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**LGBT Movement and National Sentiments:
Politics of ex/in/clusion in Serbian LGBT community**

Abstract:

The LGBT movement in Serbia grew out of a feminist movement, which, during the 1990s, was one of the main pillars of the peace movement in the former Yugoslavia and Serbia. The paper examines the relationship of contemporary LGBT movement in Serbia toward the public and overt expression of national sentiments: (a) within the public discourse, but also (b) within the narrow subcultural circles of the LGBT community in Serbia, as well as (c) the way in which activists today see the social mission of contemporary Serbian LGBT movement. The analysis is focused on four LGBT organizations (Labris, Gaytan, Egal and BG Pride), which are, in a current moment, the most active and most visible within the public space of the Serbian society. Critical discourse analysis will be done on several types of empirical data: (a) data published on official websites of LGBT organizations, (b) media content related to the activities of these organizations and their members, and (c) in-depth semi-structured interviews with prominent LGBT activists of these organizations. The analysis covers several thematic areas: (a) the attitude of the LGBT movement towards mainstream politics, (b) the attitude of the LGBT movement towards the wars and the heritage of the 1990s, (c) the impact of war inheritance on the current politics of the LGBT movement (in terms of cooperation with state institutions, cooperation with other LGBT organizations in the region and the level of that cooperation, whether they open painful issues related to the 1990s in this cooperation or not). The analysis shows that within the LGBT community exists internal tension that shapes the policies of individual organizations towards (tolerance or intolerance) in the expression of national sentiments. These policies are partly conditioned by the generation gap that exists between members of the LGBT community who belong to the generation that survived the 1990s and were active within the peace movement, and those that were born thereafter, but also by belonging to the current political groups and organizations that participate in official political system.

Key words: LGBT movement, civil society, nationalism, Serbia, former Yugoslavia, generation gap

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

The LGBT movement in Serbia, as a part of civil society sector, just as Serbian society as a whole, passed through turbulent transformation during the past three decades. In particular, it grew out of a part of civil society related to feminist movement, which, during the 1990s, was one of the main points of resistance against politics of war and ethnic conflicts and the key network that supported creation of peace movement in the former Yugoslavia and Serbia. However, the notion of civil society, especially in post/Yugoslav context, is not unambiguous. Although it is, due to historical geopolitical constellation after the fall of Berlin Wall in the countries of former socialism civil society sector within public discourse accepted as a self-implied alternative to former all-encompassing socialist system, in theoretical discussions it is possible to discern at least two determinants of that notion: (a) in the first, so-called Gramsci-style variant, civil society has *radical, activist and political* character. As per that conception, the goal of civil society can be perceived through its contribution to achieving cultural hegemony that enables society integration (Pavlović, 2006:35). (b) in a second, neoliberal variant, a civil society is apprehended as a community of free citizens able to govern their own social life through associations and self-organizations (the view that is nowadays most closely associated with Tocqueville) (Bilić, 2011: 299). Civil society understood as such is mostly considered to be *apolitical* (Pavlović, 2006; Kaldor, 2003). And while, in the first interpretation, the civil society is spontaneously created space between the state and market, whose building fabric are grassroots citizens' associations, created on foundations of various *affectual nebulas* (Maffesoli, 1996:72-78), within which individuals are encouraged to socially interact and which they are

affected by. So emerged intergroup horizontal links (founded on various forms of social capital) that are formed on the basis of mutual trust and norms of reciprocity in order to achieve certain intervention in dissatisfactory social reality became connective fabric that links and mobilizes different social actors for activist and political actions. Crucial characteristic of such perception of civil society are the social actors' requests for redistribution of political power through radicalization of democracy and expansion of capacities for civil participation (Forsyth, 2005). Thus understood "political" civil society implies existence of active citizenry, readiness for self-organizing and opening possibility for citizens to affect political decisions (Kaldor, 2003; Pavlović, 2006). Contrarily to this activist version of understanding of the role of a civil society, there is a neoliberal concept (especially developed in the USA in 1970s) that equates civil society with so-called non-profit (third) sector. According to that perception the role of civil organization is not in limiting power of the state, but in supporting state and in downloading some of its functions (for instance, in the sphere of social welfare), that neoliberal state is trying to get rid of, anyway. In such understanding, organizations of civil society should neither challenge the system nor test its limits in order to change it, or at least initiate desired change, but rather they should provide citizens services instead of the state. Such a concept is directly linked with Tocqueville-style accent on importance of pooling and linking with neoliberal ideas on reduction of the role of state.

This ambiguous nature of civil society is especially significant in unstable societal circumstances, like those that marked the process of societal transformation within post Yugoslav region, affected with the destructive processes provoked by civil war and its consequences that resulted with mass pauperization. Researching the phenomenon of (post)Yugoslav anti-war and irenic activism, Bojan Bilić concluded that "term civil society cannot be reasonably used any more for understanding of complex geometry of social, political and personal interactions and resistance within frame of regional civil sphere essentially characterized by asymmetric redistribution of power." (Bilić, 2011:297). The reason for that Bilić finds in that: "definitional elusiveness and logical incoherence of that term enable civil society to include in itself ideologically and historically extremely divergent phenomena. Owing to its conceptual elasticity, civil society appears as a cognitively very accessible mean and depoliticized theoretical paradigm, suitable for masking of power networks that are often conditioned by foreign political agendas." (Bilić, 2011: 297-8)

Indeed, these elements Bilić mentioned define significantly the reality of contemporary LGBT movement and its (historical and political) contradictions. In Serbia, LGBT movement appeared in early 1990s. According to the testimonies of its protagonist:

“In November of 1990 several lesbians and gay males, of different ethnical and professional affiliations, started to gather in a café Moskva³, in Belgrade. Later on, these gatherings were kept in private apartments. The group for affirmation of lesbian and gay human rights and culture, Arkadija⁴, was founded on January 13 1991, when founding assembly was held.” (Nebrigić, 2009: 99)

Reconstruction of available archival materials imposes conclusion that beginnings of the movement were marked by clear intention to change opposing social context. That indicates Gramsci-style, on one hand activist understanding of the role of civil engagement, on the other hand a need for permanent subverting of the existing picture of social reality that ignores and refuses otherness, in this particular case LGBT otherness. It is interesting that in science, as Joan Scott said in its famous text “The Evidence of Experience”, “often recognition of a testimony depends on that if there is potential narration it would fit in” (Scott, 1991). In that sense, beginnings of LGBT activism were marked by efforts to constitute one such potential narration in which could “fit” experiences of LGBT persons living in Serbia, i.e. to articulate it in theoretical and practical sense and make it visible. Historical moment when those issues were addressed made it even more complicated, as witnessed by the words of one LGBT activist:

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

However, once named invisible social experience (of LGBT persons) becomes/remains testimony and “evidence on existence of otherness” (Scott, 1991: 777) and “factual nature of the difference” (Scott, 1991). The naming and describing of that difference opens possibility for its integration into social life, despite of a long history of usage of strategies of ignorance, social isolation and alienation that denying the existence of this particular otherness.

³This café was in 1970s in Yugoslavia a popular gathering place for gay population. (see: <http://lgbti.ba/lgbt-aktivizam-u-srbiji/>)

⁴The first LGBT organization founded in the territory of Serbia.

Challenges of Civil War

National, and from them deriving war conflicts that in early 1990s became reality of citizens of Yugoslavia, enforcedly changed borders of former Yugoslav state, its educational system, political institutions, social and everyday life of the population. War fury spread uncontrollably producing huge material, emotional, cultural and institutional destruction in all countries of former Yugoslav region. New discourses of violence and discrimination found their victims in multiple otherness, and for majority of LGBT activists that meant shifting focus of their political engagement from the issues of identity (relating to the political and social engagement to increase in social visibility and destigmatization of LGBT identity) towards social challenges of growing nationalism and militarism.

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

This general politic stance⁵ was also visible in activities of Serbian LGBT activists of the “first wave”:

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

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

(a) concrete consequences on a society involved in war events

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

⁵ Anti-nationalistic and anti-militaristic, authors’ comment.

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

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

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

- First – all women in workshop(s) are involved in spreading policy of peace, and that implies advocating the ethics of diversity.
- Second thesis is feminist starting point that personal is political.
- Third one is encouraging women that love women to accept their lesbian craving and say to themselves and to the others they are lesbians, although it is not always possible.” (Stojanović, 2005: 40)

Such policies dominated LGBT movement all the way to second half of 1990s. Due to clear ideological affiliation against the war, militarization of the society and growing national sentiment, LGBT movement made important part of politically aware civil sector that actively resisted mainstream politics of violence, hatred and exclusion. Because, as Bilić noticed, in war conditions often takes place entwinement of “both ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ components”⁶ (Bilić, 2011: 301), and that was the case with certain initiatives inside so-called civil sector, that inside public discourse actually was some kind of “normative repository of democratic values” (Bilić, 2011: 300).

Post-War LGBT Activist Diversification

Until second half of 1990s⁷ the civil sector developed considerably. That is visible also in a case of LGBT movement: in March 1995 founded was *Labris – the group for lesbian human*

⁶ Besides, Bilić considers that “stance towards use of violence” is key criterion for distinguishing those two types of acts.

⁷ In 1995 was signed The *General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, also known as the *Dayton Agreement*, *Dayton Accords*, *Paris Protocol* or *Dayton–Paris Agreement*. This peace agreement was reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, United States, on 1 November 1995. It was formally signed in Paris, France, on 14 December 1995. These accords put an end to almost four year-long civil war in Bosnia and

rights⁸; in 1998 started the website *gay-Serbia.com*, also a web portal for LGBT community of Serbia and Montenegro; in 1999 formed was gay-lesbian group *New Age - Rainbow* in Novi Sad; in May 2000 established was *Gayten – LGBT - center for promotion of rights of sexual minorities*, in Belgrade that same year were formed in November *Queeria LGBT*, the workgroup of Socialdemocrat youth, and in December a NGO *Istopolne studije*; in 2001, in October was formed *Mreža⁹ LGBT grupa iz Srbije* (a network of LGBT groups from Serbia) and *SPY (Siguran Puls Mladih)*; in April 2002 in Niš was formed *Lambda¹⁰ - Center for promotion and development of LGBT human rights and queer culture*, an organization dealing with issues of gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgender and transsexual persons (LGBT), in October of the same year formed was *Gayrilla - ad hoc, underground, informal group of LGBT enthusiasts*; in September 2003 founded was *Udruženje za promociju ljudskih prava seksualno različitih "Pride"¹¹*, with its primary goal to organize Parada ponosa (Pride parade); in 2004 founded were, in October *Novosadska lezbejska organizacija – NLO*, in order to strengthen lesbians and promote lesbian culture and rights, and in December Kragujevac LGBT group *KOD*, that soon afterwards joined Lambda...

In parallel with diversification of civil initiatives, both regarding their multiplication and their geographic dispersity, also appear attempts of their networking. Certain type of affectual connections between these protagonists already existed, and in very difficult social circumstances it enabled articulation of the resistance based on specific *affectual identification*, that create unstable *diffuse unions* that did not even require one's full presence. These diffuse unions were manifest of a specific form of empathy, which is always merely fragmentary (Maffesoli, 1996:73). This form of cognitive and experiential substrate that enabled "the meeting of the minds" (Maffesoli, 1996:74) and understanding in its strongest sense, lead the LGBT

Herzegovina, one of the former Yugoslav republics. For the citizens of former Yugoslavia that was the first sign of hope that the destruction produced by series of conflicts will finally end.

⁸Labris first acted as a lesbian section within Arkadija, later on it became independent group. The goals of the group were strengthening of lesbians, efforts to increase lesbian visibility and linking with lesbian groups from Eastern Europe (Živković & Kojadinović, 2005: 18).

⁹The goal of this network was exchange of information and knowledge and joint activities regarding promotion of LGBT rights. Operations of network ceased in October 2003 (Živković & Kojadinović, 2005: 25).

¹⁰Lambda activists described their goals in this manner: "opposition to every form of animosity towards persons whose gender, gender expression, gender identity and/or sexual orientation different than socially expected, removal of every form of violence and discrimination and securing full and equal integration of LGBT persons into society (Živković & Kojadinović, 2005: 27).

¹¹The organization was founded by male and female activists of several NGOs dealing with protection of human rights (Živković & Kojadinović, 2005: 31)

activist “tribe” toward the creation of various supra-singular or supra-individual realities (Maffesoli, 1996:75) in which life, once again, became possible. One of these supra-singular realities included a specific interaction with foreign donors that entered the civil society market sometime in early 1990s. On one hand, appearance of this new social actor opened new possibilities for development of civil society, but on the other it brought certain limitations, most clearly visible in new conceptualization of this part of social fabric materialized in the use of new donor “particular vocabulary of fundraising, project writing, capacity building, reports and retreats.” (Bilić, 2011: 309) that in time imposed as exclusive and alienated from needs of majority of community members:

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

There are opinions like the one expressed by Bilić, that under the influence of foreign donors constituted a new kind of hybrid form of civil society that „it would be better to talk about a *parallel society* which has perpetuated an accumulation of various sorts of capital, while at the same time marginalizing authentic grassroots initiative” (Bilić, 2011: 311). That parallel society is based upon “an intricate tapestry of private-public-government interactions that secure” to a limited number of individual social participants “a relatively easy access to state institutions and diplomatic parties” (Bilić, 2011: 311), and with that a privileged social position.

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

Despite these dissonant voices within LGBT movement itself, organizations that compose it keep on their work, but it seems from different political and ideological positions. Unlike activists of the first wave in early 1990s that have pacifism and antimilitarism as imperative of their political agenda, and concern for the faith of society they lived in as major

driving motive of their actions, contemporary activists of the second wave shape their own lists of activities and priorities in a different manner. The role of LGBT organizations they do not experience as a political one:

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

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

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

The role of the LGBT movement and its relation toward the recent war heritage inspired by national sentiment is of high importance in Serbian but also post Yugoslav societal context, as state agents and institutions failed to successfully combat rise of populist nationalist narrative that got new wave of popularity in that region in last few years. States of the region as well as civil societies also failed to provide deep reconciliation and remove post war trauma among which the narrative of self-victimization remained the biggest challenge. The slowing of the enlargement process and accession of the Western Balkans states to the EU could lead to conclusion that the LGBT movement is more actively taking part in civil activism and advocacy of human and minority rights in the process of the European Integrations, then in its engagement in battle against the social inequalities and inequities. However, paradoxically uncertain decision of the LGBT movement and its activists to abandon its imposed role of political corrective of the mainstream politics (that the movement play during the 1990s) led the society

of Serbia (and the protagonists of LGBT movement as a part of that society) far away from the desirable European integrations.

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