

## THE LGBT MOVEMENT AND NATIONAL SENTIMENTS: THE POLITICS OF EX/IN/CLUSION IN THE SERBIAN LGBT COMMUNITY<sup>1\*\*\*</sup>

**Abstract:** The LGBT movement in Serbia grew out of a feminist movement, which, during the 1990s, was one of the main pillars of the peace movement in former Yugoslavia and Serbia. This paper examines the relationship of the contemporary LGBT movement in Serbia toward the public and overt expression of national sentiments: (a) within the public discourse, but also (b) within the smaller subcultural circles of the LGBT community in Serbia, as well as (c) the way in which activists today see the social mission of contemporary Serbian LGBT movement. The analysis is focused on four LGBT organizations (Labris, Gaytan, Egal and BG Pride), which are currently the most active and most visible within the public space of Serbian society. Critical discourse analysis will be done on several types of empirical data: (a) data published on official websites of LGBT organizations, (b) media content related to the activities of these organizations and their members, and (c) in-depth semi-structured interviews with prominent LGBT activists of these organizations. The analysis covers several thematic areas: (a) the attitude of the LGBT movement towards mainstream politics, (b) the attitude of the LGBT movement towards the wars and the heritage of the 1990s, (c) the impact of war inheritance on the current politics of the LGBT movement in terms of cooperation with state institutions and other LGBT organizations in the region, as well as the extent of that cooperation, including whether they dealt with painful issues related to the 1990s or not. The analysis shows that tensions exist within the LGBT community that shape the policies of the individual organizations towards tolerance

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or intolerance of the expression of national sentiments. These policies are partly conditioned by the generation gap that exists between members of the LGBT community belonging to the generation that survived the 1990s and were active within the peace movement, and those that were born thereafter, but also by belonging to the current political groups and organizations that participate in the official political system.

**Keywords:** LGBT movement, civil society, nationalism, Serbia, former Yugoslavia, generation gap

This paper is part of a current project dealing with the construction of different gender identities (male, female, transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual ...) within populist discourses and the public articulation of possible resistance to stereotypical reductions of certain gender identities and sexual orientations. The wider aim of this project is to analyze the relationship between populist political actors and actors from the LGBT subcultural scene, and the interactions between the discourses of populism, certain gender identity positions and its discursive societal articulations. The project seeks to understand why in particular social and historical circumstances populist discourses consider it a useful political strategy to utilize the discourse of discrimination, while in others to seek out the support of the LGBT community and gender minority groups, as well as what the role of the LGBT community is in this process.

As a part of civil society, the LGBT movement in Serbia has passed through turbulent transformations during the past three decades, much like Serbian society as a whole. In particular, it grew out of a part of civil society related to the feminist movement, which, during the 1990s, was one of the main points of resistance against the politics of war and ethnic conflicts, and was also the key network that supported the creation of a peace movement in former Yugoslavia and Serbia. However, the notion of civil society, especially in a post-Yugoslav context, is rather ambiguous. Although this is due to the historical geopolitical constellation after the fall of the Berlin Wall in formerly socialist countries – where the civil society sector was accepted within the public discourse as a self-implied alternative to the former all-encompassing socialist system – in theoretical discussions it is possible to discern at least two determinations of that notion: (a) in the first, so-called Gramsci-style variant, civil society has a *radical, activist and political* character. As per that conception, the goal of civil society can be perceived through its contribution to achieving cultural hegemony that enables societal integration (Pavlović, 2006, pp. 35). (b) in the second, neoliberal variant, a civil society is perceived as a community of free citizens able to govern their own social life through associations and self-organizations (the view that is nowadays most closely associated with Tocqueville) (Bilić, 2011, pp. 299). Civil society understood as such is mostly considered to be *apolitical* (Pavlović, 2006; Kaldor, 2003). However, in the first interpretation, civil society is a spontaneously created space between the state and the market made up of grassroots citizens'

associations, created on the foundations of various *affectual nebulas* (Maffesoli, 1996, pp. 72–78), within which individuals are encouraged to interact socially and are hence affected by. As a result of this, intergroup horizontal links emerged (founded on various forms of social capital) formed on the basis of mutual trust and norms of reciprocity in order to achieve certain interventions in dissatisfactory social realities, thus becoming the connective fabric that links and mobilizes different social actors for political actions and activism. A crucial characteristic of such a perception of civil society is the social actors' request for the redistribution of political power through the radicalization of democracy and expansion of capacities for civil participation (Forsyth, 2005). With this approach, "political" civil society implies the existence of active citizenry, a readiness for self-organizing and the possibility for citizens to affect political decisions (Kaldor, 2003; Pavlović, 2006).

Contrary to the activist's understanding of the role of a civil society, there is a neoliberal concept (which was especially developed in the USA in the 1970s) that equates civil society with the so-called non-profit (third) sector. According to this perception, the role of civil organization is not in limiting the power of the state, but in supporting the state and in taking on some of its functions (for instance, in the sphere of social welfare), that the neoliberal state is trying to get rid of anyway. In this setup the organizations of civil society should neither challenge the system nor test its limits in order to change it, or at least initiate desired change, but rather they should provide services to the citizens, instead of the state doing so. Such a concept is directly linked with the Tocqueville approach, with the accent placed on the importance of pooling and linking with neoliberal ideas on the reduction of the role of state.

The ambiguous nature of civil society is especially significant in unstable societal circumstances, like those that marked the process of societal transformation within the post-Yugoslav region. The region was affected by destructive processes as a result of civil war and a major consequence of this was mass pauperization. Researching the phenomenon of (post)Yugoslav anti-war and irenic activism, Bojan Bilić concluded that "the term civil society cannot reasonably be used any more for understanding the complex geometry of social, political and personal interactions and resistance within the frame of a regional civil sphere that is essentially characterized by an asymmetric redistribution of power." (Bilić, 2011, pp. 297). Bilić believes the reason for this is that the "definitional elusiveness and logical incoherence of the term enable civil society to include within itself ideologically and historically extremely divergent phenomena. Owing to its conceptual elasticity, civil society could be seen as a cognitively very accessible mean and depoliticized theoretical paradigm, suitable for the masking of power networks that are often conditioned by foreign political agendas." (Bilić, 2011, pp. 297–298)

Indeed, the elements Bilić mentioned do well to describe the reality of the contemporary LGBT movement and its (historical and political) contradictions. In Serbia, the LGBT movement appeared in the early 1990s, as described by one of its protagonists:

“In November of 1990 several lesbians and gay males, of different ethnical and professional affiliations, started to gather in café Moskva<sup>2</sup>, in Belgrade. Later on, these gatherings took place in private apartments. The group for the affirmation of lesbian and gay human rights and culture, Arkadija<sup>3</sup>, was founded on January 13 1991, when its founding assembly was held.” (Nebrigić, 2009, pp. 99)

The reconstruction of available archival materials shows that the beginnings of the movement were marked by a clear intention to change the opposing social context. This indicates a Gramsci-style approach: on the one hand an activist’s understanding of the role of civil engagement, and on the other a need for the permanent subverting of the existing picture of a social reality that ignores and refuses otherness, in this particular case LGBT otherness. It is interesting that in science, as Joan Scott said in her famous text, *The Evidence of Experience*: “Often the recognition of a testimony depends on whether there is a potential narrative for it to fit in” (Scott, 1991). In that sense, the beginnings of LGBT activism were marked by efforts to create one such potential narrative into which the experiences of LGBT persons living in Serbia could “fit”, i.e. to articulate it in a theoretical and practical sense and make it visible. The historical moment when those issues were addressed made it even more complicated, as one LGBT activist expressed:

“Turning a socially forbidden and stigmatized existence into a visible one is a big effort. That effort is even bigger in exceptional situations, particularly those when civil and democratic values are fully shifted and eliminated, as was the case during and after the wars in the territory of former Yugoslavia.” (Stojanović, 2005, pp. 39)

However, once revealed, the invisible social experience of LGBT people remains as testimony and the “evidence on the existence of otherness” (Scott, 1991, pp. 777) and a “factual nature of the difference” (Scott, 1991). The naming and describing of that difference opens up the possibility for its integration into social life, despite a long history of strategies of ignorance, social isolation and alienation that deny the existence of this particular otherness.

## The Challenges of Civil War

The national war and its subsequent conflicts forcibly changed the borders of the former Yugoslav state, its educational system, political institutions, as well as the social and everyday life of its population. This was the harsh reality the citizens of Yugoslavia were faced with in the 1990s. War fury spread

2 This café was a popular gathering place for the gay population in 1970s Yugoslavia. (see: <http://lgbti.ba/lgbt-aktivizam-u-srbiji/>)

3 The first LGBT organization founded in the territory of Serbia.

uncontrollably resulting in huge material, emotional, cultural and institutional destruction in all the countries of the former Yugoslav region. New discourses of violence and discrimination found their victims in multiple otherness, and for the majority of LGBT activists that meant shifting the focus of their political engagement from issues of identity (relating to the political and social engagement to increase in social visibility and destigmatization of LGBT identity) towards the social challenges of growing nationalism and militarism.

“When wars began in the former homeland, and some of us started straight away with anti-war activism, gatherings of Arkadija were few, but one of the topics was nationalism. Several of us (Dejan, Boris and myself) were absolutely certain that Arkadija must not be nationalistic, and that the group must promote the human rights of all discriminated populations.” (Mladenović, 2005, pp. 9)

This general political stance<sup>4</sup> was also visible in the activities of Serbian LGBT activists of the “first wave”:

“Since this group was formed just at the beginning of the war and the breakdown of SFRY, the first public appearance of ‘Arkadija’ was a circular letter to international gay and lesbian organizations and groups, in which the radicalization of society and militarism were clearly condemned.” (Nebrigić, 2009, pp. 101)

While society was breaking down under pressure of piled up social (war, ethnic, confessional and other) tensions, the activities of the LGBT movement were directed, on the one hand towards:

(a) the struggles of a society involved in war events:

“During the wars, within the feminist anti-militarist group *Žene u crnom* (Women in black), a group of male support was established by two gay activists. They initiated and supported the notion of conscience complaints and protected all those men who saw war in a different way, who refused it.

Also, some of the gay activists were very much involved in forming a safe house for deserters in Budapest. As gay activists, those who complained to conscience, anti-nationalists... these men went through very difficult times due to torture from the state and its institutions.” (Stojanović, 2005, pp. 40)

(b) on the other hand, towards activities aimed at raising awareness on the importance of promoting peace policies and a respect for diversity:

“All activities realized regarding lesbian and gay identity originated from three theses, provided by Lepa Mladenović in the introduction for workshop lesbianism and political responsibility:

– First – all women in the workshop(s) are involved in spreading a policy of peace, and that implies advocating the ethics of diversity.

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4 Anti-nationalistic and anti-militaristic, authors’ comment.

- The second thesis is the feminist starting point that the personal is political.
- The third one is encouraging women that love women to accept their lesbian craving and say to themselves and to others that they are lesbians, although it is not always possible.” (Stojanović, 2005, pp. 40)

Such policies dominated the LGBT movement all the way through to the second half of the 1990s. Due to a clear ideological affiliation against the war, the militarization of society and the growing national sentiment, the LGBT movement were an important part of the politically aware civil sector that actively resisted mainstream politics of violence, hatred and exclusion. Because, as Bilić noted, during wartime there is often an entwinement of “both ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ components”<sup>5</sup> (Bilić, 2011, pp. 301), and that was the case with certain initiatives inside the so-called civil sector, where the public discourse was actually a kind of “normative repository of democratic values” (Bilić, 2011, pp. 300).

## Post-War LGBT Activist Diversification

After the second half of the 1990s<sup>6</sup> the civil sector developed considerably. This was also the case with the LGBT movement: in March 1995 *Labris – the group for lesbian human rights*<sup>7</sup> was founded; in 1998 the website *gay-Serbia.com* was launched, which was a web portal for the LGBT community of Serbia and Montenegro; in 1999 the gay-lesbian group *New Age – Rainbow* was formed in Novi Sad; in May 2000 *Gayten – LGBT – center for promotion of rights of sexual minorities* was founded, the workgroup of Socialdemocrat youth *Queeria LGBT* was formed in Belgrade in November that same year, the NGO *Istopolne studije* was formed in December a; in October 2001, *Mreža*<sup>8</sup> *LGBT grupa iz Srbije* (a network of LGBT groups from Serbia) and *SPY (Siguran Puls Mladih)* were both founded; in April 2002 in Niš *Lambda*<sup>9</sup> – *Center for promotion and development*

5 Besides, Bilić believes that “a stance towards the use of violence” is a key criterion for distinguishing those two types of acts.

6 In 1995 The *General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina* was signed, also known as the *Dayton Agreement*, *Dayton Accords*, *Paris Protocol* or *Dayton-Paris Agreement*. This peace agreement was reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, United States, on 1 November 1995. It was formally signed in Paris, France, on 14 December 1995. These accords put an end to the almost four year-long civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the former Yugoslav republics. For the citizens of former Yugoslavia that was the first sign of hope that the destruction produced by series of conflicts will finally end.

7 Labris first acted as a lesbian section within Arkadija, later on becoming an independent group. The goals of the group were the strengthening of lesbians, efforts to increase lesbian visibility and linking with lesbian groups from Eastern Europe (Živković&Kojadinović, 2005, pp. 18).

8 The goal of this network was the exchange of information and knowledge, as well as joint activities regarding the promotion of LGBT rights. Operations of network ceased in October 2003 (Živković&Kojadinović, 2005, pp. 25).

9 Lambda activists described their goals in this manner: “opposition to every form of animosity towards persons whose gender, gender expression, gender identity and/or sexual

of LGBT human rights and queer culture was formed, an organization dealing with issues experienced by gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgender and transsexual persons (LGBT), in October of the same year *Gayrillawas formed* – an ad hoc, underground, informal group of LGBT enthusiasts; in September 2003 *Udruženje za promociju ljudskih prava seksualno različitih "Pride"*<sup>10</sup> was founded, with its primary goal to organize Parada ponosa (Pride parade); in October 2004 *Novosadska lezbejska organizacija – NLO* was founded, in order to strengthen lesbians and promote lesbian culture and rights, and in December the Kragujevac-based LGBT group *KOD* was founded, and soon after they joined Lambda.

The diversification of civil initiatives, in terms of both their multiplication and geographical dispersion, occurred concurrently with their networking attempts.. Certain types of affectual connections already existed between these protagonists and in very difficult social circumstances it enabled the articulation of the resistance based on a specific *affectual identification*, resulting in unstable *diffuse unions* that did not even require one's full presence. These diffuse unions manifested from a specific form of empathy, which is always merely fragmentary (Maffesoli, 1996, pp. 73). This form of cognitive and experiential substrate enabled "the meeting of the minds" (Maffesoli, 1996, pp.74) and understanding in its strongest sense, lead the LGBT activist "tribe" toward the creation of various supra-singular or supra-individual realities (Maffesoli, 1996, pp. 75) in which life, once again, became possible. One of these supra-singular realities included a specific interaction with foreign donors that entered the civil society market sometime in early 1990s. On one hand, the appearance of this new social actor opened new possibilities for the development of civil society, but on the other it brought certain limitations. This was most clearly evident in the new conceptualization of this part of the existing social fabric, which materialized in the use of the new donors' "particular vocabulary of fundraising, project writing, capacity building, reports and retreats." (Bilić, 2011, pp. 309). In time this brought about a certain exclusivity, which alienated activists from the needs of most community members:

"I am very alarmed by the lack of feeling of certain LGBT organizations for the actual problems community members are facing. They are all in their papers, all in their projects, nobody is looking at people. The problem is that all modern activists are champagne activists. They don't leave their offices, they have no contact with human beings..." (interview with LGBT activist)

There are opinions like the one expressed by Bilić, that under the influence of foreign donors a new hybrid form of civil society emerged: "It would be

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orientation different than socially expected, removal of every form of violence and discrimination and securing full and equal integration of LGBT persons into society (Živković&Kojadinović, 2005, pp. 27).

10 The organization was founded by male and female activists of several NGOs dealing with protection of human rights (Živković&Kojadinović, 2005, pp. 31)

better to talk about a parallel society which has perpetuated an accumulation of various sorts of capital, while at the same time marginalizing authentic grassroots initiatives” (Bilić, 2011, pp. 311). This parallel society is based upon “an intricate tapestry of private-public-government interactions that secure” to a limited number of individual social participants “relatively easy access to state institutions and diplomatic parties” (Bilić, 2011, pp. 311), and the privileged social position that comes with this.

“I experienced a lot of unpleasant things from domestic activists when I came. Because of the very simple reason that the roles, as we all know, were distributed long ago, already in the 1990s. The problem of LGBT activism in Serbia is that it was nursed somewhere in the crib of the anti-war movement. The only money that used to come from abroad, came into the accounts of anti-war organizations, and in a way that is where the LGBT persons also were. As a consequence, we have LGBT activists who are not used to dealing with community problems, and the war is over, so now that they are separated from the anti-war movement, they keep receiving finances for their non-activism.” (interview with LGBT activist)

Despite these dissonant voices within the LGBT movement itself, the organizations within the movement continue their work, but from different political and ideological positions. Unlike the activists of the first wave in the early 1990s, who had pacifism and anti-militarism as imperative parts of their political agenda, as well as concern for the society they lived in as a major motivation behind their actions, contemporary activists of the second wave shape their own activities and priorities in a different manner. They do not experience the role of LGBT organizations as a political one:

“Everywhere in Europe the right wing is in power... why, because the left wing is complacent, for it didn't manage to do well. But then again, I say it should not interest us as an LGBT community, because the problem of LGBT persons is not a party matter.”(interview with LGBT activist)

“There are LGBT persons who are nationalists, and more than that... but I think this is not a topic within the community.”(interview with LGBT activist)

The sort of depoliticization of the LGBT movement as a part of wider civil society increased tolerance towards the expressing of nationalism and right political positions, as well as the weakening of critical sharpness in perceiving the consequences of various social processes going on in the society they live in. This only confirms Bilić's conclusion that civil society is transforming into “an alienated and hardly permeable elite circle for career advancement within the newly created national borders, rather than a constantly rejuvenated source of critically oriented social energy” (Bilić, 2011, pp. 317–318). Without renewing the source of social imagination and our own capability to conceive of desired change, there is little hope that this social participant (the LGBT movement) will manage to achieve any significant change due to its own structural and symbolic social position within contemporary Serbian society.

The role of the LGBT movement and its relationship toward the recent war heritage inspired by national sentiment is of high importance in a Serbian, but also a post-Yugoslav, societal context, as state agents and institutions have failed to successfully combat the rise of a populist nationalist narrative, which has received a new wave of popularity in this region in the last few years. The states of the region as well as civil societies also failed to provide any meaningful reconciliation or to alleviate post-war trauma, including the narrative of self-victimization, which remains the biggest challenge. The slowing of the EU enlargement process and accession of the Western Balkans states to the EU could lead us to the conclusion that the LGBT movement is more actively taking part in civil activism and advocacy of human and minority rights in the process of the European Integrations than it is in its battle against social inequalities and inequities. However, the paradoxically uncertain decision of the LGBT movement and its activists to abandon its imposed role of political corrective of mainstream politics (the movement's role during the 1990s) led the society of Serbia (and the protagonists of LGBT movement as a part of that society) further away from the desirable European integrations.

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Isidora Jarić & Haris Dajč

## LGBT POKRET I NACIONALNI SENTIMENTI: POLITIKE IS/U/KLJUČENOSTI UNUTAR LGBT ZAJEDNICE U SRBIJI

**Apstrakt:** LGBT pokret u Srbiji izrastao je iz feminističkog pokreta koji je tokom 1990tih godina bio jedan od glavnih stubova mirovnog pokreta u bivšoj Jugoslaviji i Srbiji. Ovaj rad prespituje odnos savremenog LGBT pokreta u Srbiji prema javnom i otvorenom izražavanju nacionalnih osećanja: (a) unutar javnog diskursa, ali i (b) unutar manjih subkulturnih krugova LGBT zajednice u Srbiji, kao i (c) način na koji aktivisti danas vide društvenu misiju savremenog LGBT pokreta u okvirima društva Srbije. Analiza je fokusirana na četiri LGBT organizacije (Labris, Gaitan, Egal i BG Pride) koje su trenutno najaktivnije u javnom prostoru društva Srbije. Diskurzivna analiza je uključivala nekoliko vrsta empirijskih podataka: (a) podatke objavljene na zvaničnim web stranicama LGBT organizacija, (b) medijske sadržaje u vezi sa aktivnostima LGBT organizacija i njihovih članova, i (c) podatke prikupljene polu- strukturisanim intervjuima sa istaknutim LGBT aktivistima iz ovih organizacija. Analiza pokriva nekoliko tematskih oblasti: (a) stav LGBT pokreta prema *mainstream* politici, (b) odnos LGBT pokreta prema ratovima i nasleđu 1990tih, (c) uticaj ratnog nasleđa na aktuelnu politiku LGBT pokreta u smislu saradnje sa državnim institucijama i drugim LGBT organizacijama u region.

Analiza pokazuje da u LGBT zajednici postoje tenzije koje oblikuju politiku pojedinih organizacija prema toleranciji ili netoleranciji prema izražavanju nacionalnih osećanja. Te su politike dijelom uvjetovane generacijskim jazom koji postoji između pripadnika LGBT zajednice koji pripadaju generaciji koja je preživjela devedesete i bila aktivna u mirovnom pokretu, i onima koji su rođeni nakon toga, ali i pripadnošću trenutnim političkim grupama i organizacijama koje učestvuju u oficijelnom političkom sistemu.

**Ključne reči:** LGBT pokret, civilno društvo, nacionalizam, Srbija, bivša Jugoslavija, generacijski jaz