremer, Head of International Relations, Heimat.<sup>78</sup>

Serbian far-right wingers also cooperate with numerous Russian organizations, including the International Russian-Slavic Unification and Revival Movement – RUSOV, Eagles Russian-Serbian Cultural and Information Centre, Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and the like. On the Serbian side, based on a public data analysis, the People's Patrols and Serbian Action have the strongest ties with these organizations. In November 2022, the leader of the People's Patrols, Damjan Knežević, visited the Wagner Military Technology Centre in Saint Petersburg.<sup>79</sup> The President of the Serbian Right, Miša Vacić, who is close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, also

has strong ties with Russia. Vacić supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, at the invitation of Russia, he served as an international observer in Russia's fake referendums on the annexation of the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.

That the “networking” of Serbian right wingers is not naive and that it can also pose an international risk is testified by the reaction of the Moldovan authorities that did not allow a group of Partizan fans to enter the country in February 2023. Moldovan President Maia Sandu stated that Russia was planning to carry out a coup with the help of opposition protests and the involvement of military-trained persons from other countries such as Belarus, Serbia and Montenegro.

78 “Saradnici terorista, antisemiti i ekstremisti: Ko su desničari koji tvrde da je sad pravo vreme da Srbija povrati Kosovo?”, *Danas*, 9 July 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/saradnici-terorista-antisemiti-i-ekstremisti-ko-su-desnicari-koji-tvrde-da-je-sad-pravo-vreme-da-srbija-povrati-kosovo/>

79 See more about the personal contacts of the leaders of right-wing organizations in the Report by the Helsinki Committee “Serbia: Trapped Society” , Belgrade, 2022. <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj%202022.pdf>



