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Negotiating 'Serbia' and 'Europe' amidst the
politics of nationalism and Europeanization: An
exploration of identity contestation and utilization
within the LGBT movement in Serbia

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Abstract

Europe has recently seen the rise of nationalist, populist, and anti-gender movements. These movements, while diverse, are similar in their exclusionary visions which seek to define the proper national citizen. At the same time that these movements are attacking sexual and gender minorities, certain European governments and institutions increasingly champion LGBT and other human rights as a fundamental European value. By centering LGBT rights in both intra-Union and accession politics, the EU actively strengthens the imagined association between LGBT rights and Europe. These dynamics place LGBT activists on the European semi-periphery in a complex “in-between” state of being excluded from national citizenship while being expected to align with Europe. Given these factors, this research asks how national and European identities are contested and instrumentalized within the LGBT movement in Serbia. Relying on in-depth interviews with activists in the LGBT movement, this study uses a generic inductive analytical approach which allows for flexibility in the emergence of relevant themes and categories. The study found identity contestation to be a complicated process of public and private negotiation, while also finding that dominant Anglo-American identity models do not fully account for the unique historical and political circumstances of the Western Balkans.

Key words: Europeanization, nationalism, identity, LGBT, Serbia

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Streszczenie

W Europie pojawiły się ostatnio ruchy nacjonalistyczne, populistyczne i antygenderowe. Ruchy te, choć zróżnicowane, są podobne w swoich wizjach wykluczenia, które mają na celu zdefiniowanie właściwego obywatela narodowego. Jednocześnie, gdy ruchy te atakują mniejszości seksualne i płciowe, niektóre europejskie rządy i instytucje coraz częściej opowiadają się za prawami LGBT i innymi prawami człowieka jako podstawową wartością europejską. Skupiając prawa LGBT zarówno w polityce wewnętrznej, jak i akcesyjnej, UE aktywnie wzmacnia wyobrażony związek między prawami LGBT a Europą. Ta dynamika stawia aktywistów LGBT na europejskich półperyferiach w złożonym stanie „pomiędzy” wykluczeniem z obywatelstwa narodowego, podczas gdy oczekuje się, że będą sprzymierzać się z Europą. Biorąc pod uwagę te czynniki, w niniejszym badaniu zadano pytanie, w jaki sposób tożsamości narodowe i europejskie są kwestionowane i instrumentalizowane w ruchu LGBT w Serbii. Opierając się na pogłębionych wywiadach z aktywistami ruchu LGBT, badanie to wykorzystuje ogólne indukcyjne podejście analityczne, które pozwala na elastyczność w pojawianiu się odpowiednich tematów i kategorii. Badanie wykazało, że kontestacja tożsamości jest skomplikowanym procesem publicznych i prywatnych negocjacji, jednocześnie stwierdzając, że dominujące anglo-amerykańskie modele tożsamości nie w pełni wyjaśniają wyjątkowe okoliczności historyczne i polityczne Bałkanów Zachodnich.

Słowa kluczowe: europeizacja, nacjonalizm, tożsamość, LGBT, Serbia

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Introduction

In the last decade, countries across Europe have seen the growth of nationalist, populist, and anti-gender movements¹ which are fueled, in part, by concerns about the loss of traditional identities. Within these movements, the very concepts of gender² and sexuality are instrumentalized as scapegoats for “collective fears about change, loss of national identity, and excessive influence of the West and its cultural hegemony” (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 15). These movements target women’s, LGBT, and reproductive rights, as well as democratic institutions and civil society under the guise of protecting children, the heterosexual nuclear family, and/or the nation (for example, see Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Korolczuk, 2014; Korolczuk, 2020; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

At the same time that conservative forces are targeting LGBT people and other minorities, European Union (EU) institutions and certain European governments are championing human rights—often those of women, LGBT people, and other minorities—as a fundamental European value. LGBT³ rights in particular have increasingly taken on the role of a “litmus test” for EU membership, symbolizing a state’s ability to respect all categories of democratic and human rights (Slootmaeckers, 2017b). By centering LGBT rights in both intra-Union and accession politics, the EU actively strengthens the imagined association between LGBT rights and Europe⁴ (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014a, p. 3).

This linkage—which positions LGBT rights as something inherently European—is not without contention in international politics, as global political actors and publics seek to align and identity themselves with or in opposition to Europe (or the “West” more generally) and the

¹ “Anti-gender” movements, mobilizations, or campaigns are made up of a diverse constituency of those on the political right and the socially conservative. Their underlying ideology is anti-genderism, which Graff and Korolczuk define as a belief “that ‘gender’ is about collapsing natural differences; the notion that it is a danger to children, family and reproduction; insistence that it is an imposition of global elites” (2022, p. 20). This ideology is selectively instrumentalized in anti-gender movements. These movements are transnational, and often highly organized and well-funded.

² Dženderizam is the derogatory term used in Serbian to refer to gender theory or ideas, similar to “genderism” in English. According to Adriana Zaharijević, assistant professor of gender studies at the University of Novi Sad, this term is used despite the existence of a word for gender in Serbian (rod). This usage, therefore, “emphasizes the foreign origin of the phenomenon of gender in ‘our’ culture” (2018).

³ According to Binnie and Klesse “the term LGBTQ...is controversial because it insinuates a quasi-natural confluence of interests around certain gender and/or sexual subjectivities” (2012, p. 445; see also Binnie and Klesse, 2011, p. 111). Bilić (2016b) also notes that the use of this term may mask or reinforce existing hierarchies among this population. With this in mind, “LGBT” is the term I use throughout this paper to refer to people with non-heteronormative sexual orientations, non-cisgender identities, and/or mixed sex characteristics. It therefore does not exclude, for example, those identifying as intersex, asexual, non-binary or queer (although as you will see, these groups are less represented in LGBT activism). In the case of direct quotations, this paper follows the terminology used by interviewees.

⁴ Later sections will problematize the idea and popular usages of “Europe”, as well as distinguish between Europe and the European Union.

values it supposedly represents. These dynamics subsequently position LGBT activists on the edge of Europe in a complex “in-between” state. Nationalist and/or homophobic opponents of LGBT rights weaponize the rhetorical, ideological, financial, and collaborative linkages between domestic activists and Europe in order to further exclude LGBT people from the national community. This creates a paradox wherein LGBT people in Serbia, who are undoubtedly Serbian, are grafted onto a European community that is situated in opposition to the national one.

The construction of national and European identities is not solely the purview of nationalists, however. Domestic LGBT activists have long found success deploying the rhetoric of “Europe” and European values, laws, or obligations to achieve political goals. A wealth of existing studies have identified ways that Europe is “deployed” (Kollman, 2014), “practiced” (Eleftheriadis, 2014), or “mobilised” (Kajinić, 2016) by LGBT activists, often presenting LGBT advancement as part of the process of Europeanisation. Europeanisation is frequently considered a positive force (for exception, see Bilić, 2016c), yet there has been little investigation into the way LGBT activists interpret the association with Europe, how activists negotiate identities that are positioned in public discourses as incompatible, and how these identities are instrumentalized within their work. This study begins to bridge this gap, using the case of Serbia to explore the ways that activists negotiate their national and European belonging, and therefore providing insights into the following questions:

- How are national and European identities contested and negotiated within Serbia’s LGBT movement?
- How do LGBT activists instrumentalize their understandings of identity to mobilize support for their social and political goals?

Study relevance and overview

This is a particularly relevant moment for engaging in conversations about identity negotiation. Developments in the twenty-first century European social and political space—including mass migration and demographic change, democratic stagnation and decline, the Eurozone crisis, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic—have led to enhanced “Euroscepticism” among both EU member states and aspiring members (Altomonte and Villafranca, 2019). While these challenges are by no means limited to the newer member states of Central Eastern Europe, more often than not the political discourse tends to emphasize

regional challenges. In particular, the failure of extended conditionality in the cases of Romania and Bulgaria, which continue to struggle with corruption and state capture, has led powerful member states like France to demand additional accountability measures and reforms from prospective member states. The unspoken subtext of these demands is that countries from the former socialist space are somehow “behind”, threatening both the stability of the Union and the lofty values on which it has attempted to stake its identity.

On the other hand, the desirability of EU membership has come into question in many candidate countries. The power and influence of non-democratic actors in places like China, Russia, and Turkey shook the post-Cold War faith in liberal democracy as the only path to peace and prosperity, as did the experience of painful economic transition and persistently lower standards of living. In this context, it may be helpful to look to the European “semi-periphery”, a place often described as a “bridge” between East and West, to gain insight into how these negotiations are taking place.

Serbia in particular can be seen as a critical test case for the future of Europe. Long influenced by its Slavic and Orthodox heritage, engendering a close relationship with Russia, and its vilification by the European community in the aftermath of the 1990s, Serbia is an outlier in the Western Balkans. Public opinion research consistently finds Serbians to be the most Eurosceptic out of all publics in the region and the least likely to declare an affinity to either Europe or the European Union (Balkan Barometer, 2020). Nonetheless, successive Serbian governments have pursued EU membership as a top foreign policy objective since the early 2000s. However, in recent years, Serbia’s EU prospects—and those of other Western Balkan countries—have dimmed and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has begun courting new relationships with countries like China that hold the promise of investment funds. Given its fraught history, and political present, the Serbian case offers the opportunity to understand the relationship between the national and the European from the perspective of those who appear to be among Europe’s greatest supporters in the country—LGBT activists.

Along with its social relevance, this project also makes an academic contribution by engaging with the literature of several fields. Although the project departs from and fills in a gap left by the growing literature on the Europeanisation of LGBT rights in the Western Balkans (see Kahlina, 2015; Bilić, 2016b, 2016c; Sloatmaeckers, 2017b; Swimelar, 2017, 2019, 2020), it theoretically and conceptually situates itself within the literature on social movements rather than Europeanisation. Within this wider LGBT social movement literature, this project contributes in several ways. First, it acknowledges that while existing studies have analyzed the linkages between Europe and LGBT social movements (O’Dwyer, 2013; Ayoub

and Paternotte, 2014b; Bilić, 2016a; Sloodmaeckers et al., 2016), they have traditionally done so by treating the ways that LGBT movements instrumentalize Europe as an ally for achieving political or social change. This research project also engages with the literature on Europeanisation and social movements, but challenges assumptions that Europe and LGBT movements are natural allies by looking at the dynamics of contention and the ways that movement actors position themselves as both national and European. This includes exploring tensions that stem from the hegemony of European LGBT discourses, which have “overshadowed some claims and modes of organizing and created new hierarchies among activists” (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014b, p. 14).

Next, this study draws from and contributes to the literature on movement identity and strategy making (see Polletta, 1994, 1998; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Taylor and Whittier, 1992; Hunt and Benford, 2008; Bernstein, 1997, 2002, 2005). Most prominent studies have focused on Anglo-American LGBT movements working at the domestic level (Bernstein, 1997, 2002; Gamson, 1995; Taylor and Whittier, 1992; Lichterman, 1999), but it cannot be taken for granted that strategies successful in this context apply universally. This study accordingly questions the homogenizing tendencies of existing studies and widens the empirical and theoretical scope of the literature by theorizing about social movements from the Serbian “semi-periphery” (Blagojević, 2009).

To understand how identities are negotiated and instrumentalized within the context of Serbia’s LGBT movement, this research drew on data derived from semi-structured, in-depth interviews which yielded “deep knowledge” about participants’ values, decisions, and perspectives (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012, p. 100). This data was analyzed using a generic inductive approach that facilitated the emergence of themes and categories relevant to the research question. The data generated revealed that while individual activists hold a variety of understandings of the meaning of Serbian identity, most do not associate with their nationality in a positive or meaningful way traditionally associated with collective identities. Additionally, despite the expectation that LGBT activists would associate themselves with a European identity, I found that this was not a strongly resonant identity frame, and that activists aligned more with the ideals and values associated with Europe and the European Union rather than as a collective identity or site of belonging. This has implications for LGBT activism in Serbia, as activists strive to forge a community-based intersectional activism that both rejects nationalism, but also does not uncritically emulate models from Western Europe or America.

The remainder of this research paper will proceed in five parts. Section I outlines the theoretical foundations and previous research upon which this study is based. Section II

contextualizes LGBT rights and activism in Serbia within the domestic political dynamics and dynamics of Serbia's EU candidacy. Section III details this paper's methodology. Section IV outlines the results of the data generated from interviews and a discussion of the data. Finally, I return to the research question and aims and present my conclusions, as well as implications and further avenues of research.

Section I: Theoretical Foundations

This section outlines the theoretical linkages between key conceptual areas, demonstrating the relevance of linking politics, identity, and activism in the context of the LGBT movement in Serbia. Safia Swimelar explains that “while there is no natural relationship between nationalism, homophobia, LGBT rights, and imaginations of Europe, the conventional view is to pit nationalism in opposition to a European identity and to marry Europe or “the West” with LGBT rights” (2019, p. 604). In recent decades, LGBT rights have become a “powerful symbol of Europe” which is strengthened and reinforced by various regional and global actors seeking to use LGBT rights as a “rhetorical vehicle” of European belonging or opposition (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014a, pp. 1-2).

As Ayoub and Paternotte imply, the “imagined Europeanness” of LGBT rights involves complex, multi-directional processes of reinforcement. Nicole Butterfield notes the emergence of values- and rights-based rhetoric among certain transnational LGBT organization and EU institutions. She argues that this rhetoric was used to lobby for LGBT rights in non-EU countries, which “(re)constructed these rights as new markers of European ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’” (2013, p. 17).

Serbian anthropologist Marek Mikuš commented that the “(simulated) European gaze acts as the arbiter of civilization and order” due to Europe’s long-history of “Balkanist discourses” in which it positions itself as embodying these properties (2011, p. 839). Butterfield says that by placing human rights at the center of the EU accession process, the EU has essentially made itself the “gatekeeper” of human rights and arbiter of what these rights are and how they are met (2013, p. 16). Jon Binnie contextualizes the resulting relationship in terms of LGBT rights: “You are less developed than us because you treat your gays badly. Thus the western state becomes the guarantor of lesbian and gay rights versus the threat constituted by the savage brutal other” (2004, p. 76).

As I alluded, however, this is not a simple, top-down process. George Vasilev points out that the EU’s self-identification as a promoter and protector of human rights can benefit local activists aiming to increase the visibility of their challenges and agendas. Activist invocations of human rights challenge EU institutions and certain European governments to support their agendas in order to protect the validity of this self-identification (2016, p. 754). Similarly, Butterfield asserts that, by invoking European identity, values, and human rights as instruments of lobbying, activists “take part in (re)defining the border of Europe and what it

means to be European” (2013, p. 14). Ayoub and Paternotte summarize how activists themselves reinforce the linkage between Europe and LGBT rights:

“By using ‘Europe’ as an argument for demanding LGBT recognition from their states and societies, the activists on the ground subsequently, and directly, recreate the idea that Europe is united around the LGBT issue. In turn, the link between being European and accepting LGBT people becomes established, and the understanding of LGBT rights as a European value is further cemented” (2014a, p. 3).

Butterfield maintains that this is not an unproblematic situation, ignoring both the long history of homophobia in Europe and the on-going political homophobia of some member state governments, political parties, and publics (2013, p. 14). Additionally, invocations of Europe as “modern”, “progress”, or “civilization” among LGBT activists reinforces the unequal relationship between Europe and its “others” that has long been maintained through colonialism and imperialism. However, Ayoub and Paternotte argue that this association persists because both supporters and opponents of LGBT rights assume that “the European project is associated with the same values that are at the foundation of LGBT rights” (2014a, p. 6; see also Colpani and Habed, 2014, p. 78).

Given the centrality of the “European project” to understanding identity and politics in Serbia, I will begin by drawing on the extensive Europeanization literature in order to demonstrate how domestic and international political dynamics both constitute and influence conceptions of Serbian and European identity, and how these processes impact LGBT activism. Then I will unpack the dynamics of identity formation in the context of gender and sexuality, explaining political homophobia as a tool of nation-building. After explaining how LGBT people are frequently “others” in their own national communities, I follow with a historical and political analysis of Serbia’s “othering” by the European community. Having established the significant theories impacting the negotiation of national and European identities within the LGBT movement, the final section uses Mary Bernstein’s political identity model (1997) to question how activists should instrumentalize identity as a social action strategy.

1.1 Europeanization Processes

In their widely used text on the Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe, Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier define Europeanization simply as a “process in which states adopt EU rules” (2005, p. 7). Logically, then, much of the early literature on

Europeanization focuses on the role of EU conditionality in shaping state behavior, either through rationalist or social learning models (examples of the former include Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2003; Kelley, 2004; and Schimmelfennig, 2005. For the latter, see Checkel, 2001, 2005; or Epstein, 2008). O'Dwyer (2012, 2018) and others, however, have argued that Europeanization theories are ill-equipped to deal with phenomena like normative backlash, democratic backsliding, and “re-traditionalization”. These theories tend to portray Europeanization as a “one-way street” or “top-down” process in which elites in Brussels, Berlin, and Paris dictate terms to domestic political actors and activists.

The danger with this perspective is that it treats local actors as “mere ‘puppets’ or ‘cultural dopes’ under the domination of all-powerful international actors” (Stubbs, 2007, p. 222). Paul Stubbs argues that the reality is much more complex, with actors facing inevitable compromise and limited room for maneuver. Despite these constraints, activism “cannot be reduced to notions of selling out or being rendered ineffective” (2007, p. 222). In order to properly acknowledge these complex dynamics, I follow Bilić in approaching Europeanization as a “complex, dynamic, and troubled ‘translation’ process” which undergoes constant contestation and renegotiation (2016b, p. 6). Mikuš comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that activists “critically engage and recompose the discourse” of Europeanization, revealing that Europeanization cannot be easily reduced to the impact of outside actors on national institutions, but is rather a multi-actor process (2011, p. 836).

In response to the shortcomings of early Europeanization theories, later scholarship emerged focusing on the important role of ideational factors such as identity in shaping state behavior (for example, see Freyburg and Richter, 2010). George Vasilev argued that the degree of shared identity between “norm promoters” and “norm receivers” is, in addition to material incentives, a critical factor in determining the success of norm diffusion. Using the concepts of identity convergence and divergence, he asserted that even when a norm is highly contested, discursive strategies to change behavior can be successful when identity convergence is strong. “This is because under conditions of identity convergence, a cultural environment prevails in which norm promoters can more effectively ignite a process of deliberative reflection, shame norm-violators into conformance, and cultivate resonance around controversial ideas” (Vasilev, 2016, p. 749).

Drawing from Jelena Subotić’s 2011 work on identity and Europeanization in the Balkans, Safia Swimelar contextualizes identity divergence as the “mechanism by which domestic coalitions resist norms and rules of Europeanization and instead define the national community in contrast to Europe” (2019, p. 605). Subotić emphasizes that “state identity does

not come out of thin air. It is shaped by international and domestic environments in which states are embedded. The state is a social actor, and it creates and recreates its identity from interactions with different domestic and international social structures” (2011, p. 312). The emphasis here is on the *creation* of identity, with Subotić noting that processes such as identity convergence are more than mere cultural matching or norm resonance. Rather, they are processes of action in which a specific vision of state identity is reinforced and promoted to best serve the goals of the political elite. Subotić posits that successful identity convergence is dependent on three factors: an alignment and salience of values, underdeveloped alternative identity narratives, and a previously positive relationship with the desired group (2011, p. 313). I will return to these factors in Sections II and III in the specific context of Serbia and the views of my participants. First, however, I will explore the ways that social movements are equally shaped by the processes of Europeanization.

1.1.1 Europeanization processes and LGBT Activism

David Paternotte claims that the development of the EU has fundamentally changed social movements in Europe by providing a new political context outside the nation-state (2016, p. 390). Scholarly work on the “Europeanization of activism” generally recognizes that attempts by social movements to access the institutional structures and resources of the EU has led to the “institutionalization,” “NGO-ization,” or “professionalization” of activism.

These phenomena have been explored in a variety of contexts in and outside of Europe (Lang, 1997; Alvarez, 1999; Bagić, 2002; Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013; Butterfield, 2016; Paternotte, 2016; Wunsch, 2018) and the impacts of this model of activism have been well documented. Paul Stubbs, for example, cites:

The influence of donors’ agendas on topics covered and on type of organisational structures preferred; the rise of short-term ‘project cultures’ or projectisation; the emphasis on professionalisation and technical skills at the expense of broader social goals; the empowerment of a young, urban, highly educated English-speaking elite; the need to focus on project ‘success’ in very narrow terms; and the increasing distancing of elite NGOs from grassroots activism (2007, p. 221).

Ayoub and Paternotte emphasize that professionalization, “which has overshadowed some claims and modes of organizing...and created new hierarchies among activists” stems from the necessities of a European rights-based LGBT discourse (2014a, p 14). While literature

tends to focus on the negative aspects of Europeanization processes on domestic activism, O'Dwyer, for example, argues that the EU integration process creates linkages between domestic and West European human rights institutions that can empower domestic activists through funding, knowledge sharing, and transnational solidarity (2012, p. 333; see also Ayoub, 2013). Ayoub and Paternotte caution however, that these same transnational linkages often reinforces hierarchies between individuals and organizations “namely between those who can and are willing to work transnationally and those whose work is locally focused”, additionally privileging the young, educated, English-speaking, and those activists “whose claims and repertoires resonate more harmoniously with the frames of Western European LGBT organizations and potential funders” (2014a, p. 15).

These dynamics have led to contention within the activist community and LGBT population. Within the community, there is debate about what constitutes “real” or “serious” activism, with political lobbying often seen as more legitimate than service provision or so-called “cultural” work like art and performance.⁵ Nicole Butterfield, writing about LGBT activism in Croatia, points out that this has created disagreement and division within the activist community. She says that arguments over approaches to activism have a wider impact beyond the activist community because they “hinder the development of networks of solidarity that struggle for larger social/cultural transformations that combat other systems of oppression based on class, ethnicity or gender, which also impact the diverse constituencies that make up LGBTQ communities” (2016, pp. 63-64).

Bilić argues that more importantly, the dominance of NGOs in domestic activism has “made it difficult to conceive of civic initiatives outside an NGO frame, often (sometimes wrongly, sometimes rightly) associating activists and activism with huge amounts of foreign money and introducing division regarding its distribution as well as limiting claims to representational legitimacy that could develop on the basis of articulating widely shared local grievances” (2016d, p. 208; for more on this theme, see Bilić, 2011).

One of the most explored (and contentious) contact points between European institutions and domestic LGBT activists—and therefore an interesting demonstration of the impact of Europeanization on local activism—is Pride (Mikuš, 2011; Bilić, 2016c, 2016d; O'Dwyer and Vermeersch, 2016; Sloodmaeckers, 2017b, 2021; Ejodus and Božović, 2019).

⁵ I emphasize that this is not the case among all organizations in Serbia. For instance, Asocijacija DUGA which is based in Šabac is highly involved in community work related to HIV/AIDS and sexual health. The Pride Information Centre in Belgrade holds local art exhibitions, film screenings, lectures and discussions, game nights and other cultural, educational, and community-building activities.

Nationalist discourses frequently present Pride as a foreign import from western LGBT movements. Slootmaeckers rejects these narratives, arguing that while Pride is used by the EU as a “litmus test of Europeanness”, it cannot be seen solely through the lens of foreign imposition. European governments and EU institutions are often responding to attempts by local activists to put Pride on the domestic agenda (2017, pp. 520-21), yet at the same time, global Pride events “remain deeply embedded in the history of “Western Pride” as well as their current imagery.” Slootmaeckers, drawing on Thoreson (2014), thus considers Pride a “local, yet vernacularized version of a globalized event” (2017b, p. 521).

Mikuš testified to what he called the “globalized iconography of the LGBT movement” at Belgrade Pride 2010:

“In their rather predictable and formal speeches in English, the foreign guests repeatedly referred to the EU, whose flag could be seen in the crowd, along with rainbow flags, a purple Union Jack, but no Serbian flag ... I could not help feeling that almost the only local thing about the Parade were the militarised, violent conditions under which it was happening. If the speakers mentioned Serbia, they mostly denoted it negatively, as a site of deviation from the European norms of respect for human rights that the Parade begins to rectify” (2011, p. 836).

Bilić argues that the disproportionate emphasis on events like Pride—both on the part of European elites, Pride organizers and certain activists—as a goal in itself rather than as a tool to increase visibility of community challenges detaches the efforts of activists “from the broader LGBT population that they are supposed to represent” (2016d, p. 205).⁶ Slootmaeckers (2017b) came to a similar conclusion in his interviews with civil society activists in Serbia, finding that organizers spent so much time communicating with state and international representatives that few resources were spent engaging the local LGBT population (p. 526).⁷ I will return to these conclusions in Part II when outlining the results of my interviews, finding

⁶ I follow Bilić (2016d) in using the phrase “LGBT population” rather than “LGBT community” which is frequently found in political rhetoric and everyday speak. This is because “community” connotes a “precisely delimited, self-understandable and unproblematic category synonymous with the LGBT population” (p. 207), whereas the actual LGBT population is a diverse and undefined group whose interests do not necessarily align, nor do they necessarily self-identify as such.

⁷ This may be one reason that, while Serbia has by far the largest community of LGBTI organizations, research surveys have found that LGBTI Serbians surveyed were by far the most dissatisfied with activist organizations than in any other Western Balkan country. Nearly two-thirds reported some level of dissatisfaction with their work, and less than one-third reported some level of satisfaction (National Democratic Institute, 2015).

a complicated relationship between European institutions, governments, and LGBT activists that is neither solely of necessity nor a confluence of ideologies.

1.2 Identity Politics: Nations, Sexualities, and Belonging

Section 1.1 explained the importance of Europeanization as a multi-actor translation process which both impacts and is impacted by politics and activism. It also briefly explored theories of Europeanization which emphasize the importance of collective identities in determining behavior. Section 1.2 moves to the concept of collective identity, using the enduring concept of the nation to explain why gender and sexual “difference” are often targets of nationalism and political homophobia.

Few concepts have inspired more definitions than that of the nation. A nation is Max Weber’s “community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state” (Gerth and Mills, 1948, pp. 172-79), Gellner’s “illusory or spurious community” (1983), an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), a “symbolically constructed community” (Cohen 1985), a concept for which “neither objective nor subjective definitions are thus satisfactory” (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 8). Drawing on this constructivist tradition, Joane Nagel concludes, therefore, that the goal of nationalism is to constitute the national community through “nation-building” (1998, p. 247).

Political sociologist Richard Mole argues that much of the work of nation-building is the creation of a “positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis other nations.” The boundaries between the national Self and national Other must be clearly bounded, therefore relying on myths of internal homogeneity constructed through shared norms and values (2016, pp. 106-07). Nagel argues that, among the norms and values which constitute the national community, “appropriate enactments of heterosexuality are perhaps the most regulated and enforced. In particular, correct heterosexual masculine and feminine behavior constitutes gender regimes that often lie at the core of ethnic cultures.”⁸ These “ethnosexual frontiers” which lie in the borderlands between the Self and Other are “surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted” (Nagel, 2000, p. 113).

While there are a myriad of “culturally and historically contingent” meanings ascribed to sexuality and gender (Weeks, 1992; Mole, 2016), “these heteronormative ethnosexual stereotypes are nearly universal depictions of self and other as one gazes inside and across

⁸ Nagel views nationality as a “particular kind of ethnically based social identity or mobilization” (2000, p. 110), therefore I use her analysis of ethnicity and sexuality as equally relevant to nationalism.

virtually any ethnic boundary” (Nagel, 2000, p. 113). To summarize using the logic of Anja Hennig, if the nation is largely constituted through its members adherence to the formal and informal rules of appropriate gender and sexual conduct, then any expansive or flexible definition of gender (or sexuality) clashes with the “naturalist hierarchical understanding of gender relations and with the anti-pluralist conception of a homogeneous society and/or nation (2018, p. 7)

Swimelar notes that the (masculine, heterosexual, patriarchal) nation is frequently constructed as the “symbolic embodiment” of normality, making same-sex relations by necessity “abnormal”, “unnatural”, or “deviant” (quotations mine) and therefore threatening to the idea of nationhood (2019, p. 609). In his work on threat perception, Phillip Ayoub, drawing on the work of Stychin (1998), Binnie (2004) and others, came to a similar conclusion, arguing that non-heterosexual sexualities are often perceived as threats to national identity because they “destabilize the narrative of the nation” (2014, p. 338). LGBT people (and gender and sexual non-conforming people generally) are thought to disrupt these “national narratives” by not performing traditional gender roles or stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity that uphold hetero-patriarchal society (Mole, 2016, pp. 109-10). Through this lens, the “othering” of sexual and gender minorities can be seen as part of the project of nation building, where boundaries are constructed to determine in- and out-groups, and a vision for the long-term survival of the nation is created (Swimelar, 2019, p. 99). This is a relevant observation since often, the perceived threat of LGBT people is related to national continuity and the perceived importance of the reproductive capacities of desirable groups (Mole, 2016, p. 105).

In the context of political movements opposing LGBT, women’s and reproductive rights, the ideas of gender and sexuality, are what Laclau (2005) calls an “empty signifier”, terms that “allow for collective identification by linking issues concerning family, kinship, sexuality and nation within a single chain of equivalence” (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, pp. 16-17). The strategic demarcation, maintenance, and contestation (and weaponization?) of the boundaries of the national community are central to the “politics of belonging” (see Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011; Yuval-Davis et al., 2006; Roseneil, 2013; Geddes and Favell, 1999). This theoretical perspective departs from the notion that actors exist in multiple social locations along temporally fluid, contested axes of power (Yuval-Davis, 2006).⁹ Actors in and outside

⁹ For instance, social locations could include race, nationality, age, gender, sexuality, disability, or socio-economic status.

of the national community politicize these social locations to determine who “belongs” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 205).

Lähdesmäki et al. define belonging as a “dynamic process of constructing conformity with specific political value systems and social locations at multiple levels that determine the individual’s relationships with groups, communities, institutions, and entities and equally enable a personal experience of involvement (2021, p. 28). Yuval-Davis notes that “social locations” are never singular, but always constructed along multiple axes of difference (2006, p. 200). In the context of this study, for instance, LGBT activists possess different levels of privilege and often face multiple oppressions. An LGBT activist may face exclusion or discrimination in Serbian society for being LGBT but have greater access and visibility within the activist community due to being male, cis-gender, or having a gender conforming appearance. Likewise, ethnic Serbian activists may face fewer barriers towards acceptance than an ethnic Albanian or Roma person. The next section interrogates these layers of privilege and oppression vis-à-vis Europe, finding that (western) European powers have historically used their economic, military, and cultural power to define Europeanness as an ideal which is contrasted to its geopolitical, normative, and temporal “others.”

1.2.1 The historical and political “othering” of Serbia

Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova wrote in 2009 that “a specter is haunting Western culture—the specter of the Balkans.” Writing about the persistent European “othering” of the Balkans, she argued that “Balkan”, “Balkanization”, and its related terms had become virtual “synonyms for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian” (Todorova 2009, p. 3). That an imagined inequality plagues the relations between “West” and “East” is not a new phenomenon in the literature. This subject was most comprehensively explored by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*, but Todorova and others have argued that the Balkans occupy a unique liminal space. Todorova calls the Balkans a bridge, or crossroads, which is “semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental...” (2009, p. 16). As a land in-between, in perpetual transition, it can never be fully “European”, “civilized”, or “developed”. Milica Bakić-Hayden described a multi-layered system of “nesting orientalisms”: Asia is more “other” than Eastern Europe; within Eastern Europe, the Balkans are most “other”; and within the Balkans themselves similar hierarchies are established (with Croatia and Slovenia, for example, being the least “other”) (1995, p. 918; for more on “othering” in the particular Balkan context, see Hammond, 2004).

As this complex system of “othering” demonstrates, a significant challenge in a study about identities is that geographical terminology rarely encompasses the complex system of meaning within a word or phrase. Designations like “Central and Eastern Europe” and “Balkan” are laden with meaning. For instance, in the 1990s, Croatians and Slovenians “exited from the Balkans” and “returned to Europe” (Lindstrom, 2003), while Estonians have tried to re-brand as “Nordic” rather than “Baltic” (Lagerspetz, 2003). For Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs, being “Central Europeans” was a way to reject Cold War, Soviet associations with “Eastern Europe” (Okey, 1992). Thus it may be useful to understand these strategic usages of geographical language as “performative utterances”, or speech acts, which are used “not to claim something, but to do something, such as make it true that Serbia is European...” (Mikuš 2011, p. 837).

There are many ways to parse the relationship between Europe and its many Others, but I follow Sloodmaeckers’ 2020 re-analysis of Diez (2005) in classifying European Othering processes as geopolitical, normative, and/or temporal. Sloodmaeckers argued that different othering processes are foregrounded at different times. Thus, for example, during the Cold War, the Balkan countries, as part of socialist Yugoslavia, were primarily geopolitical others. Now, however, the Balkans are arguably normative and temporal others. Normative othering presumes the universality of specific norms (like human rights), which, when combined with temporal othering, positions the “other” in a past temporality which is perpetually trying to catch up to the modern, better, self (for the full typology, see Sloodmaeckers 2020, pp. 349-50).

Kulpa and Mizielska form the same conclusion, describing the “West-East” relationship in temporal, rather than geographical terms. They argue that a disjunction in time means that Central and Eastern European countries are in a constant state of “catching up” with the West, stuck in the “past” although living in the present. Simultaneously, for the West, post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe is now in the “present” though “hindered” by the communist past. Thus, while both West and East are now “present”, the “Western present” is presented as an aspirational “future” for CEE (2011, p. 17). They conclude that CEE is “European enough” geographically, but not yet (or never) Western in the temporal sense of “progress” (2011, p. 18).¹⁰ This analysis aligns with Lähdesmäki et al.’s idea of belonging as a contested and discursively constructed “place-space” which has the potential to explain diverse social

¹⁰ As an example of this language in practice, a 2011 Public Radio Exchange article about LGBT rights in Serbia called the country “a modern ghetto in Europe” (Grant, 2011).

processes that shape the individual's sense of belonging and relationship to a specific entity, such as Europe (2021, p. 28).

Clearly, the relationship between the EU and its others is rarely based on simple geography. Even the language of Center-Periphery which is at the center of many post-colonial studies is imbued with socio-economic implications. But as we have seen, the Balkans is in-between, neither colony nor colonizer. Marina Blagojević calls this “semi-periphery” a “social hybrid”, shaped on one hand “by the effort to *catch up with the core*, on one hand, and to *resist the integration into the core*, so not to lose its cultural characteristics, on the other hand” (2009, p. 33). From the perspective of the core, the semi-periphery is unstable, “de-developed”, or in a state of “permanent reform” (2009, pp. 35-36). According to Blagojević,

“This results in an attitude of the core which is reflected in constant efforts to “improve” the semiperiphery, through some kind of paternalistic behavior, with colonial and neocolonial taste. We-know-what-is-good-for-you-because-we-have-already-done-it-philosophy resonates in most of the core-semiperiphery communication, as also very visible in Accession “conditionality” logic” (2009, p. 37).

While these imagined relations between Europe (and later the EU) and the Balkans were conceived and cemented throughout the twentieth century, the reductionist stereotypes at their foundation were also applied, largely unchanged, during and after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The wars were significant for Serbia because, as the designated villain of the conflict, its relationship to Europe and the “West” was re-written. Zala Volčič argues Serbian relations with the West must be contextualized not only by war, but also by the disintegration of Yugoslavia and subsequent search for a new national identity, the collapse of the Milošević regime, the EU enlargement process, and promotion of neo-liberal policies in the Balkans (2005, p. 157).

In her study of Serbian intellectuals' understandings of “the West”, Volčič argues that stereotypes which reinforce existing power dynamics are imposed from both those in the West, but also by Serbian's themselves (2005, p. 159). In addition to this “othering of the self”—which Slovenian sociologist Primož Krašovec coined as “*autorasizam*”—Volčič described selective deployment or exploitation of stereotypes in identity discourses. Therefore, the “West”, like “Europe” is not necessarily a geographical signifier, but a foil that is used to contrast with what is or is not Serbia. Ana Omaljev comes to a similar conclusion, calling

Europe a “symbolical space where Serbian ideas about themselves are reflected, yet where no single interpretation of Europe is precise and accurate” (2016, p. 131).

Interviews conducted by Sandra Obradović and Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington on identity and belonging among Serbians revealed the internalization of beliefs about Serbian inequality, with respondents positioning Western European countries as “prototypical members, able to define what it means to be European and thereby expected to “Europeanize” incoming members” (2019, p. 1432; see also Petrović, 2014, p. 7). Obradović and Sheehy-Skeffington conclude that Serbians’ beliefs in their subordinate position vis-à-vis the EU heightens fears of identity dissolution within the EU and therefore resistance to EU membership. Participants I spoke to expressed similar sentiments. Matija, for example, said that ultimately, the EU “doesn’t present a credible alternative to Serbian identity for the Serbian people.” He said that Serbian people see the experience of countries like Bulgaria and Romania—which according to Matija never became European countries in terms of democratic standards—as proof that Serbian people will never be “equal members” in the EU.

“That creates a hierarchy of identity in which European identity could be regarded as more developed, high living standards and salaries. Then you can’t actually see yourself as European because these things are not the case in Serbia.”

The following section will explore how these identity processes help form the collective action strategies of LGBT activists.

1.2.2 Identity as strategy in the LGBT movement

Section 1.2 has aimed to establish the fundamental dynamics of national identity politics by outlining the role of gender and sexuality in the national identity as well as the discursive relationship between Serbia and Europe. This final sub-section explores existing explanations of the ways that identities can be instrumentalized in a social movement context, finding that the dominant Anglo-American models of “identity as strategy”—particularly Mary Bernstein’s political identity model—do not satisfactorily account for the unique political and social dynamics of the Western Balkans. However, I will first explain how I am using the terms that define this study.

While these term *movement* is often used interchangeably with *activism*, Crossley (2002) argues that they are not exclusively interdependent. Snow, Soule, and Kriesi identified five general characteristics of social movements, including joint or collective action taking place outside of formal institutions, change-oriented goals or claims, some degree of

organization, and some degree of continuity over time (2007, p. 6). Organization is the characteristic that arguably distinguishes activism from a social movement. According to Rhodes-Kubiak, “activism may be organized, undertaken through a formal or informal movement, or initiated, undertaken, and evaluated by an autonomous individual with no reference to a social movement” (2015, p. 13). However, many social movements engage in activism, the cornerstone of which is “purpose-driven action...in pursuit of a goal, outcome or change” (2015, p. 14). By this formulation, then, the individuals and organizations considered in this study are engaged in activism and can be considered *part* of a larger LGBT social movement. So, while actors within the LGBT movement in Serbia may undoubtedly contest calling it as such, the term movement is only meant to suggest a common commitment to LGBT issues rather than concerted, collective action on the part of all actors involved in the movement, including individual activists, supporters, and allies.

I acknowledge that participation in a social movement can be widespread, dispersed throughout society, individual, and that many forms of social action may constitute activism. However, this study predominately reflects the thoughts and experiences of “professional” activists—those who are employed full-time in civil society organizations that have LGBT rights, advocacy, education, and outreach at the core of their activities. This imbalance was largely practical. LGBT CSOs are highly visible with many English-speaking members, making them easier to access for someone without advanced knowledge of the Serbian language. My resultant sample group is not intended to privilege certain kinds of professionalized activism, but rather acknowledges that certain activists have relatively more collective social visibility.¹¹

Finally, while this study aims to parse identity dynamics within the LGBT movement in *Serbia*, researchers like Rhodes-Kubiak caution against framing a “homogenous ‘Serbia’ within which LGBT activism takes place” (2015, p. 146). Existing research on LGBT activism in Serbia has frequently established the significant differences between activism, and LGBT life generally, in larger cities like Belgrade and Novi Sad, and life and activism in smaller towns and villages. All the individuals participating in this research study live and work in Belgrade, so as Rhodes-Kubiak notes, this affects the tactics used and the “arenas of protest” engaged (2015, p. 139).

¹¹ For a more intersectional look at LGBT activism, see Bojan Bilić and Sanja Kajinić’s edited volume *Intersectionality and LGBT Activist Politics: Multiple Others in Croatia and Serbia* (2016).

Scholars, often working in Western European and American contexts, have argued that collective identity is a key driver of social and political action (Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1985, 1989; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Hunt and Benford, 1994; Snow, 2001; Fominaya, 2018). Polletta and Jasper define collective identity as a “cognitive, moral, or emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.” Emphasizing collective identity as a *perception* of shared status rather than an objective reality, Polletta and Jasper, in line with the conclusions of the previous sections, found that collective identity may be constructed and enforced by those outside the community (for example, in the way western imaginations of the “Balkans” have imbued the meaning of Serbianness), but depends to a certain extent on enforcement and acceptance by those who hold that identity (2001, p. 285).

The broad category of identity-based social movement research has focused on the way movements create resonance around specific identity categories in order to increase movement participation, create solidarity and commitment, frame objectives, and devise strategies (Hunt and Benford, 1994). Polletta and Jasper identify strategic and tactical decision-making as one of the distinct roles that identities play in collective action, noting that identity-based strategies compete with instrumental, rationalistic ones; activists “construct, deconstruct, celebrate, and enact collective identities as strategies of protest”; and collective identities are “embedded” in strategies and inform how they are implemented (2001, pp. 294-5).

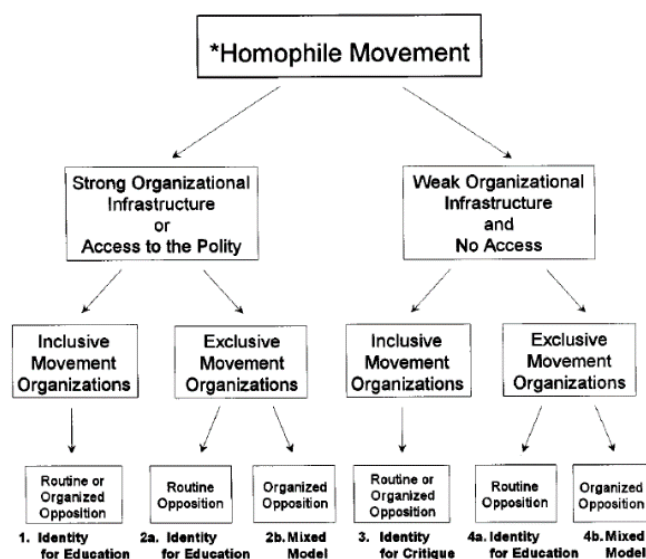
It is strategy that I will now focus on, with two important notes. First, English-language literature on identity and strategy tends to focus on Anglo-American social movements. Thus, it cannot be assumed that the same political and structural factors driving these movements are equally applicable in the Serbian context. And second, these studies focus on the impact of the “movement defining” identities, meaning, for instance, that LGBT movements are studied through the lens of LGBT identity. However, using the framework of the politics of belonging, this study rejects the idea that LGBT social movements can be studied solely through the lens of the gender identity/sexual orientation social location. Later analysis supports this conclusion, as participants frequently vocalized an inability to define their nationality or experience of “LGBT-ness” without reference to other factors.

In the remainder of this section, I draw on the work of Bernstein (1997, 2002, 2005, 2008), Taylor and Whittier (1992), and Polletta and Jasper (2001). In particular, I found that Bernstein’s model of political identity is especially instructive in demonstrating the limitations of models based primarily on the Anglo-American experience. Bernstein asserted that “the configuration of political access, the structure of social movement organizations, and the type and extent of opposition” could help predict how movements would “deploy” identities (1997,

p. 539). Following Taylor and Raeburn (1995), Bernstein theorized two broad goals of identity-based strategy: identity for critique and identity for education. “*Identity for critique* confronts the values, categories, and practices of the dominant culture. *Identity for education* challenges the dominant culture’s perception of the minority or is used strategically to gain legitimacy by playing on uncontroversial themes” (1997, p. 538). This can be considered similar to LGBT respectability politics, where groups portray themselves as “proper” or “respectable” in the hope that larger public will see the group as similar to themselves, as thus deserving of equal rights (Jones, 2021, p. 1).

Bilić and Dioli argue that the LGBT movement in Serbia, “sustained by the globalised neoliberal discourse of human rights, tends to leave activists with strategies and political options that do not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions, but actually forces mainstream activist organizations to engage in homonormative practices, among which the insistence on gay marriage is the most dominant one” (2016, p. 116). This would suggest that the organized activism represented in this study would be deploying identity for education.

Polletta and Jasper argue that understanding the interest-identity-strategy-politics nexus requires the rejection of a priori assumptions about causal mechanisms, allowing for relationships between both cultural and institutional processes (2001, p. 285). While this study has thus far focused primarily on institutional relationships and factors, in this instance the Serbian context affects the model. As I will argue in Section VI, by “playing on themes” that may not be controversial in other contexts, Serbian activists often (but not always) challenge the dominant culture. For example, strategies of normalization and visibility that portray LGBT people as “just like everyone else” with similar struggles, desires, and values rather than



emphasizes the unique elements of gay or queer culture may not be controversial in a western context where LGBT people receive more social acceptance. However, in the Serbian context, positioning LGBT as “normality” and challenging the normalization of homophobia in society can be considered revolutionary considering the negative portrayal of LGBT existence in the discourse of national identity.

A further inspection of Bernstein’s model (above) reveals the challenge of predicting the ways a movement “should” operate. For instance, the Serbian movement has strong intra-organizational infrastructure, but not necessarily inter-organizational infrastructure. It arguably has a degree of *access* to the polity but little *responsiveness* from the polity due to the dominance and power of the ruling party. Equally problematic is the question of movement inclusion and exclusion. Bernstein defines an inclusive movement as one which seeks to mobilize its constituency and maximize participation. Conversely, an exclusive movement “actively discourages participation” and strategizes in a way that is unlikely to mobilize the constituency (1997, p. 539). First and foremost, this assumes that mobilization and participation are realistic or desirable goals. However, as I emphasized previously, most LGBT Serbians are not “out” to anyone beyond a few close friends, neighbors, or colleagues. Additionally, while discrimination is officially prohibited and violence rarer than in the past, they are not unknown among the community. Thus, maximizing participation in activism is not necessarily desirable in a context where participants may face personal and public backlash. Rather than mobilization per se, I observed activists aiming to increase participation in and access to social and community services and programs.

Finally, Bernstein argues that the structure factors discussed above will impact whether a movement emphasizes its sameness to the dominant population versus difference from the dominant population. However, I observed that the deployment of identities had less to do with movement structure than the “political arena” being engaged. For instance, when engaging in traditional lobbying activities and political advocacy, activists deployed a rights-based discourse that emphasized European and international obligations and implied a gap between Serbian and EU standards. On the other hand, when engaging the public (usually through media campaigns), activists frequently emphasized the social and economic challenges of the community, focusing, for example, on tangible inequalities from the general public like disproportionate bullying, discrimination, or violence.

Section I Summary

Section I outlined the theoretical underpinnings of this study, first explaining Europeanization as a complex, multi-actor process that impacts both the formation of identities and the conduct of activism. It established the complex set of “othering” processes faced by LGBT people in Serbia, first through what one of my participants called the “heteronormative matrix” (although I will call it a hetero-patriarchal matrix), and second as Serbian nations historically othered by the European core. Finally, it explored how these identity processes are predicted to impact social movement organizing, finding that Anglo-American models do not adequately capture elements of the Serbian context.

Section II:

Situating politics, identity, and activism in Serbia

2.1 The Europeanization of LGBT Rights in Serbia

Section I explained the importance of Europeanization processes for both domestic politics and activism. A brief examination of developments in the status of LGBT rights in Serbia reveals a close connection to concurrent political dynamics. Figure 1 (below) illustrates a timeline of key developments in both the EU accession process and the framework for LGBT rights in Serbia. While Serbia's pathway towards EU membership began in 2003 at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki, the early period of negotiations were consumed by relations with Kosovo and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). However, beginning in 2008, LGBT rights entered the agenda in several ways. First, the narrow re-election of incumbent President Boris Tadić and pro-EU parties in the parliament were seen as reaffirming an EU reform perspective for Serbia, reforms that would ensure LGBT rights and equality (Rhodes-Kubiak, 2015, p. 128). Later that year was the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU.

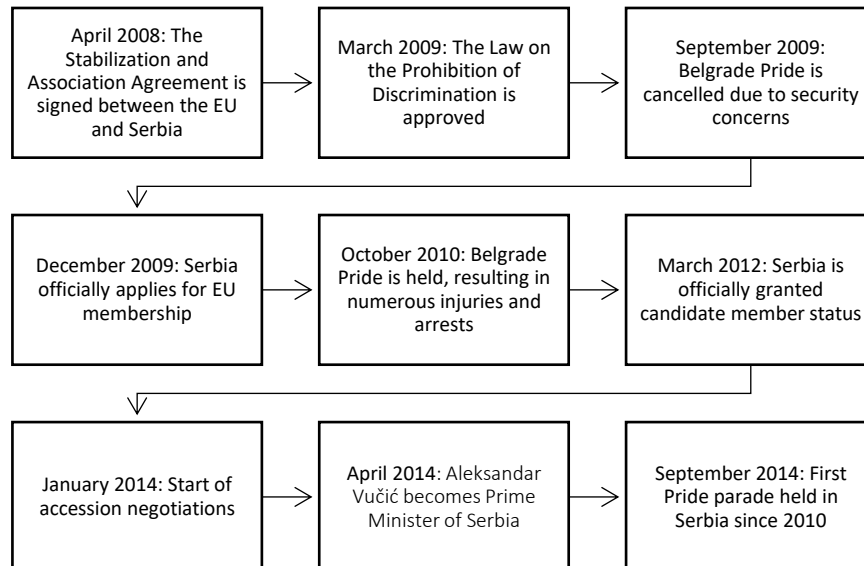


Figure 1: Domestic politics and LGBT rights in the EU accession process

Since 2008, a “push and pull” can be observed in the movement for LGBT rights in Serbia. The 2009 Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination was considered a landmark victory for LGBT people as it specifically prohibited discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (the law was later amended to include gender identity and sex characteristics).

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited by the Labor Code, but gender identity and sex characteristics are not protected categories). However, in late 2009, Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic advises the organizers of Belgrade Pride to switch the event venue from the Belgrade city center to more distant New Belgrade, citing security threats from right-wing groups. The event was eventually cancelled (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2009). In response, the OSCE Mission to Serbia, the European Commission Delegation, and the Council of Europe issued a joint statement, calling on state authorities to “guarantee the effective exercise of human rights” (OSCE Mission to Serbia, 2009). Two months later, the government of Serbia officially applied for EU membership.

The next year, in 2010, the first “successful” Pride parade was held in Belgrade, although the significant role of the state and “globalized iconography” of the event led Mikuš to dub the event “State Pride”. The events of Belgrade Pride 2010 are well documented, with right-wing hooligans facing off against thousands of police, resulting in injuries, arrests, and widespread property damage. In the subsequent three years, Pride was banned in Belgrade by the government, citing an inability to protect participants. Pride returned to Belgrade in 2014 after the election of a new government (and the start of EU accession negotiations) and has been held successfully each year since (apart from 2020 due to COVID-19). Another ostensible sign of progress was the appointment of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, an open lesbian, in 2017.

The appointment of Brnabić—who perhaps better than anyone represents the complexity of being LGBT in Serbia—was a salient example for many participants. For context, Ana Brnabić was the first woman and first openly LGBT public official in the country when she was appointed in 2017. She has a partner, who gave birth to their child while Brnabić was in office. However, despite the hopes of the LGBT community for her term in office, the Prime Minister has consistently downplayed her LGBT identity. Brnabić herself has said as much, stating in an interview that “I’m not a spokesperson for the LGBT community...I don’t want to be branded as a gay minister” (Wintour, 2017).

In July 2020, members of the LGBTI community sent an open letter to Brnabić in response to her appearance on an Atlantic Council panel with other LGBTI leaders, in which she dismissed criticism that she “has not done anything” for the LGBT community or for equality. She argued that her job as prime minister is not to push what she calls the “LGBT agenda”, but to improve the lives of all people in Serbia (LGBTI ERA, 2020; Brnabić et al., 2020).

In a June 2017 article from *The Guardian*, University of Belgrade political scientist Boban Stojanović called Brnabić’s appointment a “window-dressing” for President Vučić.

“The problem is that it will mask the real picture of the situation of civil and human rights in Serbia. The choice of a member of the LGBT community for prime minister will be used as an indicator of the state of civil and human rights, and that is not realistic” (MacDowall, 2017). In a statement for LGBTI ERA, the LGBT organization Da Se Zna similarly argued that “the election of Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister will serve mostly as a PR tool for the newly elected Serbian president which can lead to the wrong assumption that human rights in Serbia have been improved” (Fecanji, 2017).

Jana argues that while the Prime Minister has not worked to improve the human rights of LGBT people, it is not true that nothing has changed.

“We think that it is not changing anything, but *of course* it is changing. There are a lot of people from villages that never even heard about lesbians, and now they know that the prime minister is a lesbian and has a kid with her partner. It is a big thing. We can say that she didn't do anything for our community, but even just being there is enough to change something.”

Even Vuk, who had previously criticised the lack of government action, admitted that the visibility of the Prime Minister has had an impact.

“For example, my parents see a lesbian Prime Minister, and it's like, wow. Until like, five years ago, [homosexuality] was a sickness for them. But when they see Ana Brnabić, well, they cannot say it's a sickness anymore.

However, as many scholars and activists have pointed out, the state of LGBT rights in Serbia cannot be appropriately gauged by arguably performative measures like appointing a lesbian prime minister or having a Pride parade, which can be considered “pinkwashing” or “tactical Europeanisation”¹². In terms of equality legislation and policies, the European

¹² Pinkwashing describes state or organizational practices which co-opt the rhetoric or symbology of the LGBT movement in order to position themselves as progressive, often in contrast to a more homophobic “other”. The term was originally used by Sarah Schulman in a New York Times op-ed to describe Israeli government practices which portrayed Israel as a “modern” LGBT friendly state in contrast to its Palestinian Muslim population. Vanja Zarić argued in Glasnik Okvir that the appointment of Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister was an act of pinkwashing because it was presented to the international community as a revolutionary social shift, while most LGBT activist agree that the position of LGBT people in Serbia has remained the same under her leadership (Schulman, 2011; Zarić, 2017).

Similarly, tactical Europeanization is defined by Slootmaeckers (2017a) as an approach where “LGBT issues are used to speak to the EU’s self-proclaimed LGBT-friendly identity without engaging with LGBT issues

Commission's 2020 report on Serbia noted that "the legislative and institutional framework for upholding human rights is broadly in place. However, consistent and efficient implementation of legislation and policies still needs to be ensured." The report also noted that human rights defenders and the LGBTI community continue to face hate speech, threats, discrimination, and violence. "Overall, the situation of LGBTI persons in Serbia remains broadly the same as in previous years" (European Commission, 2020).

The ILGA Rainbow Europe index—which rates countries based on their equality legislation and policies—similarly shows that for nearly a decade Serbia's cumulative score has hovered around 30 percent. Trans and intersex people are still not protected from employment discrimination, amendments proposed by civil society activists to the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination have not been adopted, the Non-discrimination Strategy from 2009 expired in 2019 and has yet to be replaced, and negotiations on the Laws on Same Sex Partnerships and Gender Identity have been stalled since early 2021 (ILGA Europe, 2021).

While European institutions and governments frequently employ rhetorical pressure on the Serbian government to make the necessary reforms, its coercive abilities are limited despite the existence of EU conditionality mechanisms. There are several geopolitical forces at work affecting the capacity and will of these actors to push more strongly for human rights reforms in Serbia. First, several current member states (predominately in western Europe) are advocating for a more stringent accession methodology, which would effectively delay the accession of Western Balkan candidate states. The new methodology stems from fears that, without more significant reforms, the introduction of new member states with democracy, rule of law, and corruption challenges will upset the already tenuous cohesion of the EU. The rise of populism, nationalism, and so-called "democratic backsliding" across the union are at the heart of these concerns, particularly among the "newer" member states from Central Eastern Europe (Emmott, 2021).

At the heart of EU "cohesion" is the question of values, and as Section I showed, essentialist, Balkanist discourses continue to impact perceptions of values. Pushing back against these prejudiced narratives, Matija said that high levels of Euroscepticism among Serbians is not really about conflicting values. "I would say that regular Serbian people would regard both human rights and all the values of the European Union as something worth preserving." However, he said that Serbian people are beginning to get the sense that their EU

domestically." He argues that both the return of Belgrade Pride in 2014 and the appointment of Brnabić in 2017 are "acts of compliance" which are used to signal to the EU that Serbia can accept "European values".

prospects are further away, and that they also see a kind of hypocrisy in the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights through its support for the current government.

“If they see human rights as important, then European Union officials should not negotiate with incumbents who violate human rights regularly. I would say that the credibility of the European Union is a bit unstable. These EU values are or will be regarded as ideals that we deem valuable, but we don't think are realistic or that are coming anytime soon.”

Whether or not Serbia's EU prospects are realistic given the current geopolitical climate, Luka says that the Serbian people should continue to closely consider whether or not this is the appropriate path for Serbia and what benefits it will bring. He says that one of the problems is that many people have “completely unrealistic expectations from the European Union—in both positive and negative ways. “Some people have an irrational perception of some ‘dangers’ that are coming from the EU, mostly in relation to the cultural sphere.” Vuk agrees that many people, especially some LGBT activists, think that EU membership is a way to improve the human rights situation in Serbia. But he believes that this is not the case given the current government.

“If at this moment we join the EU, trust me, immediate finish [with regard to improving human rights]. We will become Hungary, or even worse, because at the moment, what we have is a Hungarian style of government.” He named specific elements of the government's tactical Europeanization strategy, including the appointment of Brnabić, as surface-level improvements that “don't cost anything politically.” So, while Vuk continues to be a support of Serbia's EU membership for other reasons, he believes that it will not lead to improvements in the human rights situation in Serbia.

Luka points to another example of expectations: that joining the EU will bring economic prosperity to Serbia. “I don't have anything against joining this ‘family of nations’, but I'm worried about this globalism, this global capitalism that is already collapsing but that we have to join.” He admits, however, that because Serbia is a small and not economically strong nation, “maybe it's best to belong where the majority belongs.”

Luka expressed Serbia's complicated position with regards to belonging, saying that geopolitics provide a relevant explanation for Serbia's place in the world.

“I don't think that it is good to pressure Serbia to choose [a side] because it belongs both to the east and west. I don't think that if we join EU, we should join against Russia,

although we are asked to make that choice. Our entire culture and society are built on both groups of values, both Eastern and Western. And I think that whether we join EU or not we should continue being in touch with both cultures and groups of influences, if possible. Maybe that's the only way for us.”

I want to briefly return to the idea of identity convergence which was introduced in Section I. While comments from Matija indicate that LGBT activists align with the values of Europe or the EU, Subotić points out that “Europe” as a collective identity is not universally shared and is underdeveloped. In addition to the underdevelopment of European identity, Serbia has strongly resonant alternative narratives related to its Slavic heritage and role as a “bridge” between East and West. Vesna Pavičić cites several factors which strengthen this alternative identity narrative, including Slavic heritage, orthodox Christianity, Russia’s support for Serbia on Kosovo issues, and Western hesitation on issues of EU membership (2019, p. 111).

The next section will explore how these political dynamics have impacted LGBT activism in Serbia, exploring the role that post-war and post- Milosevic politics played in the development of activism, and what this means for the organization of the movement today.

2.1.1 Europeanization process and LGBT activism in Serbia

I begin in the 1990s, which, as previous sections have shown, was a crucial time period for the (re)development of Serbian identity. It was also at this time that organized LGBT activism in Serbia began. Serbian lesbian and gay activism—which evolved in its current form from the organization Arkadija founded in 1990—grew out of earlier feminist, anti-regime, and anti-war movements (Rhodes Kubiak, 2015, p. 98). Based on interviews with early activists, Rhodes-Kubiak found that these initial activist initiatives “were less influenced by international models and more by the shared experiences of people during the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the post-Tito 1980s and the nationalist rule of Milosevic” (2015, p. 103). Anti-war street protests and vigils were commonly used tactics for increasing visibility and participation. Notably, lobbying activities were not common due to the hostile political elite and lack of access to political spheres (Rhodes-Kubiak, 2015, p. 103). This changed in the aftermath of the 1990s; war-time human rights abuses and the need to build a new, post-war citizenship led to the emergence of human rights discourses in activist circles. According to Bilić, the emerging lesbian and gay movement quickly and pragmatically moved from ground-level street protest into professionalized organizations with a legalistic human rights and

transitional justice focus (2016d, p. 206). Rhodes-Kubiak found that the human rights focus was facilitated by changes in the legal framework for LGBT rights in the early 2000s, leading to new opportunities for activists. The changing legal framework, combined with the relative abundance of new financial resources from Europe, led to the proliferation of new organizations and movement participation (2015, pp. 126-27).¹³

Today, the LGBT movement in Serbia is largely centered around organizations based in the capital city, Belgrade, with a small number of additional organizations in Novi Sad and Šabac.¹⁴ While professionalization is characteristic of most organizations and many are engaged in lobbying and political advocacy, this is not the case of all organization, and even those that do engage in explicitly political activism usually have other thematic focuses such as service provision and educational work.

Another commonality among organizations is close financial and collaborative ties to Europe. An examination of the donors to the most prominent organizations reveals that a majority are usually European governments (or American government agencies), European and American charitable foundations, or institutions like the Council of Europe, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), or the EU Erasmus+ programme. Among state donors, the governments of Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom were found most frequently. Private foundations from the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany can be found among the names of private donors.

Vuk outlined the difficulties in securing this support, saying that the constant turnover of diplomatic personnel means a constant effort to appeal to new Embassy staff and stay relevant to the priorities of different governments. “It’s really not easy to maintain the same level of support all the time.” He said that verbal support comes easily, but money, especially where activists need it, is difficult to come by.

“Verbally, they’re supporting us, they are coming to Pride, ambassadors are always there, and they have statements on their website or Twitter account or Instagram. Some of them are raising the LGBT flag, like the American embassy, and a couple of them are giving money. But you know, *real* support, which would be funding us, I’m afraid that it’s not that systematic. And every year, you need to convince them that it’s important.”

¹³ Of the dozen or so organizations Rhodes-Kubiak identified that became active from 2000-2010, less than five are still operating as of late 2021.

¹⁴ The regional advocacy organization, LGBTI ERA, reported previously operational organizations and groups in Niš, Kragujevac, Subotica, and the province of Vojvodina (LGBTI ERA, 2016).

This critique aligns with recent findings from the annual conference of the LGBTI Equal Rights Association, concluding that western donors are often out of touch to the real needs of the community, and would rather fund projects that align with Europe-wide movement priorities such as same-sex partnerships, and anti-discrimination legislation (LGBTI ERA 2021, Paternotte 2016).

Another challenge, which was outlined in earlier sections, was the way that activist linkages with Europe through financial patronage, resource sharing, and project collaboration fuels nationalist discourses which position LGBT rights as a foreign imposition.

Marko said that these narratives are dominant among people who believe that Serbia should not be a part of the EU. “People who think that the Western nations are trying to influence, control, or have dominance over Serbia would see our fight for LGBT rights as a part of that, as a part of the EU, Western Europe, or America’s agenda of, in some sense, harming Serbia.”

Vuk, who works closely with EU institutions and governments, similarly pushed back against these narratives. “What we want in Serbia is European values like rule of law. We want freedom of expression. We want non-discrimination. We want all international standards ratified by Serbia to be respected. Those are the European values we want, those same values that anyone in any civilized country wants.” He made sure to emphasize that this support is not unequivocal, that EU policies are often flawed or biased. But he acknowledges that in the Western Balkans, the EU was always the driving force in the improvement of human rights. This statement, which seems to be at odds with Vuk’s other assertion about the decline in human rights if Serbia joins the EU, hints at the complicated and delicate relationship LGBT activists face in their relations with European and EU actors. Section 4.2 will re-examine these dynamics in the context of my conversations with participants.

2.2 Identity Politics: Nations, Sexualities, and Belonging in Serbia

Public opinion polls consistently find negative public attitudes towards LGBT people in Serbia.¹⁵ This is not to suggest that Serbian people, or people from Central and Eastern Europe generally, are more homophobic than their western counterparts. In most right-wing discourses throughout the world, gender and sexual minorities play a specific role in the

¹⁵ A 2021 survey by Civil Rights Defenders found that in 2020, fully 57% of Serbians surveyed thought that homosexuality is an illness. The survey also found that, while many social and economic rights are supported by the public, support for marriage and adoption rights remain around 25%. Perhaps more tellingly, 82% “have nothing against homosexuals, but believe they should not display their sexual orientation outside the home” (Civil Rights Defenders, 2021).

national mythology and creation of national identity. The 1990s created a unique situation in which Serbia was redefining its national identity and role in the international community. According to Serbian scholar Zorica Mršević, the post-war situation “created and maintained...value-based orientations towards nationalism, traditionalism, conformism and authoritarianism” that are also at the root of societal homophobia (2013, p. 72). Isidora Stakić (2011) writes that gendered and heteronormative imagery continue to dominate the Serbian national mythology. She argues compellingly that various national myths, particularly related to Kosovo, establish national symbols of Serbians as freedom fighters, the protectors of Western (Christian) civilization, martyrs unrecognized by the West (2011, p. 50). Like Mršević, Stakić notes the evolution of these mythologies in the aftermath of the 1990s conflicts, saying that “in the absence of a “real” war enemy, the new generations inspired by warrior myths and eager to affirm their patriotism started looking for the enemies of the nation in all those who do not conform to their perception of normality” (2011, p. 51).

Tim Judah (2000) has shown how the Milošević regime in Serbia connected citizenship and nationhood with the “nuclear heterosexual family, reproduction, and purity of bloodlines”, which, as Rhodes-Kubiak argued, “marginalized anyone who fell outside the definition of what it was to be a Serb” (2015, p. 99).

The idea that ethnic or cultural “others” threaten national continuity is perhaps particularly resonant in Serbia due to the relatively recent experiences of war and Yugoslav disintegration in the 1990s. War by necessity positions the “other” as hostile and threatening rather than simply different, but this is especially the case when war is fueled by the nationalist rhetoric of ethnic persecution (for instance, of Serbs in Kosovo). With the end of the war, the collapse of federal statehood, and the fall of the Milošević regime, Serbia had to completely reimagine itself and its place in the world.

Among the nation building tools used by Serbia (as well as the other countries of the former Yugoslavia) were language and religion. As Paul Moon details, the “Yugoslav” language “was claimed by multiple groups as a part of the reconstruction of their new national identity” (2018, p. 1074). Moon and others (such as Miličević, 2017) assert that the languages of the region—Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin—“came into existence for purely identity reasons, even though such initiatives defied the obvious fact that they are all a single language, and that variants within some of these languages...were greater than the variants between these languages” (p. 1074). These attempts to instrumentalize language as a defining feature of national identity continue to this day. Recently, the Serbian government passed a law requiring the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in public firms, and now offers incentives for private

firms to adopt similar policies. According to reporting from Balkan Insight, the new law is part of a “drive to ‘protect and preserve’ Cyrillic over Latin script and expand use of the Serbian flag and anthem in public life” (Stojanovic, 2021).

Religion is another tool. According to Hilton Saggau, during the 1990s, religion re-emerged as a “central hallmark” of national identity. In Serbia, “the intertwinement between the Serbian nationalist movements and the Serbian Orthodox Church” meant that “the question of national identity also became a question of religious belonging” (Hilton Saggau, 2017, p. 32). This is a particular point of contention in the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro, a country where many citizens continue to consider themselves Serbs rather than Montenegrins (Džankić, 2014, p. 349). In September 2021, a dispute between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the “canonically unrecognized” Montenegrin Orthodox Church erupted over the use of a historic monastery in Montenegro which is owned by the Serbian Orthodox Church (Kajosevic, 2021).

Roman Kuhar posited that post-socialist processes of re-traditionalization and subsequent rehabilitation of religion were “seen as a ‘coming home’ to the true (patriarchal) values of the nation” which had been erased by the communist regime (2013, p. 8). Tamara Pavasović Trošt and Koen Sloodmaeckers concluded from this that the interplay of nationalism and religion in the post-socialist Balkans contributed “to a (hyper)masculine and heteronormative culture, in which the homosexual body is seen as a national threat” (2015, p. 160). Zorica Mršević said that this correlation between homophobia and nationalism is the “result of certain psychological needs for self-confirmation of one’s own identity and fear that this identity is jeopardised” (2013, p. 71). This psychological need is dealt with through the identification of “something different” in society that may or may not be considered hostile. Mršević said that while, during the 1990s, this “something different” was a national other (Croatsians, Albanians, etc.), now gender and sexual minorities fulfill this role—a status perhaps shared with Roma people and migrants.

Thus the Serbian government is in a unique and challenging position of attempting to satisfy the demands of two very different constituencies while engaging in nation building practices. On the one hand, Serbia continually reaffirms its commitment to EU membership, which means putting human rights on the political agenda in at least a cosmetic way. At the same time, nationally-oriented publics (often rooted in religious ideology, anti-gender/homophobic ideology, or both) comprise a considerable constituency in Serbia and demand respect for “traditional” or “family” values and policies.

The challenge, in turn, for LGBT activists is similar, as they face three main constituencies. First and foremost, activists are accountable to the LGBT population which it represents and serves. While there is little available data on the relationship between the activist and general LGBT population, a 2015 survey by the National Democratic Institute found that the LGBT population is highly dissatisfied with national LGBT organizations compared to other populations in the region (National Democratic Institute, 2015). Conversations with activists suggest that this is due to the perceptions that organizations are more focused on advocacy and lobbying than the social and economic needs of the community. Additionally, activists face the challenge of engaging a community that is largely not “out” and open, according to survey data. Activists are also accountable to the European and international donor community, who focus their financial engagement predominately on short-term projects dedicated to advocacy and lobbying on topics important to the donor community, such as anti-discrimination and civil union legislation. Activists from Serbia and throughout the region have expressed frustration that donors often do not understand the local context or prioritize the needs and expertise of local organizations (LGBTI ERA, 2021). And finally, activists rely on state institutions for cooperation on important topics like health and social services and hate crimes and hate speech and provide funding and access to communities. Given this complex matrix of material and ideational factors, Section IV explores how activists understand and deploy their various understandings of belonging within their work to both create resonance with the larger LGBT community and to achieve their social and political goals.

Section II Summary

Section II took the theoretical foundations of Section I and applied them to the specific case of LGBT activism in Serbia. It explored how, due to the processes of Europeanization, the progression of LGBT rights in Serbia has been highly politicized by the ruling party, who uses a strategy of “tactical Europeanization” in order to satisfy the demands of its EU candidacy while also catering to its substantial Eurosceptic population. It revealed that processes of Europeanization also impacted the strategies and organization of LGBT activism in Serbia. The subsequent professionalism of the movement has led to tensions between activists and the community but has also allowed it to achieve substantial political gains.

Section III: Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Foundations

In this sub-section I briefly outline the theoretical foundations of this research study, because, as Strauss and Corbin asserted, “the manner in which one asks the research question is important, because it determines to a large extent the research methods that are used to study it” (1998, p. 41). Like many qualitative studies, this study takes an interpretivist approach that most closely aligns with contextualism, a philosophical worldview “founded on the belief that all knowledge is local, provisional, and situation dependent” (Madill et al., 2000). This relativist/constructivist ontology and epistemology align with the key assumptions of this study, namely, that there is not one “fixed” or “objective” reality, but that it is possible to seek rich accounts of experience within specific contexts (King et al. 2019, p. 19). This is highly relevant in the study of contestation within social movements. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argued, “there is not one discourse and one system of categories through which the ‘real’ might speak without mediations,” meaning that understanding and usage of identities within a social movement is by nature, negotiated and contested continuously among actors. This perspective mediated the choice of research design possible for the study.

3.2 Research Design

This project is based on a qualitative, critical case study of identity contestation and instrumentalization within the LGBT movement in Serbia. According to Lee Harvey (2011), critical, or theoretical, case studies provide detailed analysis of a case with a specific focus on myth or contradiction, taking “abstract theoretical notions and deconstructing them as social practice” thereby exploring how they operate in relation to society. The presumed “contradiction” under scrutiny in this case is the relationship between national identity and Europe, the dual forces of nationalism and Europeanization. The assumption that activists must “take a side”, so to speak, when formulating strategies for collective action is the “myth” being deconstructed. By looking at the instrumentalization of identity within activism contexts, this study explores and contests the binary of *or* (as in Serbia or Europe) and suggests an *and/or* (as in Serbia and/or Europe).

This case study relies on interview data generated through in-depth, qualitative interviews. In-depth interviews were used as the primary method because of this study’s emphasis on seeking “deep” knowledge about participants’ values, decisions, or perspectives. The research question “focuses on what and how, rather than why social processes are enacted

in everyday life” (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012, pp. 100-101). Due to the lack of quantifiability or generalizability (and the belief that such endeavors are not feasible or desirable), interviews in this study are used to provide context and situational understanding in a way that other types of data cannot.

One caveat to this research design is that in-depth interviews are rarely the sole source of data. This is because, as Johnson and Rowlands outline, interviews usually take place with the direct intention of data generation and are therefore used to “check out” theories or verify knowledge obtained through other means, such as observation or document analysis (2012, p. 100). As Donna Haraway noted that “the positionings of the subjugated [sic] are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation...” (1988, pp. 583-84), so while the experiences and perceptions of participants form the basis of this study, limited online data was also collected in order to provide additional context to the data generated from interviews. These data include organizations’ funding sources, projects implemented in concert with European and Serbian institutions, and more “banal” data such as the prevalence of European and national symbols used in online platforms and amount of content produced in English rather than Serbian. However, this study does not rely on systematic content or social media analysis, and this information is used primarily to contextualize the positioning of various organizations.

A final limitation to the use of in-depth interviewing as a research method in this study is that, due to my own language and financial limitations, interviews could only be conducted in English. While many LGBT activists, and Serbians generally, speak English fluently, this significantly inhibited both my ability to reach a broader range of participants and the ability of participants to express themselves on their own terms.

3.2.1 Case selection

Thomas (2011) distinguishes between the object and the subject of study. The object, or the theoretical or analytical frame, of this study is identity contestation and utilization within social movements. The subject, the “practical, historical unity,” is the LGBT movement in Serbia (2011, p. 514).

With this understanding the boundaries of and actors in Serbia’s LGBT movement, I move to explain its significance as a subject of study. According to Thomas, study subjects may be chosen due to the “inherent interest of the case”—it may be a *key* case which exemplifies a phenomenon, or it may be an *outlier* case which is illustrative “by virtue of its difference” (2011, p. 514). The LGBT movement in Serbia combines elements of both key and outlier case.

Since this case may be useful for confirming, challenging, or extending existing theories about movement contestation and strategizing in the Western Balkans, it could also be considered an *influential* case (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, p. 303).

There are several factors that make the LGBT movement in Serbia a key, or exemplary, case for studying movement identity contestation and utilization. First and foremost is the current political climate. Serbia is one of five candidate states for EU membership and Serbian politicians continually invoke the strategic of the EU and EU countries for Serbia's future. Serbian LGBT organizations also have significant financial and collaborative links with EU institutions and European governments. At the same time, Serbia is led by populist president Aleksandar Vučić, who, like many leaders in the region, has employed nationalist rhetoric to secure public support and has strengthened traditional alliances with Russia, while pursuing new alliances with emerging actors like China (Teokarevic, 2016). These apparently contradictory political tendencies have combined with the emergent “hypervisibility” (Wilkinson 2020) and Europeanization of LGBT issues in the post-socialist space. The resulting polarization of political and social attitudes makes the Serbian LGBT movement an ideal case for understanding dynamics of identity contestation.

Other factors arguably make it an outlier case. Serbia has the largest (professionalized) activist movement in the region and the movement is largely centered in Belgrade, the largest and most cosmopolitan capital in the region. Additionally, as Part II discussed in detail, Serbia's relationship to Europe in terms of affinity and identity formation is also unique in the region. While the first characteristics might suggest an increased openness to LGBT issues in society, the complex and often oppositional relationship to Europe could indicate adversarial societal attitudes towards LGBT issues and their association with Europe and EU politics. The combination of these outstanding factors means that the results of this study are likely not generalizable to other LGBT movements in the region.

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Primary data sources

The main sources of data for this study were generated from qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with LGBT activists in Serbia. Communication with participants took place via email, and interviews were held on the video conferencing platform Zoom for health and safety reasons. Interviews were approximately one hour in length and followed a semi-structured format which allowed the conversation to progress from insights provided by

participants (King et al., 2019, p. 63). Interviews were recorded for transcription with written permission from participants.

Traditionally, remote or virtual interviews were considered to be a “pragmatic second choice” or even “last resort” (King et al., 2019, p. 117). Remote video interviews are much more feasible than in the past due to wider availability of personal computers and internet access, and quality of technology. There are certain populations where this is not the case, but technology access was not a serious concern in this study. Another benefit of this mode of interviewing is that it allowed participants to speak with me from a location where they felt comfortable.

The primary downside of video interviewing is that it inhibits the interview as a social interaction. King et al. call this tendency in telephone and video calling “task-focus” (2019, p. 119). Additionally, with limited ability to interpret body language, there is greater risk for misinterpreting the nature of the interaction or the meaning of what is being said (King et al., 2019, pp. 118-19). At the same time, the greater sense of anonymity provided by (digital) distance may make some participants willing to disclose information (2019, p. 116). Most prominently, digital recording and data collection presents unique ethical challenges compared to in-person interviewing. I will address these later in section three.

3.3.2 Sample Frame

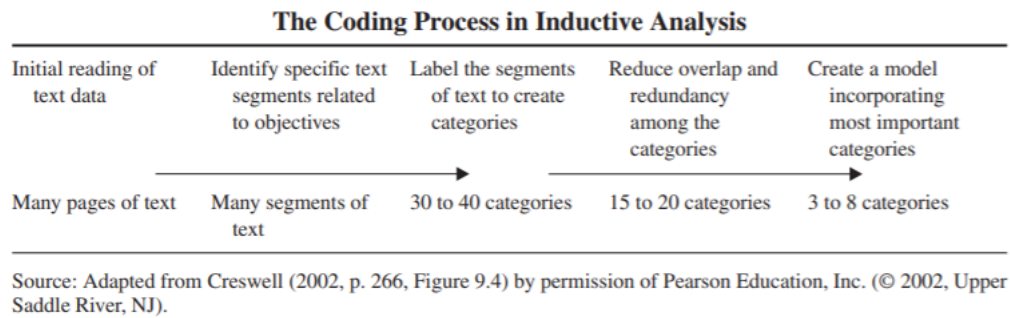
The study sample consists of 10 LGBT activists in Serbia.¹⁶ The initial participants were recruited through LGBT organizations which I identified through desk research and my existing networks in the region. This initial pool of research participants was expanded through a combination of snowball and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) In soliciting participants for the study, purposeful maximal sampling was used to achieve a greater breadth of perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). However, this study does not assume any level of sample representativeness and does not aim for data generalizability to other activist populations or the non-activist LGBT community.

3.3.3 Data analysis

I analyzed my data using a qualitative inductive general approach. While less extensively theorized in the literature, generic inductive approaches can be considered more flexible in allowing for emergent themes in data than traditional qualitative approaches like

¹⁶ One participant withdrew from the study at a later stage, so my analysis is based on nine sets of data.

grounded theory, narrative analysis, or phenomenology (Liu, 2016, p. 130). According to Thomas, a generic inductive approach looks for “the core meanings evident in the text, relevant to evaluation or research objectives (2006, p. 241), and creates categories or themes most relevant to the identified research objectives. I followed Thomas’s inductive coding process (2006, below) for identifying the most important themes in generated data.



Critical to the coding process is close reading that considers “multiple meanings that are inherent in the text” (Thomas, 2006, p. 241). Memo writing, which involves recording the “associations, links, and implications” of a theme, as well as relationships between themes, was also employed as part of this approach. One final element of the generic inductive approach used here was the concurrence of data analysis and data generation. This was done in order to refine ideas and themes generated from previous interviews in order to further explore them in subsequent participant interactions, allowing me to test the relevance of theoretical categories and explore themes that emerged spontaneously and were not accounted for by theory. Figure 2 (below) shows an example of this coding process.

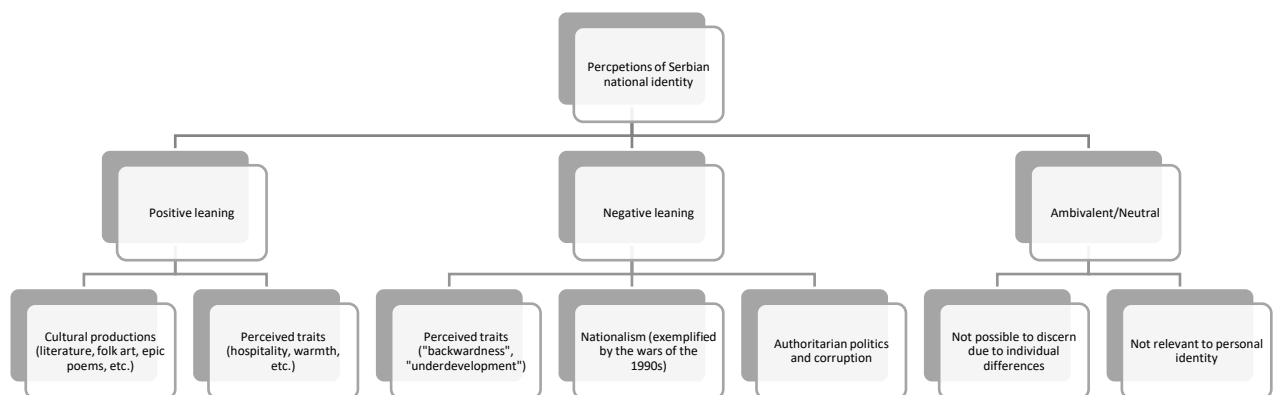


Figure 2: Themes in Serbian National Identity Perception

I analyzed the data in the following way. First, I read through the raw data several times to gain a general familiarity with its contents. This was followed by a several close readings of each transcript, during which I searched for themes relevant to the research question (“vertical” analysis). Following a compilation of the major themes, transcripts were cross-coded against each other to find recurring themes (“horizontal” analysis). Each piece of evidence was considered for multiple meanings against the theme or category in which it appeared to fit.

In Section IV, I follow Thomas’s (2006) interpretation of Williams and Irurita (1998) in reporting my findings. This sequential reporting style labels the main category or theme, usually as a heading or sub-heading, and follows with an explanation of the theme in the words of the author. Finally this description is substantiated with evidence from the raw data which illustrates the way the theme emerged in the data and its relevance to the research question.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The primary ethical concerns addressed here are informed consent, data protection, and participant safety. This study received ethical approval from both the University of Glasgow and Jagiellonian University.

All study participants were provided with an Information Sheet for Research Participants (Appendix A) which outlined the purpose for the research and clearly stated that participation was voluntary and that consent could be withdrawn at any time. Participants were given the opportunity to request additional information about the research project and ask questions about consent as outlined in the Consent Form (Appendix B) and data protection. Participants were also provided a Privacy Notice (Appendix C) detailing the methods for storing, retaining, and destroying their research data.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, all interviews connected with this research project were conducted virtually via Zoom, which is considered a GDPR compliant video platform. Interviews were conducted from a private room using a secure internet connection. This virtual format additionally allowed interview participants to speak with me from a location where they felt secure.

Interviews did not explore themes that were likely to cause harm or distress to participants. Nonetheless, measures were taken to minimize participant distress, such as informing them broadly about the kinds of questions that might be asked during the interview. While participants predominately identified as LGBT and their experiences as LGBT people are inseparable from their experiences of national identity, the challenges or difficulties of

being LGBT were not the subject of discussion. The idea that LGBT people are a vulnerable minority with whom special precautions must be taken in research is addressed further in the following section.

3.5 Additional Considerations: Positionality and Power

My role as an American/“Western”, English-speaking researcher working with participants from the Western Balkans situates our interactions within a specific power dynamic that I will briefly address. First, I consider traditional narratives which position the LGBT community as “vulnerable” (van den Hoonaard, 2018). I follow Mary Brydon-Miller (2008) in rejecting this often paternalistic and prejudiced conceptualization which has the effect of excluding certain groups of people from active participation in knowledge production. I took my guiding principle on the question of vulnerability from Iphofen (2011, p. 108) in asking not whether a subject population is vulnerable, but rather, “Are these subjects made any more vulnerable than they might ordinarily be in their daily lives as a result of their participation in this research?” I argue not for several reasons. First, study participants are public LGBT activists whose names and careers are associated with LGBT activism. This, combined with pseudonymization of participants, meant there was little risk of unintentionally “outing” someone as an LGBT person or supporter. Second, as discussed above, the study did not delve into potentially harmful or traumatizing topics such as experiences of violence, exclusion, or discrimination.

An additional consideration regarding vulnerability is one raised by Kim England, which is how to incorporate the voices of (often marginalized) “others”, “without colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination” (1994, p. 81). Audrey Kobayashi (1994) poses this dilemma as a question of who speaks *for* whom vs. who speaks *with* whom (pp. 75-76). I attempted to address this issue in the interview process by challenging my own preconceptions throughout the interaction and allowing the perspectives of participants to guide understanding of the topic. As I showed in Section II, “western” academic literature has reported extensively about Europeanization, nationalism, and their effects on LGBT activism in the Balkans. Rather than assume a priori the truth of these conclusions, I tried to use them as a point of inquiry.

Like my research participants, I also approached this study with my own background, preconceptions, and worldview. While I follow feminist-grounded researchers such as Donna Haraway (1988) and Sandra Harding (1991, 1993) who challenge traditional conceptions of researcher “objectivity”, I acknowledge the ways that these subjectivities influenced both the

research process and my relationship with participants. The most important is likely my self-identification as an LGBT person. This shared (?) identification with my participants could presumably have given me a certain degree of “insider” status that facilitated trust or understanding. However, there is no universal, decontextualized “LGBT experience” that I shared with participants, so I positioned myself in this research context as working *with*, rather than *within* Serbia’s LGBT activist community (Gorman-Murray et al., 2010; Merriam et al., 2001; Nash, 2010). This seemingly trivial distinction means, however, that I approached participant interactions without any assumption of common understanding of terms, concepts, or experiences, impacting the social interaction and the data generated.

Section IV: Identity and Strategy

4.1 Negotiating Identities

“Am I a ‘true’ Serb? Probably not. But am I a modern Serb? Yes.” – Dragana

“The problem for Serbian politics is that national identity is, I would say, like an open wound, which heals a bit but then gets open again.” – Matija

Section I’s brief overview of identity construction processes revealed that identities are constructed and negotiated within a complex matrix of historical, political, and cultural dynamics. It also revealed how these identity processes—defining identity, experiencing it, and expressing it—are particularly complicated for LGBT people and other minorities who are excluded from definitions of national citizenship in many popular discourses. Throughout this section, which outlines the results of my discussions with participants, I will emphasize the idea that identity construction, experience, and expression take place within this matrix of factors. The following subsections focus their attention on the two identities which concern this study—national and European identity—with particular concern for the boundaries, intersections, and zones of ambiguity. Following in the tradition of social constructivism, I come to no concrete conclusions regarding the definition of Serbian or European identity, but rather prompt readers to consider the individual and collective discursive processes that constitute the on-going negotiation of these identities.

4.1.1 National identity

My first observation after speaking with participants was that almost none of them considered their national identity to be of significant importance, prompting me to immediately reconsider the relevance of a study about the negotiation of national identity. Matija, dismissed these concerns, telling me that in an international system which continues to be dominated by the nation-state, “unfortunately, there is no other paradigm that can fill in for national identity.”

The problem, according to him, is the academic and media tendency to view *all* issues in the Balkans through the lens of national identity. “[These discourses] make national identity the answer to questions which other variables, other than national identity could explain much better.” He highlighted this point, saying that in the Balkans, despite the conflicts of the past, there is much interconnection and diversity. He pointed to his own upbringing in the multi-national region of Vojvodina, saying that his early exposure to national and ethnic diversity

made him “from the beginning at odds with my Serbian identity. I never considered it as something very important to me.”

Dragana, who is Bosnian by birth but has lived in Serbia for much of her life, similarly said that her mixed family has minimized the importance and meaning of national identity. In fact, for Dragana and many other participants, if the category *Serb* was salient at all, it was part of the matrix of being LGBT in *Serbia*. To explain what this means in practice, Dragana told me this story:

“I live with my partner, but we are not legally recognized. We want to buy our apartment, but we are not eligible to get this joint credit offered by the state. The man who's buying the apartment from me, he's married. It was really awkward for me because it says in his part of the contract that he is married, and it says in my part that I'm single. It also says in his part that his wife is automatically allowed to be the co-owner of the apartment. But my partner and I don't get that right.”

Dragana's story points to several dynamics which are relevant to this study. First, it points to the politics of LGBT exclusion in Serbia. Dragana and her partner cannot obtain joint credit to buy an apartment, they cannot automatically be co-owners of a new apartment, and Dragana must be listed as single in the contract. According to Dragana, these factors make her LGBT identity more salient (albeit, in a negative way) than her national identity because she is consistently reminded in her day-to-day life of being LGBT through social, economic, and legal discrimination.

Marko described the same processes, telling me that he has always thought a lot about his identity, “because of my difference from the general population in the sense of my sexual orientation. I had to think about it often and make my position somehow clear for myself, and then to express it for others.”

Marko points out that collective identities often have a purposeful dimension that goes beyond the internal processes of self-identification with a category (such as LGBT or Serbia). For him, being gay (his term of identification) is not just about sexual orientation, but about expression. Bojan said identity expression, especially gender expression, is an important but overlooked element of LGBT existence in Serbia. “My oppression as a gay man is not connected that much with my sexual orientation, but with my gender expression. A lot of oppression and violence is made because of gender.”

I emphasize this point because, as Section I showed, national identity formation and subsequent LGBT exclusion is highly related to conformity with gender norms. The data support this conclusion, says Bojan, finding that most violent attacks in Serbia occur against people who are perceived to be gay men. Alternate expressions of masculinity have always been highly policed, which is why men who appear “feminine” have been attacked despite being heterosexual. Bogdan came to the same conclusion, saying that because he looks like the “average designated Serbian guy”, he has never faced the public discrimination, harassment, or violence that plagues gender non-conforming members of the LGBT population.

Even Bogdan’s use of the phrase “average designated Serbian” points to importance of gender expression in conceptions of national identity. He said the average Serbian guy is portrayed as being masculine, athletic, and emotionally reserved. Interestingly, while nearly all participants tried to avoid stereotypes, few interrogated the dominant culture’s categories of masculine and feminine and the way they are used to oppress sexual and gender minorities. There was an assumed understanding between us, that I understood what he meant by “masculine” appearance, or that I understood Dragana when she talked about “feminine” lesbians. Unfortunately, there is little representation of gender non-conforming, trans, and non-binary people in Serbia—in activism, in media, in positions of power, or in this study—so it is beyond the scope of this study to fully analyze the role of gender expression in conceptions of national identity. I will reconsider this idea in my conclusions when I suggest further avenues of study.

Returning to the idea of the “average designated Serbian,” I found that *Serb* is a highly contested category which elicited a variety of emotions and responses. Perhaps the only commonality among participants was that being Serbian is complicated. Attitudes generally fell into three broad categories: generally positive, generally negative, and the largest category, those who felt ambivalent or neutral and rejected both positive and negative associations.

Vuk and Bojan, for example, said they are *technically* Serbs, but would not consider themselves Serbian in any substantial sense. Jana said she sees herself more as a person, a member of humankind, than a person from Serbia. Already, then, is the ultimate problem of collective identity. Most scholarly definitions of collective identity emphasize that it has an affective dimension, meaning that people experience a positive self-identification with the category. Vuk, Bojan, and Jana appear to feel that the label has somehow been applied to them at birth, but they do not claim it, certainly not in a positive way. So, are they Serbs? The best answer seems to be *technically*, but I will return later to the ways that this category has real world impacts despite their lukewarm self-identification.

Even if I take for granted that the category of “Serb” can be applied to my participants, the next challenge is what constitutes this category. What makes an “average designated Serbian”? Participants struggled to find anything universal. Jana said perhaps it could be the Serbian language, but Matija said growing up in Vojvodina many of his family members spoke Romanian rather than Serbian.

Many participants, like Jana, rejected the question. “I’m not sure that being from the same country means that we all have the same things. Maybe some people will say that Serbs eat sarma or drink rakija. I don’t like either of those things, but I don’t think I’m not Serbian.”

The most common response, however, was to list characteristics from the popular discourse, with the caveat that these were stereotypes which are not actually true. For example, Bojan gave me a step-by-step guide to the stereotypical Serb.

“First of all, it’s language. You can’t be Serbian without knowing Serbian also.”

Step two: have a traditionally Serbian name. This means you cannot have a name which suggests that you are Muslim, for example.

Next, “it would be great that you are Christian, Orthodox Christian.” Atheists are maybe acceptable, but certainly Catholics and Muslims cannot be true Serbians. An atheist can “pass”, but not a Catholic or Muslim.

There are several points to unpack here. Section II outlined the role of language and religion as nation building tools, and Bojan’s remarks indicate that these are still salient components of national identity for many Serbs. Next, Bojan’s comment about the ability to “pass”, reveals that the question “what makes someone a Serb?” is actually two distinct questions. The first question is about who a Serb is *technically*. This category is more expansive. People born in Serbia are Serbs. People with Serbian citizenship are Serbs. But Bojan points to another category: the *good* Serbs, the *true* Serbs. This is a much more exclusive group, one in which Catholics, Muslims, Roma people, LGBT people, and migrants cannot be a part. “They are basically traitors to national identity even though they may say they are Serbians.”

Data collected by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality support the idea that there are two classes of Serb, finding that Albanians, migrants, Roma people, and LGBT people are the most “socially distant” groups in Serbian society. Social distance in this case means that people were least likely to want a member of these groups to be a friend, family member, neighbour, or colleague (Regular Annual Report, 2021, p. 170). For members of these groups, Vuk points to a fundamental double standard. Nationalists, he says, try to define the boundaries of nationality using language and religion.

“If that’s the case, what if someone comes from Africa and lives here for five years, speaks perfect Serbian, and is Orthodox? Is he a Serb then? Of course, [the nationalists] immediately say no. It’s illogical, but Serbian nationalists don’t want to accept anyone who is not white, who is not a man.”

For everyone who does not fit the standard, “yeah, you are Serb, but you are deviant, you are something that is second rate or third rate...” Vuk and others expressed frustration that the domestic discourse about what it means to be Serbian seems to be the monopoly of nationalist and right-wing politics. For Serbs like Matija and Marko who have travelled and lived abroad, outsiders define the boundaries of Serbianness. He said that even among the highly educated, perceptions of Serbia are rooted in Balkanist stereotypes. For older people, Serbia is Yugoslavia, it is ethnic conflict. “Younger people usually tend to view Serbia as a cheap country of very good clubs. It’s kind of a sexist fantasy, like, beautiful women everywhere, clubs open until the morning. They have the idea that Serbia is less prohibitive than their home countries, so they can really have fun with no constraints.”

Marko said that even though he considers himself a globalist in his outlook, he is constantly aware of his nationality when he is outside of Serbia. “I can’t *not* take into consideration my national identity in the sense that, when I’m in Vienna, I’m always a foreigner. No matter how integrated I am in the society, no matter how much I become like the Viennese or Austrians, I’m always a person from somewhere else.”

It seems that no matter where my participants are, Serbian identity is being defined for them, and in ways that ultimately exclude them. While I have emphasized that the boundaries of belonging are more often zones of ambiguity than clear lines, Dragana told me that categories come with expectations that can easily lead to feelings of exclusion. “When I was in school, I was supposed to be this good Catholic, Croatian girl, and I wasn’t that, I was just Dragana from a mixed family. I always felt good whenever I did *not* need to identify myself.

Dragana and Marko both expressed the desire to not have to think about national identity. But Matija said ultimately, in Serbia the question of national identity continues to be salient in politics because Serbian statehood is unresolved. He is referring, of course, to Kosovo, a subject impossible to ignore when talking about Serbian identity. If there was no agreement or commonality among participants about what it means to be Serbian, Kosovo and the 1990s always lingered in the background. For instance, when Vuk and I discussed the existence of LGBT Serbian nationalists, he told me, “It’s more comfortable to say that you can be gay or lesbian and Serb at the same time. Well, this is fine, I mean, *in some other*

circumstances [emphasis mine].” Here Vuk implies that being Serbian is inseparable from the past, and that this past is something one cannot be proud of.

“Okay, for you, is Srebrenica a genocide? Are we guilty of war crimes? What do you think about [the independence of] Kosovo? You know, when you have the right answers to that, maybe then you can have a clear attitude towards the past, then maybe you can be Serbian, a proud Serbian...”

For Vuk, there is a “right answer” to the past, and it involves a complete rejection of war-time actions and any kind of nationalism. This is something I found throughout my interactions with participants. Participants equated nationality with nationalism, and nationalism was never something positive. This makes sense given the legacy of nationalism in Serbia. Luka and others, however, see a less black-and-white process of confronting the past, arguing for “partial responsibility.”

“You have to accept it and to carry it as part of your identity as someone who was born and raised in this historical period...these are just things that I accept, and I try to create a balance of what can be done in the future to change these things for something better, to learn something new.”

To be clear, every participant, without exception, condemned the wars and acknowledged Serbia’s role in them. But they also struggled with the way Serbia was painted as the primary, or only, villain. As I have emphasized, collective identity is defined by positive self-identification, by traits, characteristics, or attributes that members of the collective can be proud of. Thus, it is understandable that the question of collective guilt or responsibility weighs heavily on the minds of Serbs. Matija said that erasing the image of the 1990s comprises much of contemporary Serbian identity negotiation. He considers this unfair in many ways and said that the Serbian *people* cannot collectively be considered aggressors in the conflict. Many people outside Serbia saw the actions of paramilitary groups and politicians and applied blame to Serbia as a whole.

Most participants agreed that the government should take public responsibility for actions of the past, but Ivan says the attitude of the ruling elite is to deny or neglect accountability. Ivan says that, although he was a very young child when the wars occurred, he will continue to take responsibility as a form of opposition to the lack of government accountability. Jana said when nobody takes responsibility, “we all take responsibility.” And this collective guilt weighs heavily upon Serbian identity, especially given that most Serbians

feel they are being blamed for something they didn't do. Jana says, "we are not guilty because of that. People did their best from information they had. But politicians are those who should speak about it, someone should go and say what really happened, but that will never happen in Serbia."

These questions hang also over Serbia's relations with Europe. Jana said, "for war you need two parts and there were also bad things from both sides." Luka agreed, saying that he feels two burdens. He feels the burden of injustices committed by Serbian forces during the war, but also the additional burden of injustices committed against the Serbian people which remain largely unacknowledged. Not only is the memory of the 1999 NATO bombings still fresh for many Serbians, but so are the political decisions made afterwards. Luka said double standards were always present and continue to be present based on who was on whose side during the wars. Thinking particularly about Croatia, he says they were accepted into the EU based on politics alone, even though they were not ready in terms of economy or human rights. He added that it isn't good for Croatian society in the long-term to have "gotten away with" their role in the wars so easily.

"I kind of like that the conflict within society in Serbia about our role in the 90s is still going on. I think this is an opportunity for healing which is not being used in the proper way at the moment. But maybe in the future, if make it a real dialogue and come to some conclusion, it will be beneficial for our society."

4.1.2 Serbian Identity and Europe

Comparing Serbia to Croatia, Bojan said in Croatia, there is a sense that "even if you are not European, or maybe not Western, you *should* be." In Serbia, however, he says that people are not ashamed to act in ways that are "non-Western or non-European... There is a lot of pride in our oriental culture which has traditionally looked towards Russia... A lot of people really don't want to be European." Matija agreed, saying that the EU doesn't present a "credible alternative" to Serbian identity for the Serbian people

So Matija asks rhetorically, "What is European?" Is it geographic? He says that for Serbian people, it would be hard to claim that Russia is European, or even that Romania and Bulgaria are European. But Sweden, Germany, or Switzerland for that matter, even though it is not an EU country, they are certainly European. "This is the image of Europe that is presented. A system which functions. State institutions that serve the citizens with no

corruption or clientelism. Good infrastructure, prospects for a good job and salary, something that is definitely not related to what is Serbian.”

This is the image of Europe that is *presented*, a Europe that Bogdan says does not always correspond to the reality.

“Usually, whatever Hungary or Poland do, the European Union is gravely concerned, but there are no concrete actions. If actions do not occur, I think that we should really reflect on what Europe actually is.”

Bojan said geographical definitions are not helpful. He said for example, there are no “European values”, but only the political spectrum of right-wing and left-wing values. This is a more useful category of analysis because every part of the world, every country, has its own right and left-wing. For example, he asked, “What is the meaning of liberal ‘European values’ if right-wing politicians are winning elections all over Europe, if there are authoritarian countries in Europe?”

So perhaps Europe and its values are not an objective reality, but as Bogdan phrased it, an aspirational category. On the other hand, says Matija, “in the domain of stereotypes and prejudice, Serbian people tend to see Serbian identity as something that has intrinsic qualities that they value more than certain European qualities, even though they're aware that life in Serbia doesn't often correspond to these very good traits.” Is Europe the characteristics of its people? Luka said that the stereotype is that people from the East are more traditional and spiritual, while people in the West may be more prosperous in their economies but are also more superficial. Matija said something similar.

“According to Serbians, western Europeans are, you know, a bit alienated. They don't hang out with each other, they're closer to their own homes, they don't care about other people, very cold. Again, almost all stereotypes. Serbian identity, on a on a binary scale, would usually be related to something warm, nice, cozy, you know, people care for each other, they're very polite to each other.”

Thinking, for example, of the Serbian reputation for hospitality and friendliness, Jana is not so sure this is true. “There are some things that people from Serbia *want* to be and be recognized for, but I'm not sure those *are* the things we are recognized for. For instance, the political things that aren't so good.” Matija said he experienced similar sentiments among foreigners, who usually see him first as a Serb, even if he does not see himself that way. “The prevailing opinions about Serbian national identity usually define the parameters for that

encounter, conversation, or relationship. I feel compelled to step into the shoes of identity that someone already prepared, no matter what I think about it.”

Matija and Jana agree that it’s certainly not, that people tend to transpose their individual experiences with members of a community to the entire national community. Jana says that, yes, “a lot of things make us different, of course. I’m different from people from Asia, even from Europe, but it is not because we are different when we were born. We are different because we were raised differently, because the politics here were different.”

Matija expressed a similar sentiment, saying:

“I always felt that there is nothing unchangeable in Serbian identity, and nothing that’s so unrelated to other sorts of national identities. [Certain traits] are basically associated with national identities, but I wouldn’t say that they create a corpus of personal individual traits, or even group traits that cannot travel.”

Luka said that Serbians, being both eastern and western, should reject stereotypes and see what is positive from all cultures.

“I think that both East and West have almost the same positive features and almost the same negative features. I don’t think that the ruling stereotypes are actually true. Both sides fought for freedom and both sides had their ups and downs. There are so many valuable things in both spheres, in culture and in the sphere of human rights.”

While Luka acknowledged that dominant stereotypes position the East as a place of human rights violations, he countered this by pointing to the community justice values of socialism, the fight for freedom from successive conquerors, and the on-going social justice and human rights movements in many countries.

Section 4.1 Conclusions

“I would say that LGBT people have a problem entangling their Serbian identity and their sexual identity because the right-wing monopoly on national identity equates the heteronormative matrix with being Serbian. This is in the public construction of identity. In private, it’s different

because LGBT people actually get the opportunity to negotiate their own national identities within themselves.”

Matija implies a liberation potential in the private negotiation of national identity. While public discourses frame LGBT people as “not Serbian” or “not Serbian *enough*”, he says in private, “people get the opportunity to feel themselves as Serbian, they get to withdraw from that what they deem important.” Marko agreed saying “with identities, in general, we are kind of allowed to pick and choose what we like, what we don't like, and what we want to keep for ourselves.” This is important for LGBT people, as my participants have shown how the public construction of Serbian identity continues to be monopolized by right-wing, exclusionary forces. Matija cites, for example, (Orthodox) religiosity as a traditional element of Serbian identity that a person may choose to claim. He cautions, however, that certain elements of Serbian identity are so entangled in systems of oppression that “you really have to do the work of reflexivity.”

As earlier sections showed, Serbian identity is in many ways trapped in the past, with those who experience it constantly reminded of those things that were negative in Serbian history. But Luka says there are so many positive things in Serbian history that Serbs can rely on to create a better identity, not only in front of other nations, but for themselves. Subsequently, participants described their identity negotiations as a kind of reclamation project that takes what is positive in Serbia, including:

The particular Balkan brand of humor
 Fighting against fascism
 Fighting with the Allies in World War I
 Fighting against Ottoman domination
 Values of social equality and justice during socialist times
 Diversity in Serbian society
 Serbian and Yugoslav cultural productions
 Serbia as a home with family and friends
 The on-going struggle to make Serbia “for everyone”

Above all, participants emphasized that LGBT rights are not incompatible with Serbian identity. “[Nationalists] see the fight for our rights as opposed to some traditional values. For me that is problematic, because I respect and love Serbian traditions like our music, some of our folk customs that have survived through the ages...I don't see two people who love each other being regulated under law and not being beat up in the streets in opposition to this

tradition,” said Marko. Luka said that some traditions served a purpose in the past, helping the nation unite and persevere in times of struggle.

“But it doesn't work that way anymore. Tradition is good to care about and cherish, but it should not represent a burden for development. Just because a thing is not traditional does not mean it is in opposition to our identity. Actually, I find it opposite. It enriches our identity and renews our tradition in light of the 21st century.”

Finally, I return briefly to my first research question, which asks how national and European identities are contested and negotiated within the LGBT movement in Serbia. This section has shown how national identity contestation and negotiation are on-going processes which take place in both the public and private realms. Taylor and Whittier argue that the idea of public and private negotiation forces a recognition that collective identities both *do* and *are*, meaning that the construction and expression of collective identities is political, as is the “politicization of the self and daily life” (1992, p. 117).

While the negotiation of collective identities can be either explicit or implicit, testimonies from my participants suggest that, in the presence of strong nationalism and the on-going threat of violence and discrimination, national identity negotiation relies more on symbols or displays that undermine the (heteropatriarchal) status quo (1992, p. 118). These displays could include defying traditional forms of gender expression or celebrating diverse forms of queer life and love in media.¹⁷ As previous discussion of the “nationalization” of cultural productions showed, culture and media are also the forefront of critiques *against* nationalism and heteropatriarchy. Transnational LGBT cultural productions like the Merlinka Queer Film Festival, drag, or the arguably queer genre of music called turbofolk (Eurovicious, 2014) show that performance and artistic activism are ways to actively subvert national, gender, and sexual boundaries in the Western Balkans.

Additionally, and contrary to theoretical expectations, I found that neither Europe nor European Union are strongly resonant collective identity frames for LGBT activists that challenge or replace other facets of identity. However, the historical relationship between

¹⁷ An example of this is the project “Naša 4 zida” (Our four walls), which portrays the everyday lives of same-sex couples in Serbia (on Instagram as @nasa4zida). For an example of these actions in other national contexts, see the project “Glasnaya”, a social media project which fights gender and sexual stereotypes in Russia (www.glasnaya.media).

Serbia and Europe, as well as the on-going linkages between Europe and LGBT activism, mean that Europe remains a relevant frame (or foil) through which *Serbian* identity is understood.

4.2 Identity as strategy in Serbia's LGBT movement

"Think locally when you are fighting for your cause. This will translate to global improvement." –
Bogdan

"We need to put our national identities away if we want to be good activists." – Jana

This study initially presented an apparent contradiction between national and European identity. Traditionally excluded from the national identity, it is assumed that their human rights values would lead LGBT activists to align with Europe. The previous sections have complicated this straightforward assumption. Returning in this final section to Bernstein's political identity model, I show how the complex matrix of political opportunities, constraints, and identity negotiations impact LGBT organizing in Serbia. I found that activists advocated a shift away from *both* the national and the European, instead emphasizing a community-centric intersectional activism.

Strategy 1: Localize your activism

I concluded that the political identity model insufficiently accounted for the specific socio-political conditions in Serbia. This was emphasized most clearly by Bogdan, who said that the LGBT movement in Serbia "should not take for granted manners of struggle from, say, America. I think we should reshape how we fight in accordance with the local context...."

However, as several participants, as well as Rhodes-Kubiak, acknowledged, the political conditions of the post-war, post-Milošević era helped dictate the strategies and tactics of the embryonic movement. Luka, who has been part of the movement for more than twenty years, admitted that "certain values that we used in order to become free as LGBT people were imported from the West, from Western Europe... Maybe we should create our own way to fight, for LGBT activism. But I think what we did in the last 20 years, it was inevitable, to use a model that already existed to create some basic rights, which we did. It brought some results, especially in the area of legislation."

Bojan argues, however, that in light of on-going social and economic challenges within the community, advertising connections with the EU is not a good strategy, and that activists

should improve connections with the community. Dragana agreed, saying “it’s important to always work with the LGBT community, even while we are working with other groups in society.”

As Section II outlined, much of this “local context” is conditioned by the politics of state capture in Serbia. With no organized political opposition, high levels of corruption, and low levels of political participation, there are few opportunities for LGBT activists to access political structures in a meaningful way and precludes large scale mobilization.

For example, Bogdan pointed to the time-honored American political tactic of “going out to the people”, speaking with voters in informal settings to appear approachable and establish goodwill. He said such a strategy would never work in Serbia due to the low level of cultural dialogue. Widespread homophobia, especially outside of Belgrade, makes the idea of door-to-door campaigning seem laughable at best, and dangerous at worst. One large American NGO suggested recruiting prominent Serbian sportsmen to vocally support LGBT rights. Bogdan said he can name maybe 10 to 15 people in all of Serbia who would be willing to go on TV and talk about LGBT issues. “Public figures and influencers are highly reluctant to support anything that is related to LGBTQ rights in Serbia.”

Bogdan explained that his organization localizes LGBT campaigning through the use of social media campaigns. “Only a tiny portion of the queer community here is out of closet, so we employ social medias where a lot of queer teenagers or queer younger people are in Serbia.”

These factors directly challenge the categories of Bernstein’s political identity model. As I have shown, LGBT activism in Serbia is dominated by professionalized organizations. However, this does not necessarily equate to “strong organizational infrastructure.” A recent report from ILGA-Europe revealed that a majority of LGBT organizations in Europe, particularly Southeastern Europe, operate on miniscule budgets with few to no paid staff members. Volunteers and employees in these organizations face high levels of burnout in response to these and other conditions. Organizations and staff face frequent turnover (Howe and Frazer, 2022). Additionally, it is unclear to what extent organizations cooperate on larger movement initiatives. Access to the polity is a non-question due to state capture, with the ruling party certainly not responsive to or supportive of movement goals beyond the limited political gains to be achieved from it.

Bogdan’s point about local context challenges the idea of movement inclusivity and exclusivity, showing that, under conditions of political and societal homophobia, traditional methods of mobilization and inclusion are not possible or desirable. While certainly movement

mobilization takes place where it can, an online, social media-based constituency is unlikely to be representative of the Serbian LGBT population. So, to this point, the first two branches of the political identity tree are under contestation. This brings us to the question of opposition and whether it is “routine” or “organized.” Here, the answer appears to be *both*, as the goals of the LGBT movement are opposed by both political insiders like the Serbian Orthodox Church and organized unaffiliated anti-gender movements which operate transnationally throughout the region.

Strategy 2: Reject nationalism

Participants continually made it clear that nationalism—historical or contemporary—has no place in LGBT activism. Vuk said while there is a small minority of activists who think the movement should focus more on “being Serb”—using national symbols and motifs in their activism—he emphasized that the large majority “staunchly reject nationalism” and also are antifascist in their values. Bojan said much of the same, although neither named any specific individuals or organizations. “You can organize and frame your oppression in various ways,” he said. Some organizations and individuals in the movement “flirt with nationalism”, using nationalist symbols and emphasizing their nationality more than their sexual orientation or gender identity. “That is something that is unacceptable for me, using your national identity but not having a clear relation to your past...It's very important to have some basic, anti-nationalistic background, and then from that background you fight for LGBT rights.”

Bogdan said that, despite any contradictions he sees between LGBT activism and nationalism, it’s important to accept the diversity of the LGBT population. “They are everywhere. They aren’t just anti-war activists, but can be butchers, mechanics, people working in religious institutions, and as well, they can be nationalists.”

He acknowledges that while catering to nationalism might make LGBT activism more palatable to the public, he does not think it’s a good long-term strategy for being understood. “Nationalism is exclusionary at its origins, so I don’t think it’s a good way to be relatable. It’s good to show in other ways that you are a part of this community, of Serbian society, but this is not the way to show it.”

Bojan concurred, recalling a conversation with his father, who he considers an extreme nationalist:

“My father always asks me, “Bojan, why is the LGBT movement looking so...not domestic? Why don't you say that you are Serbs? Why don't you say that you are

supporting this country?" Basically, what he asked me is, why don't you flirt a little bit more with this kind of national consensus?"

Bojan argues, however, that this nationalist perspective makes his father a minority in Serbia. Catering to nationalism is simply not good strategy—pragmatically or morally—because, in his view, most people in Serbia are not serious nationalists.

However, these comments by my participants raised a question for me: Is everything associated with the nation inherently nationalist in the pejorative sense of the word? For instance, in 2015 Belgrade hosted two Pride parades. One was held by the Belgrade Pride organization, the other by a group under the name of Trans Pride. According to some of my participants, national symbols such as the plum¹⁸ could be seen at Trans Pride. To me, this symbol seems innocuous, but as my earlier analysis of nation building practices showed, even seemingly mundane objects are transformed and politicized as objects of the nation. For instance, Jelena Gligorijević wrote recently about the “nation branding” of Serbia’s most popular music festivals—Exit Festival and the Guča Trumpet Festival—as symbolic of the conflict between “European Serbia” and “traditional Serbia” (2021; see also Kuligowski, 2014). Ivan Đorđević (2016) argued that even the football team Red Star FC has played a role in the construction of national identity.

While it may appear that nationalist groups have appropriated many of the symbols of the nation, there are also examples of re-appropriation by the LGBT community. In 2018, the Queen of Belgrade Pride, Dita von Bill, performed wearing a traditional Serbian folk costume. This performance, which inevitably drew vitriol from right-wing and church groups, can be seen through the lenses of re-appropriation and resistance. In a later magazine interview, she said her message was that “regardless of your sexual orientation, you can respect and love tradition and everything that is Serbian and that our sexual orientation does not define us as anti-Serbs or opponents of traditional values. The message is that love is a traditional value, and that it is not violence and hatred”¹⁹ (Nikolić, 2018).

The idea that national symbols can be re-appropriated complicates the idea of rejecting nationalism. If nationalist groups are the only ones willing to appropriate national symbols and cultural markers, then inevitably they will remain in the domain of nationalism. At the same

¹⁸ Plum rakija (šljivovica) is the most popular variety of the national liquor. However, like many symbolic things in the Balkans, rakija is claimed as the national liquor in several countries, including Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

¹⁹ Translated into English by Anđela Marković.

time, LGBT activists are understandably hesitant to be seen as pandering to nationalism by using these same symbols and markers. The example of Dita von Bill, however, suggests that re-appropriation is a strategy which has not received full consideration within LGBT activist circles.

Matija advocated for a related strategy, which he called “de-nationalizing the national identity.” Returning to the idea of diversity in Serbia that has been so important in his life, he said that expressions of national identity are variable. “The nationalist story is just one of those stories, and there are other potential interpretations of national identity embedded in social and cultural life.”

Strategy 3: Tailor your messaging

As Section II detailed, the professionalization of LGBT activism has in many ways alienated the movement from its constituency in the community. Dragana, who has worked on campaigns for the law on same-sex unions, said when they started the campaigning process, “that’s when we understood that we need to make campaigns not only for the decision makers and for the general public, but we needed a campaign for the LGBTI community as well to help them understand what this law brings to them.”

Bogdan said when working outside the spheres of political power, a “human approach” is much more resonant. Thinking again about the same-sex partnership act, Bogdan said his organization leaves behind the language of international law and standards, but instead focuses on the day-to-day reality for LGBT families. Partners who cannot visit each other in the hospital, children whose parents are not recognized as parents in the eyes of the law, a person in poverty because they could not inherit their partner’s pension or assets when they died. He said that so many of the “homophobic talking points” are about LGBT people trying to get special rights above and beyond what the no-LGBT population has. So, he said when you can point out specific examples of rights that are missing, “this is the kind of thing that would resonate even to the strongest homophobe.”

This is not an entirely unproblematic framing. Going back to Bernstein’s idea of “identity for education”, the centering of the same-sex partnership act and its subsequent focus on families and children takes away, in Bojan’s view from the larger problems facing the community.

“In countries like Serbia, you have violations of human rights on a daily basis. You have a social state which is falling apart. There are very disturbing conditions with many problems, and when you put that in the picture and say, okay,

there are gays that can't marry, some people would say there are a lot of things that are worse than that.”

His suggestion is to focus on the still harsh realities for LGBT people, particularly hate crimes and hate speech. “Very few groups actually experience that, and people can relate with it in the sense that it is a very different experience. Maybe in that sense, we can communicate how difficult it is for us to live in this country.”

Another troubling aspect of appealing to public is the use of problematic tropes or stereotypes which are more understood and appealing. For instance, one participant said in her organization’s campaigns, they always “try to give a face to the stories we are telling.” These faces are usually conventionally attractive and feminine presenting, without the short hair and masculine clothing that makes up the “butch lesbian” stereotype. “I know it’s a bunch of stereotypes, it’s a bunch of prejudice, but it’s something we have to do in order to have [the public] on our side.”

Jones argues that these approaches have “non-trivial costs” to the LGBT community, such as further stigmatizing those who will not or cannot present themselves in “respectable” ways and overlooking the interests of relatively disadvantaged LGBT people (2021, p. 1). While the idealized “good gay” is certainly different in the Serbian context, (For example, in Jones’ study of LGB people in America, the “ideal” gay couple is married, monogamous, and has children. These first and last requirements are not possible for Serbian LGBT people) the promotion of certain, gender conforming LGBT families marginalizes those who are not partnered, who are gender non-conforming, polyamorous, or part of sexually alternative lifestyles, not mention LGBT people who are ethnic or religious minorities. While respectability is a contentious strategy for LGBT advancement in many political contexts, in Serbia “respectability” can be considered a form a survival, as people perceived to be LGBT continue to face discrimination, exclusion, and violence. Furthermore, as I argued earlier, the political and social climate for LGBT rights in Serbia means that themes which are (relatively) uncontroversial in other contexts, such as partnership or adoption rights, can actually be considered revolutionary in Serbia because they undermine the heteronormative matrix at the foundation of Serbian national identity.

Strategy 4: Remember the intersections

Yuval-Davis’ theory of belonging reminds us that individuals have multiple social locations which exist along various axes of power. Participants pointed to these intersections as they discussed the dynamics of movement. Marko for example, said he feels like parts of

community are privileged on different levels of identity. “I can’t claim this with scientific certainty, but men are definitely more active and louder in the movement...that’s what we also see in our hate crime reports. We get most of our data from men, which of course does not mean that more violations happen to men, just that men are more inclined to report incidents.” Based on his experience, Marko said trans people have not had the opportunity for their voices to be heard due to extreme marginalization. Trans people are disproportionately exposed to violence and discrimination, their economic and legal status is more precarious, and social acceptance for trans people is less than for other LGBT identities. Marko said those facing multiple oppressions have fewer opportunities to participate in activism. “A person needs to be needs to be empowered in some areas of their lives to be able to participate in activism. But if you are constantly brought down, for example, that whenever you want to express yourself you are pushed back, then it disempowers you to actually speak up or do something.”

In the same way that activists claim anti-nationalism and anti-fascism as inherent to LGBT activism, Matija said that activism should disentangle national identity from the “heteronormative matrix” by supporting trans-inclusive feminism, fighting against gender-based violence, and supporting all varieties of gender expression. Marko said this is a critical point, as much of the bullying and violence against LGBT people is based on gender presentation/expression—the *perception* of being LGBT—rather than sexual orientation or gender identity per say. “Because of that, even if we are cis, we can relate to trans people. And not just relate to them, but to know why this is the same fight. We must defend our conjoinment and not allow any decoupling of trans from LGB, which seems to be the goal of trans-exclusionary feminism.”

In addition to LGBT solidarity, participants frequently named the importance of economic empowerment and class solidarity in LGBT activism. Among the Serbian public, economic issues consistently poll as those most important, and Bojan said this should translate into the initiatives and messages pursued by activists. Returning once again to the same-sex partnership law, Bojan asks how much the focus on this law benefits the entire LGBT community.

“What you will find out is that the benefits of the law on same-sex partnerships are most useful for the people who own property, who have jobs with nice benefits. If you are working in a precarious position, if you work informally, if you don’t own property, your partnership is of symbolic

value, basically. I think that we need to rethink every policy to the class dimension.”

Bojan argues that class considerations should dictate what next steps will be after the same-sex partnership law. Marriage rights, or efforts to create safe housing for young people rejected by their families and those facing homelessness? Adoption rights, or anti-discrimination measures for trans people in the workplace? While clearly the situation is not as dichotomous as Bojan explained—the movement can have multiple priorities after all—he clarifies that for him, basic needs like housing and employment are more urgent than the perhaps “middle class need” for marriage.

Along with class and intra-LGBT solidarity, participants said that transnational LGBT solidarity has long been a positive example. Ivan joked that the LGBT people from the region are so united, they act like they are still together in Yugoslavia. Luka agreed, saying “we have learned a lot from each other, and we have built so many things together...it’s so inspiring. When we work together, it’s not just a simple combination of what we can do, it’s actually mutual multiplication of the things we can achieve together.”

The organization of Pride is an area in which regional cooperation is particularly strong. Luka said that all the countries in the region supported each other’s initial attempts to organize Pride, and organizations usually send a small delegation to the Pride parades in other countries. For example, in its bid to host EuroPride 2022, Belgrade Pride got statements of support from LGBT organizations across the region (Belgrade Pride, 2019). Another example of the transformative potential of transnational LGBT organizing occurred in 2019, when, for the first time, drag queens from Kosovo performed at Belgrade Pride and a Serbian drag queen performed at Pristina Pride (Zivić and Marinković, 2020).

What does a localized, intersectional LGBT activism look like? Luka does not know but says the model must be their own. “I don’t think we should combine nationalism with our movement but see what is positive in Serbian history that goes along with our rights. He emphasized freedom and diversity as guiding principles that align with the history and tradition of Serbia.

“Maybe we made some kind of mistakes at the beginning because the history of Serbia was all about liberation, all about freedom. And some activists actually think that using different national motifs as a part of our fight for LGBT rights would bring better results than using the pressure from the West and using values that we imported from the West.”

Marko says that, more than appeals to Serbia or Europe, everyday connections between people are what draws people to the movement. He sees more people being involved in LGBT activism, not employed as activists, but by posting, sharing, spreading awareness. He says that when people feel empowered and reach self-acceptance, they can bring change to their communities. “This brings more people from outside our community to our fight, because when they see that we are genuine people who just want to improve our lives and the lives of others who are in similar situations, then they join us.”

Section 4.2 Conclusions

Localize your activism, reject nationalism, tailor your messaging, remember the intersections

When viewed collectively, these strategies point to the same conclusion reached in Section 4.1, namely, that neither national nor European identity are resonant frames for LGBT activism in Serbia. Before I summarize my findings and present my conclusions, I come back to my second research question. Section 4.1 explored how identities are contested and negotiated. This section discussed how LGBT activists instrumentalize their understandings of identity to mobilize support for their social and political goals. Section 4.1 concluded that identity negotiation is a complex, multi-layered, and on-going process. By necessity then, the identity-based strategies used by activists cannot perfectly address the challenges faced by LGBT people in Serbia.

These strategies also bring back the questions of boundaries which is fundamental to the politics of belonging. As Section I detailed, the politics of belonging is frequently defined by the creation and policing of boundaries between groups. Bernstein theorized that social movements could either choose to emphasize their sameness to or difference from the larger population by manipulating these boundaries, though, as Taylor and Whittier point out, “the boundaries that are drawn around a group are not entirely a matter of choice” (1992, p. 113). In Serbia, homophobia and nationalism have erected boundaries of difference around the LGBT population, but as my participants revealed, LGBT activism in Serbia is working to subvert these boundaries by creating bridges across them. Localizing activism and tailoring the messages of LGBT activism to targeted audiences shows broader audiences how the issues facing LGBT people are relevant to them. Focusing on class, gender, and other social intersections links LGBT activism to related human rights and social equality movements,

gaining allies across the societal spectrum. And by rejecting nationalism, activists point to an LGBT experience and LGBT challenges that transcend the boundaries of the nation.

Collectively, the boundaries expand, or perhaps blur, changing not necessarily who “is” LGBT, but the number of people who are touched by LGBT rights. As Bogdan said, “LGBT rights, women’s rights, these are everyone’s rights, and the entire society will benefit from equal and adequate application of the law.” This shows the challenge of constructing exclusive boundary markers. LGBT rights are human rights because “LGBT” is not an exclusive category. There are LGBT workers, parents, and children, LGBT people who are elderly, disabled, veterans, and business owners. Taylor and Whittier theorized that a majority of interactions between majority and minority groups reinforce established perceptions or stereotypes in a way that perpetuates the disadvantages of the minority group (1992, p. 118). However, the testimonies of my participants, as well as public opinion research, show that this is not necessarily the case. The results of the 2015 study by the National Democratic Institute and the 2020 survey by Civil Rights Defenders both suggested that personal experience with or connection to LGBT people increases knowledge about and tolerance of LGBT people.

The conclusion I draw from this research is that perhaps the goal of LGBT activism is not to completely dissolve the distinctions between LGBT people in Serbia and non-LGBT people in Serbia, for in fact, there is much to celebrate in Serbian LGBT culture and life. Instead, the goal should be to disassemble the oppressive structures undergirding these boundaries: nationalism, heteropatriarchy, xenophobia, and so on.

Findings and Conclusions

In this section, I will summarize the findings of this study and present my conclusions, including the limitations of the study and possible avenues of future research. Recall that this study began with the fundamental problem of changing identities in Europe. Demographic, social, and economic changes in the twenty-first century have altered the political fabric of Europe and led to renewed fears about the loss of traditional identities. Sexual and gender minorities have often been the targets of prejudiced and violent reactions to these changes because their existence is perceived to threaten the ethno-heteropatriarchal foundations of the nation-state. These cultural battles are especially complex on the European “semi-periphery”, where social change and EU accession politics collide. Given the continued importance of national identity in European politics, this study asks how national and European identities are contested and utilized through the case of the LGBT movement in Serbia.

To answer questions about the contestation and instrumentalization of Serbian and European identities amidst this political context, I began with the literature on Europeanization, showing how Europeanization is a complex, multi-directional “translation process” between European and Serbian actors. Next, after establishing the relationship between national identity construction and heteropatriarchy, I detailed multiple layers of identity processes to show how Serbia’s unique geopolitical and historical positioning vis-à-vis Europe impacts the role of Europe in understanding Serbian national identity. My understanding of identity contestation and negotiation was based on the concept of belonging, with an emphasis on ambiguity, intersection, and politicization. For my understanding of identity-based strategizing within LGBT movements, I relied on political identity theories developed primarily from Anglo-American social movements, ultimately finding that these models did not adequately encompass the Serbian social and political context. I did not approach the research questions expecting to find a conclusive or broadly agreed answer as to what Serbian and European identities mean, nor uniformity in how they are utilized. Rather, I aimed to demonstrate the complexity of these processes amidst competing social and political forces. Due to my emphasis on complexity of experience, this study relied on nine in-depth interviews conducted with LGBT activists in Serbia.

Research Questions and Findings

First, I asked how national and European identities are contested and negotiated within Serbia’s LGBT movement. I found that Serbian identity is negotiated both privately and

publicly. Public negotiations remain largely the monopoly of right-wing and nationalist politics, with Serbian identity being constructed in a way that excludes LGBT people and other minority groups who threaten ethno-heteropatriarchal norms. Therefore, it is the private construction of identity that LGBT activists in Serbia are actively redefining and renegotiating what Serbia is, and what Serbia could be.

Next, I asked how LGBT activists instrumentalize their understandings of identity to mobilize support for their social and political goals, finding that neither national nor European identities presented a viable basis for collective action. I interpret this to be the result of two factors. First, national identity among LGBT activists was largely associated with exclusionary nationalism, which most considered antithetical to a movement based on inclusion and social justice values. Given the heavy academic and media emphasis on national identity as a casual factor in Serbian society, participants emphasized the need to move entirely away from this framing and focus on gender, sexual, class, and *transnational* intersections. In fact, the importance of transnational solidarity was a key finding of this study, and I found that the idea of an “LGBT movement in Serbia” was much more fluid than I theorized and contributed to the strong emphasis on intersectionality among my participants.

While my participants saw echoes of their social justice values in the European project, the hypocritical and often prejudiced politics of the European Union and the troubled historical relationship between Europe and Serbia precluded their ability to explicitly link these values to a European identity that would be resonant among the larger Serbian LGBT population. I found that participants did not so much contest or negotiate European *identity*, but rather *Serbian* identity in the context of European politics.

Conclusions and Assessment

These findings contribute to the broader discussions about LGBT activism and Europeanization processes by showing how Europeanization has had both positive and negative impacts on the LGBT movement in Serbia. On the one hand, Europeanization and the EU accession process have provided a language of human rights and international obligations which have arguably been effective in creating policy changes, but on the other hand have provided fuel for nationalist discourses which position LGBT activism as something “foreign” or in opposition to the national interest. It also provides further evidence of the unique, multi-directional relationship between LGBT activists and European institutions, as activists both benefit from the material and non-material resources of Europe while continuing to contest the politics of the EU. My finding that, despite theoretical assumptions, LGBT activists are not

uncritical supports of the European project shows the extent to which geopolitics and delays in the accession process have impacted Euroscepticism in Serbia even amongst its most apparent supporters. This has implications for debates about Serbia's role in Europe, and indeed, larger discussions about European identity. As Europe increasingly becomes composed of those traditionally considered "other"—people from formerly socialist countries, racial, ethnic, religious, and gender and sexual minorities—the perspectives from the peripheries will come to define what it means to be European.

Finally, my findings may also be helpful in understanding how Europeanization and identity processes impact LGBT activism in Serbia. I have already emphasized several times how professionalization is largely a result of Europeanization processes and has alienated the organized activist community from broader LGBT population in several ways. However, Europeanization, nor activists themselves, are entirely to blame for this dynamic. Many social movements have a core of young, educated, and socially liberal activists that is not representative of larger, more heterogeneous populations. This may only be more apparent in the Serbian case because Serbia has a large socially conservative population, much of which is based outside of major cities. Societal homophobia and the difficulty of being "out" increases the social cost of public activism and hinders movement participation, which is true in Serbia, Europe, or anywhere else these factors are present. Therefore, LGBT activists in Serbia will have to continue finding creative ways to mobilize their constituency in a way that is inclusive of all LGBT people.

In calling for a localized, intersectional LGBT activism, my participants echo the conclusions of Bojan Bilić and Paul Stubbs, who argue for a "heightened sense of activist representational responsibility", which requires paying attention to the class dimensions of exclusion, engaging more closely with LGBT people and other oppressed groups, and narrowing the gap between LGBT activism and individuals (Bilić and Stubbs, 2016, pp. 241-42). Bilić and Stubbs also call for a "commitment to reflexive activist-research", and in that spirit, I acknowledge that this account is hardly complete, and the analysis presented is based on my limited perspective as a non-Serbian who does not speak Serbian and has only lived in Serbia for a short time. Further research into this subject would benefit from additional explorations of the intersections of LGBT activism in Serbia. While the professionalized activism community in Serbia is relatively small and highly connected, there is growing group of non-affiliated, part-time, and online-based activists in cities and towns around Serbia whose perspectives and experiences are undoubtedly different than those of the highly educated and well-traveled activists represented in this study. Furthermore, the LGBT movement in Serbia

has been the subject of many academic studies and media articles, usually with the same small group of visible activists interviewed to represent the entire community. As I underscored in Section III, my study does not make any claims to represent the entire LGBT population, or even activist population, in Serbia. A fully representative study of LGBT activism in Serbia would certainly need to include perspectives from the less visible segments of the LGBT population, such as trans, non-binary, and intersex people, to more marginalized members like the LGBT homeless, Roma, or sex workers.

The importance of transnational LGBT solidarity in the Western Balkans also indicates a need for a multi-country study analyzing processes of identity contestation and utilization across the region. As I argued previously, Serbia is a unique case in the region for several reasons, so it is highly unlikely that the same combination of historical and political factors impacting national identity formation and the relationship with Europe will be the same.

Despite the limitations inherent in this study, I argue that my participants articulated important perspectives about what it means to be Serbian. In a Europe which has seen rising nationalism, populism, anti-gender movements, and xenophobia, I believe that understanding nationhood from the margins of society will become increasingly important as states will inevitably confront, contest, and ultimately redefine what it means to be a national citizen in the context of deepening multi-culturalism and diversity. In order to truly understand nationhood amidst identity crisis, we should continue interrogating these questions, and not just in spaces of “otherness”, but in the European core which continues to define who and what is “other.”

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Appendix A: List of Interview Participants

| <i>Code</i> | <i>Pseudonym</i> | <i>Description</i> | <i>Date of interview</i> |
|-------------|------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | Dragana | Member of LGBT organization | 21 July 2021 |
| 2 | Marko | Member of LGBT organization | 12 August 2021 |
| 3 | Bojan | Member of LGBT organization | 19 August 2021 |
| 4 | Vuk | Member of human rights organization and volunteer in LGBT organization | 30 August 2021 |
| 5 | Bogdan | Member of LGBT organization | 2 December 2021 |
| 6 | Matija | Former member of LGBT organizations | 4 December 2021 |
| 7 | Jana | Independent LGBT activist | 14 December 2021 |
| 8 | Luka | Member of LGBT organization | 16 December 2021 |
| 9 | Ivan | Member of LGBT organization | 16 December 2021 |

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

- Study Title:** Negotiating ‘Serbia’ and ‘Europe’ amidst the politics of nationalism and Europeanization: An exploration of identity contestation and utilization within the LGBT movement in Serbia
- Primary Researcher:** Meghan Poff, MA candidate
- Primary Supervisor:** Dr. Agnieszka Sadecka, Lecturer at the Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University
- Degree Programme:** MA in Central and East European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you would like to participate, please read the following information about why the research is being done and what it will involve. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The purpose of this study is to determine how individuals in Serbia’s LGBT movement understand what it means to be Serbian and/or LGBTI within the context of domestic and EU politics. Secondly, the study aims to explain how conceptions of identity impact the movement’s formulation of its goals and strategies. Your participation in this study is being requested due to your employment or volunteer status at an organization dedicated to LGBTI rights. You have been contacted based on a referral by another interviewee or your previous communications with the primary researcher.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent at any time. If you agree to participate, your commitment will consist of one interview conducted virtually for the purposes of health and safety. The interview will be no more than one hour in length.

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. All personal data will be replaced with a pseudonym so you cannot be identified. Interview data will be stored in encrypted files. Please keep in mind, however, that complete confidentiality may be impossible to ensure due to the relatively small number of potential participants. Please refer to the accompanying privacy notice for details on how the University of Glasgow will store and retain your research data.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrong-doing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University of Glasgow may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

The results of this research study will form the MA thesis of the primary researcher. The final study will be shared among peers and colleagues, as well as submitted for publication. Additionally, the findings of this study may be used by other researchers in subsequent publications.

If you require further information about the purposes of this study, or have any concerns regarding confidentiality and data security, please contact the primary researcher, Meghan Poff. If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you may contact the University of Glasgow School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr. Susan Batchelor, at Susan.Batchelor@glasgow.ac.uk.

Appendix C: Consent Form for Research Participants

Project Title: Negotiating ‘Serbia’ and ‘Europe’ amidst the politics of nationalism and Europeanization: An exploration of identity contestation and utilization within the LGBT movement in Serbia

Primary Researcher: Meghan Poff, MA candidate

Primary Supervisor: Dr. Agnieszka Sadecka, Lecturer at the Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University

Please tick as appropriate

- Yes ☐ No ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for Research Participants and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to interviews being audio recorded.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to interviews being video recorded.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that all personal and identifying data will be replaced by a pseudonym and my personal data will not be retained.

I agree that:

- Yes ☐ No ☐ My interview data will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ All personal data will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ My de-identified data may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

.....

Name of participant:

Gender pronouns (optional):

Signature:

Date:



School Ethics Forum for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☐

Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☒

Application Number: **PGT/SPS/2020/083/CEERES**

Applicant's Name: **Meghan Poff**

Project Title: **To be or not to be (European): Attitudes and Perceptions of Europe in Serbia's LGBT+ Activist Community**

Application Status: **Fully Approved**

Date of Review: 12/11/2020

Start Date of Approval

13/11/2020

End Date of Approval

30/09/2021

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection from the date of approval.

Fully approved

Means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Approval granted in principal

No data collection must be undertaken until the current research restrictions as a result of social distancing and self-isolation are lifted. You will be notified once this restriction is no longer in force.

Amendments required

Where amendments are required by reviewers, applicants must respond in the relevant boxes below to the recommendations of the School Ethics Forum and provide this as an 'Amendments Response' document to explain the changes made to the application as well as amending the documents, as relevant. Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in **block highlight** or **in red coloured text** to assist the reviewers. All amended application documents should then be sent to the ethics administrator by the Supervisor for the approval of the SEF before data collection can proceed.

Rejected

If your application is Rejected a new application must be submitted to the School Ethics Forum. The reviewer feedback below will indicate whether a similar future project is likely to be supported. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated. The new application forms should be signed off and submitted to the ethics administrator by the Supervisor.

Ethics in Research Commission
Institute of European Studies
Jagiellonian University in Kraków



Kraków, 14th July 2021

CONDITIONAL APPROVAL DECISION

for the project

To be or not to be (European):

Attitudes and Perceptions of Europe in Serbia's LGBT+ Activist Community

The Ethics in Research Commission of the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, having assessed the scope and consequences of research undertaken within the project *To be or not to be (European): Attitudes and Perceptions of Europe in Serbia's LGBT+ Activist Community*, submitted by Ms. Meghan Poff, hereby declares that the project meets the standards of ethical research as adopted by the Institute of European Studies.

The Commission finds that the applicant has considered thoroughly the ethical dilemmas that may be involved in their research and safeguarded adequate protection of all potential participants as well as their personal data.

Members of the Commission:

Dr. hab. Jacek Kołodziej, prof. UJ (Chair)
Dr. Magdalena Góra
Dr. Ewa Kamarad
Dr. Joanna Orzechowska-Wacławska
Dr. Kinga Sekerdej
Dr. Przemysław Tacik

On behalf of the Commission,

Dr. Przemysław Tacik
Secretary of the Commission