

# NEGOTIATING FAMILY: FAMILY POLITICS AND LGBTIQ ORGANISATIONS IN SERBIA<sup>1</sup>

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## A b s t r a c t

The paper presents advocacy efforts and attitudes of local LGBT activists in Serbia on legalization of same-sex partnerships. Key questions that I explore in the analysis are related to how local activists perceive this issue and how same-sex partnerships advocacy is related to the wider context of family policies and family reality in modern, neoliberal Serbian society and conservative, “anti-gender” narratives on family.

Key words: *LGBT rights, same-sex partnerships, LGBT activism, anti-gender, family*

## Introduction

Same sex partnerships are still not recognised in the legislation of the Republic of Serbia, while the Constitution defines “marriage” as a union between a man and a woman (Act 62).<sup>3</sup> The existing draft of the Civil Code (*Gradanski zakonik*) indicates that legalisation of same-sex partnerships is possible in the future, but through a separate legal document — not through changes to the existing Marriage Law.<sup>4</sup> According to the state’s *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination 2014—2018*, Serbia was obliged to adopt this law until 2019.<sup>5</sup> Also, there are two drafts of the legislation. One was proposed by Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) in 2019,<sup>6</sup> without any consultations with local

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<sup>1</sup> The text was developed during January and February of 2020, as part of the research that the author conducted as Early Stage Researcher on Horizon 2020-project FATIGUE. The author is also PhD Candidate at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, University in Belgrade.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <http://www.ustavni.sud.rs/page/view/sr-Latn-CS/70-100028/ustav-republike-srbije>

<sup>4</sup> Article 2214, page 558, Draft of the Civil Code, available at: <https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/files/NACRT.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Available at: [https://ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument\\_file/ad\\_action\\_plan\\_eng\\_pdf.pdf](https://ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/ad_action_plan_eng_pdf.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “Predlog zakona o registrovanim istospolnim zajednicama”. Available at: <https://otvoreni-parlament.rs/akt/3932>

LGBT organisations, while the other draft was created by local lesbian organisation, Labris, in 2010 (Gajin 2012). Both of the proposed drafts define same-sex partnerships only through the set of social and economic rights that are available to heterosexual married couples related to mutual social and economic support, joint property rights, inheritance, protection from domestic violence, etc. (see Gajin, 2012). Both of these drafts do not consider the issue of children — except in cases when one of the partners is a biological parent, which leads to rights and obligations for the child's and parent's support.

The draft law proposed by the LDP also explains why is it important for Serbia to legalise same-sex partnerships — to reduce the high level of discrimination and homophobia against LGBT persons, improve their quality of life without “damaging the others” and provide access to those rights that are already available to heterosexual married couples.<sup>7</sup> The overall silence about the topic in public was shortly interrupted in 2019 when publicly “out” lesbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, became a parent, with her partner giving a birth to their baby. While her colleagues congratulated, the LGBT community and organisations posed a simple question: how is it that she can do it and the rest of us cannot? Is she a legal parent to her child? According to Serbian law, she is not. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister herself still did not take any significant and decisive steps toward the final legalisation of same-sex partnerships.<sup>8</sup>

Surely, this legislation has to be observed in the wider context of family politics in Serbia, which have been extremely pro-natalist ever since the 1990s (see Drezgić 2010). Family is discussed predominantly concerning increasing the birth rate and the threat of the “white plague”, framed in extremely nationalistic and misogynist discourses (Drezgić 2010). The current government in Serbia does not deviate much from this pattern, proclaiming an increase in the birth rate as one of its top priorities. This decision is not at all supported by the development of sustainable social welfare mechanisms and economic measures that would indeed assist women and their partners in raising children. Actual population policies are focused on providing short-term financial assistance to pregnant women and mothers, but do not tackle the problem of the position of pregnant women and mothers on the labor market and their working rights (see Reljanović 2018; Krek and Veljić 2019).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., page 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Ilić Dejan: “Kratki osvrt na Igora”. Published at: [pescanik.net](https://pescanik.net), 22. 2. 2019. Available at: <https://pescanik.net/kratki-osvrt-na-igora/>. Radoman Marija: “Istospolne porodice — društvena realnost i izazovi”. Published at: [masina.rs](https://masina.rs), 21. 2. 2019. Available at: <https://www.masina.rs/?p=8691>. See also: “Pismo premijerki- otvoreno pismo Ani Brnabić, premijerki Srbije”, Labris. Published at: [labris.org.rs](http://labris.org.rs), 10. 12. 2019. Available at: <http://www.labris.org.rs/sr/pismo-premijerki>

At the same time, abortion remains legal in Serbia — legalized at the beginning of 1950s during communist Yugoslavia; the new Civil Code has announced the decriminalization of surrogate motherhood;<sup>10</sup> and biomedical assisted fertilization is also possible for single women.<sup>11</sup>

It is also important to perceive Serbian family policies in a wider context of actual “anti-gender” movements and their insistence on protecting traditional families from the dangers of “gender ideology”, same-sex marriages and an “unnatural” understanding of sex and gender (see Kuhar and Patternote, 2017; Kováts and Pöim, 2015; Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Lazaridis, Campani and Benveniste, 2016; Kuhar and Zobec 2017). Although crusading against “gender ideology” still isn’t present so much in Serbia compared to in other countries in the CEE region,<sup>12</sup> one cannot overlook the tendency of the current Serbian government to develop family policies emulating those governments (such as FIDESZ in Hungary) that adopted an “anti-gender” narrative in creating strategies for strengthening the middle-class, Christian, white, heterosexual *ideal* family.

Having all these aspects of family in Serbia, the aim of this paper is to analyze the initiative of LGBT organizations for the legalization of same-sex partnerships, the politics behind this initiative and how their vision of same-sex partnerships (and families) correlates with the dominant, pro-natalist policies and ideal of the traditional family model. In that regard, it is important to bear in mind that Serbia today cannot be described as a mere traditional, backward society in the notorious Balkans. Just like other CEE and Balkan countries, it has transformed into a neoliberal

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<sup>9</sup> See also: “Od populacione politike do podrške porodicama”. Faculty of Philosophy, video debate. Published at: [pescanik.net](https://pescanik.net), 4. 6. 2019. Available at: <https://pescanik.net/od-populacione-politike-do-podrške-porodicama/>

<sup>10</sup> Zakon o rađanju za drugog, Article 2272, page 568, Draft of the Civil Code, available at: <https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/files/NACRT.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Zakon o biomedicinskoj potpomognutoj oplodnji, Article 25, Available at: [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_biomedicinski\\_potpomognutoj\\_oplodnji.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_biomedicinski_potpomognutoj_oplodnji.html)

<sup>12</sup> The term was used in disputing the draft of the Law on Gender Equality in Serbia. See in: Ignjatović Tanja: “Gde su tu muškarci?”. Published at: [pescanik.net](https://pescanik.net), 24. 8. 2018. Available at: <https://pescanik.net/gde-su-tu-muskarci/> Also, in 2017 several prominent public figures from the academic scene actively opposed introduction of educational packages on prevention of sexual violence in the curricula, articulating it as attack on the traditional family values, parenthood rights and introduction of gender ideology in Serbian educational system. See: Antonić Slobodan: “Na mala vrata uvode seksualno obrazovanje u vrtice i škole”. Published at: [srbin.info](http://srbin.info), 11. 4. 2017. Available at: <https://srbin.info/pocetna/aktuelno/antonic-na-mala-vrata-uvode-seksualno-obrazovanje-u-vrtice-i-skole/>. Đurković Miša: “Školski priručnik za promociju homoseksualizma”. Published at: [Sabornik Srbsko-Ruski](http://sabornik.rs), 9. 12. 2017. Available at: <http://sabornik.rs/index.php/autorski-pogledi/943-djurkovic-promocija-homoseksualizma>

periphery, with diminished economic and social welfare inherited from the socialist period; a privatized economy and sharp class division (see Lazić 2011; Horvat and Štiks ed. 2015; Deacon and Stubbs ed. 2007). This is the context in which we should observe not only *family policies*, i.e. states' actions towards and for families, but also *family politics*, "*which implies a wider consideration of the place of families in the social and political life of a nation-state.*" (Ginsborg 2014: xiv). Thus, when thinking about the politics behind the idea of legalizing same-sex partnerships, we have to think not only about the *openness* of the state to respect the human rights of LGBT persons but also whether LGBT persons and their representatives — i.e. LGBT organizations — are aware of what family means in the modern Serbian society? Moreover, are they ready to challenge the idea of the traditional family with more than just a partners' sex, but by challenging the key presumption of the family in neoliberalism — as a middle class entrepreneurship comprised from two persons with children, economically stable and a substitute for reduced public social welfare (Duggan 2003; Cooper 2017)?

This question is already analyzed in the context of same-sex partnerships' legalization campaigns in the United States and Western Europe. Many authors, such as Judith Butler (2002), Lisa Duggan (2003), Jasbir Puar (2017), Melinda Cooper (2017), and Michael Warner (2000), emphasize that the legalization of same-sex marriages was a final drowning of LGBT activism into the neoliberal and neoconservative "politics of equality" (see Duggan 2003). By framing the idea of same-sex partnerships solely through social and economic rights that should belong to everybody, LGBT organizations failed to challenge the idea that the family should be the primary care-giver and basis for economic and social stability of the individual — not the state. What happens with single persons? Moreover, they failed to advocate for change in the paradigm about what *is* family in the first place — for the inclusion of various family models that do not necessarily include two persons and a child (Butler 2002; Warner 2000). The campaigns for the legalization of same-sex partnerships indicated the rise of *homonormativity*, politics that "*does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.*" (Duggan 2003: 50). Having in mind the overall influence of western LGBT activism on the local, post-Yugoslav scene (Lončarević 2014; Maljković 2014) but also the overall influence of neoconservative concepts of "civil society" in post-Yugoslav countries,<sup>13</sup> these criticisms have to be taken into account. Nevertheless, I will try to

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<sup>13</sup> According to Darko Suvin (2014), the term "civil society" was taken over at the end of 1980s as part of bourgeois democracy propaganda, *in order to emphasize lack of freedom*

avoid a simple reduction of the initiative on the legalization of same-sex partnerships in Serbia on its Western counterparts, primarily due to the specific context in which LGBT organizations emerged, developed and function now in Serbia and the wider post-Yugoslav space. The issue of whether we can talk about politics of normativity — the Serbian way — will be touched upon briefly, and, hopefully, by focusing on the legalization of same-sex partnerships, I will contribute more to its understanding.

## Methodology and Structure of the Paper

In trying to depict an LGBT perspective on the legalization of same-sex partnerships in Serbia and the politics behind it, I will rely on data gained from interviews done with seven lesbian, gay and transgender activists from leading Serbian LGBT organizations. The sample reflects a variety in LGBT identities, as well as age differences — the youngest interviewee is 24 years old, while the oldest is 46. The difference in age also reflects a difference in professional experience — some of my interviewees were part of the LGBT movement in the early 2000s, with a strong influence inherited from the 1990s; some were born long after this period, or were uninterested in the LGBT cause at that time. Also, diversity in age reflects different emotional/relationship statuses and experiences, which have been important for their perception of the initiative for the legalization of same-sex partnerships. All of the interviewees have completed higher education (a faculty diploma or equivalent), live either alone or with partners (not with parents) and some of them have children in their same-sex partnerships. All of them live in Belgrade, although the majority (five) were born outside the Serbian capital.

The structure of the interviews was semi-open, meaning that interviewees were given the space to take an active part in the conversation, discussing not only their personal and activist perception of same-sex partnership legalization in Serbia but

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*in officially communist countries (...) with the aim to extort return of opposition parties and private ownership over the public means of production* (2014, 151). Also, I would like to add Mulholland's remark (2012) on neoconservative influence on the shaping of civil society in the United States and post-communist countries. For Western neoliberals, the fight against communism was one of the top priorities (Mulholland 2012, 279) and, in the post-1989 era, the US administration provided significant funds for support of *free elections, independent media, the rule of law and civil society NGOs*, seen as priority issues that would secure a blooming of the neoliberal vision of society, as stated in the US government's 1996 statement of foreign policy: *Democracies create free markets that offer economic opportunity, make for more reliable trading partners and are far less likely to wage war on each other... The more that democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world, particularly in countries of strategic importance to us, the safer our nation is likely to be and the more our people are likely to prosper.* (Ibid, 280).

also other topics that are relevant for modern LGBT organizations in Serbia: the importance of the 1990s' legacy for LGBT activism in Serbia today; the perception of professionalization of LGBT organizations and the civil society sector in general; the LGBT community and its relation with LGBT organizations. Data gained from the interviews were used both as primary source information (especially in relation to the activities that take place in advocacy and lobbying for the legalization of same-sex partnerships) and for interpretation in line with the discourse analysis method, allowing deeper insight into the formation of various perceptions and discourses on same-sex partnerships, family in general and LGBT politics in that regard, from the standpoint of LGBT activists themselves. Secondary sources included the following documents: drafts of legislation documents; legislative documents; policy analyses; strategies relevant for family, marriage, reproductive rights in Serbia and other relevant countries produced by LGBT organizations and relevant organizations/institutions. It also included official statements and media appearances of the above-mentioned entities, related to the topic.

The following chapter will present in more detail the initiative on the legalization of same-sex partnerships in Serbia and perspectives of the interviewed representatives of LGBT organizations, also in the context of pro-natalist policies of the current Serbian government. It will also give insight into the development of LGBT organizations in Serbia from the early 1990s until today, presenting key issues and challenges, relying on the conducted interviews but also existing literature on the topic (Bilić ed. 2016; Bilić and Kajinić eds. 2017; Bilić and Radoman eds. 2019; Blagojević and Dimitrijević, eds. 2014). The third chapter will present the relationship between current pro-natalist politics and wider “anti-gender” strategies in CEE, focusing more on the context of Serbia and the relationship of LGBT organizations with governments' pro-natalist measures. The conclusion in the fourth chapter summarizes and discusses the key aspects of the initiative for the legalization of same-sex partnerships, its politics (or policies) and the potential of LGBT organizations to offer a radically alternative vision of family politics in modern Serbian society.

## From the Decriminalization of Homosexuality to the Legalization of Same-sex Partnerships: LGBT Organizations in Serbia and Same-sex Partnerships

One of the common misconceptions regarding civil society in post-Yugoslav region and CEE is that it emerged with the downfall of socialism. This “methodological nationalism” (Gordy 2015, 12) ignores the fact that many civic initiatives existed during socialist Yugoslavia, even ones promoting gay and lesbian rights.<sup>14</sup>

The first lesbian and gay organizations appeared in Slovenia and Croatia, and the first gay and lesbian film festival in Yugoslavia and Europe was organized in 1984 in Ljubljana (see Kajinić 2016; Kuhar 2012; Jurčić 2012). In Serbia, the first organization — Arkadia — was founded much later, in 1991, emerging at the beginning of a series of bloody conflicts in Yugoslavia and during the long era of Serbia's "blocked transformation" (Lazić 2011) marked with economic downfall, social deprivation and poverty, a rise in class differences and an overall dominance of nationalism and traditional values (Lazić 2011 and 2005; Dinkić 1995). On the top of all that, homosexuality was still treated in Serbia as a criminal offence up until 1994 (Vasić 2012, 103).<sup>15</sup> Generations of these early lesbian and gay activists emphasized the importance of informal networking that was established between these early initiatives in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia, and was continued in spite of the devastating social and political contexts in which they acted (Savić 2011; Živković ed. 2015). Based on the idea of solidarity and Yugoslav heritage, but also the personal involvement of some of these early activists in anti-war and feminist initiatives, even today we see an argument that early lesbian and gay initiatives in Serbia (and in other post-Yugoslav countries) grew from this "leftist" legacy, presenting unequivocal opposition to the dominant nationalism in these countries.<sup>16</sup>

This perception of the leftist, anti-nationalistic and solidarity roots of LGBT movement<sup>17</sup> in post-Yugoslav countries has to be taken with caution (see Bilić 2015

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<sup>14</sup> What is important is that these issues were not interpreted by activists in an "anti-socialist" manner, in terms that none of them actually advocated a change from the socialist system — more its improvement. In that way, the majority of these issues were treated more on a theoretical, not practical, level (Lazić 2005, 69, also Bilić 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Male homosexuality was punishable in Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia by the Criminal Code (Article 186) with the prison of one year (Jurčić 2012, 89). But, after the constitutional change in 1974, Socialist Republic of Slovenia decriminalised homosexuality, followed by Socialist Republic of Croatia (1977), Montenegro and Vojvodina Province (Ibid, 90). For more information on life of gay men under this prohibition during socialism, see Franko Dota 2012 and 2008.

<sup>16</sup> The example of this is documentary "Crveni vez / Red Embroidery" which presents history of LGBT movement in the post-Yugoslav countries, on the basis of "personal testimonials and political accounts of 12 feminist, anti-war and LGBTIQQA pioneer activists, who have shared their stories on solidarity and their contribution to feminist, anti-war and LGBTIQQA movement in these countries." The documentary is opened with scenes of war in Bosnia and scenes of violence at Parades in Belgrade and Split, as well as during QSF in 2008, indicating connection between war violence and post-war violence that occurred against LGBT victims of the post conflict society. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EatvM0UIQs>

<sup>17</sup> At that point, most of these initiatives did not exist as organized non-governmental organizations with strong financial support or structure. Also, they dealt primarily with gay and lesbian issues, while bisexual or transgender persons remained out of scope, until the 2000s.



and Miškovska- Kajevska 2017), especially having in mind that there was an intense split between anti-war and anti-nationalistic personal engagements and values and what was perceived as important among the rest of the lesbian and gay community in that period. Not all members of Arkadia were supportive of the anti-nationalistic, inclusive narrative of its founders, Dejan Nebrigić and Lepa Mladenović. As Lepa Mladenović recalls, “*some people started to laugh, and we heard sentences such as: ‘I don’t want to be in the group with Gypsies,’ and ‘I don’t want to be with Šiptari,’*” (in Gočanin 2014, 339). Finally, a decision was made (by Mladenović and Nebrigić) that the group would function with “*less members, since at that moment they did not have the strength to fight against chauvinism inside itself.*” (Ibid).<sup>18</sup> Faced also with a lack of support from other civil society organizations,<sup>19</sup> Arkadia continued to exist until 1995, focusing their activities on creation of safe spaces for lesbians and gays, dealing with issues of visibility, acceptance, even discussing the possibility of the legalization of same-sex marriages (Ibid.). Nevertheless, most of these activities remained invisible to the public, due to the general hostility of Serbian society in that period towards all kinds of differences.

The breaking point in the development of LGBT activism in Serbia happened in 2001, when a group of activists from Labris and Geten attempted to organize the first Pride Parade in Belgrade. Believing that the overthrowing of Milošević in 2000<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> According to Lepa Mladenović, it was hard for her to work at the same time with female victims of war violence and lesbians, who did not want to know anything about the war. See “Crveni vez” documentary, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EatvM0UIQs>

<sup>19</sup> In 1994 Arkadia was forced to leave its working space from the Centre for Women Studies in Belgrade. The office was shared with another project related to refugee assistance, whose team claimed that it was not “compatible” with Arkadia’s activities. The project’s claim was supported by its international donor, and the board of the Centre decided to cancel its hospitality to Arkadia members. The relation of the first lesbian and gay initiatives with the feminist movement is also often mentioned as crucial, but without precise information on what this relation really looked like. Mojca Drobnikar, an activist and founder of the feminist group Lilit, out of which later emerged the lesbian group Skuc LL, recalls that it was hard for lesbian activists to “find themselves” on the existing feminist agenda, since it included topics such as parenthood, pregnancy or abortion. Although feminists were open to lesbians, they were not “sensitized” to topics that were important for them (Gočanin 2014, 337).

<sup>20</sup> The regime of Slobodan Milošević was established in 1989, and was followed by the disintegration of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia through a line of bloody conflicts. During his regime, Serbia was placed under international sanctions, was actively involved in conflicts and war crimes committed in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The economy was destroyed and poverty reached its peak. The regime was overthrown after the elections held in 2000, and on the 5th of October 2000, with massive demonstrations on the streets of Belgrade, Milošević was finally overthrown. He died at the International Tribunal for War Crimes in The Hague, in 2006. His legacy, though, remains pretty much alive in modern Serbia. See more: Lazić 2011; Dinkić 1995.



and the establishment of a new democratic regime also meant a new era for LGBT community, they tried to organize a walk in Belgrade city center. It never happened and the event is remembered as one of the bloodiest on the streets of Belgrade, due to the severe violence committed by organized groups of hooligans and minimum police protection.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, this violence boosted the LGBT scene in Serbia, increasing the visibility of the community and pointing out that homophobia, discrimination and violence against LGBT persons is real in Serbian society. Thus, during the 2000s, other organizations working on LGBT rights, even outside Belgrade, were founded and developed with the assistance of international donors (see Sav-ić 2011).

These *post-Pride* LGBT organizations should be understood in the larger context of civil society in Serbia, especially after 2000 and the change from Milošević's regime. Almost all of the identified trends and problems in the development of civil society in that period are applicable to LGBT organizations, too (see Lazić 2005; Bilić ed. 2016; Bilić and Kajinić ed. 2017; Blagojević and Dimitrijević 2014). The overall "NGOisation" of the civil society sphere (Bagić 2016) indicated a professionalization of these organizations and their severe dependence on international donors' funds and agendas. The focus of their work shifted to advocacy and lobbying activities, cooperation with institutions and an overall lack of civic initiative: *"interests coming from the outside, identified and articulated by experts and NGOs as service providers, where members of the communities whose needs are addressed are seen as 'clients'"* (Lazić 2005, 80, see also Sejfića 2006; Stubbs 2007; Vlaisavljević 2006; O'Brennan 2013; Bilić ed. 2016, 2015). Completely dived into the human rights narrative and politics of representation (see Fraser 1997; Merkel 2014: 126; Moyn 2017; Kennedy 2002) CSOs adopted the aura of "emancipatory" actors, leading Serbia toward modernization, democratization, EU integration, protection of human rights and diversity (Bilić ed. 2016; Lončarević 2014; see also Listhaug, Ramet and Dulić ed. 2011; Bojičić-Dželimović, Ker-Lindsay, Kostovicova ed. 2013).

A very similar pattern occurred in the LGBT civil scene, with organizations focusing on advocating and lobbying for legislative improvements and LGBT human rights. Cooperation with institutions, i.e. sensitizing police, judiciary, social workers and medical professionals, became a prerogative, especially for those organizations who provided support to LGBT persons in situations of violence. *"Activism is not on the street anymore, it is in the courtroom that is the main frontline. When I was attacked, I realized that I cannot do anything (...) because there is no system. Today, activism means pushing for your basic human rights. It is a privilege to live*

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<sup>21</sup> See more in Kajinić, in Bilić and Radoman, 2019. Also, archive video on the first Pride Parade in Belgrade is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdoPQwB9erg>

*outside the system, and I do not have that privilege.*" (D. B, 36) Nevertheless, this focus on the issue of violence, human rights protection and the importance of co-operation with institutions poses several issues for LGBT organizations today (see also Buterfield 2016).

Firstly, it narrows the perception of the LGBT community as a homogenous group, constantly in a situation of violence and in need for protection — i.e. a constant victim of society's homo/bi/transphobia and exclusion (see Rexhepi 2016). This poses an important question: what is this "community" that LGBT organizations are actually representing and advocating for? For D. B. (36), *"The community is the people who share a certain experience of oppression."* According to another interlocutor, *"We are getting 0.001% of the community, usually the ones that are in problem — emotional, legal, psychological, etc. We are not doing anything on mobilizing the rest of the population, for example reaching out to lesbians in business sector."* (J. V. 42) Without trying to minimize the level of homo/bi/transphobia in Serbian society (see Stojčić and Petrović 2016), this insistence on the victimization of LGBT persons and the importance for cooperation with institutions implies that LGBT organizations largely adopted the role of "care givers" — i.e. services for those "clients" among the LGBT community who are in a specific state of need: concrete cases of violence or discrimination. Thus, the needs and problems of LGBT individuals (citizens) that are shared with the general population — unemployment, economic and social security and rights, free health protection, etc. seem to be out of scope for local LGBT organizations (see in Dioli 2017). What is missing is a frontal, joint approach of the civil society sector toward structural social problems, regardless of the identity they represent: *"That is the question for the whole civil society sector, where 100 organizations are working on the same problem — the identities change, but that kind of front does not exist anywhere in the world."* (A. Č. 29)<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, by focusing on human rights and institutional change, LGBT organizations are implying that institutions are *neutral* from the wider political and social context, as *non-political* counterparts of civil society organizations, both operating solely on a policy level. This technocratic vision of the state and civil society is crucial for neoliberal politics, embedded in the "politics of equality" (Duggan 2003). Based on the idea of a "third way" suppressing the extremes of left and right, *"presented not as a particular set of interests and political interventions, but as a kind of non-politics — a way of being reasonable, and of promoting universally desira-*

<sup>22</sup> One of the interviewees, A. Č. (29) also points out to the lack of will to cooperate with LGBT organizations among other CSOs: *"LGBT organizations are much more opened for cooperation"*.

*ble forms of economic expansion and democratic government around the globe.*" (Duggan 2003: 10) This approach is dominant among LGBT organizations in Serbia, seen as *"purely practical"* (A. Č. 29), allowing them to focus more on the concrete problems of the LGBT community in Serbia. Nevertheless, this insistence on providing concrete solutions for concrete problems seems to prevent their involvement in dealing with issues that are structural and sensitive for the ruling political establishment in Serbia, including then legacy of the 1990s, both in terms of nationalistic narratives and derogation of social and economic rights.

*"Our society is divided and, whatever you say, you will create an enemy. The sole fact that you are protecting LGBT rights is enough, without mentioning war crimes, 1990s, etc. For marketing and pragmatic sake, we should stop ourselves on LGBT issues"* (P. A., 42)

*"(Our organization) deals with hate speech, and (...) we should fight against hate speech based on nationality, but not in the sense that we are reporting it, but to raise capacities for the others who are specifically dealing with it"* (D. B. 36)

*"The war was done by politicians, right? Let them do that. We are the ones getting beaten up, let's deal with that first. (...) why would we deal with something that only raises the anger of the majority against us? (...) Let me deal with the basic existential issues, and we will easily politicize everything later."* (H. V., 46)

*"We have to cooperate with anyone who is elected in the government — finally, we do not cooperate with the person, but with the system and institution that this person represents. We can ignore the system, continue to hide, or we can say, OK, you are here, whoever you are, whatever you did, and you have to serve me now, in 2020. Yes, we have to be aware of what happened during the 1990s, but we also deal with generations who were born after, and have no memory of that period."* (A. Č. 29)

Certainly, this hesitation in dealing with the neoliberal politics of distribution established after 2000, the destruction of public property and increase in economic and social inequalities is not eminent to LGBT organizations — it is a failure of the civil society sector in general (see O'Brennan, in Bojičić-Dželilović, Ker-Lindsay, Kostovicova ed. 2013, 37). Nevertheless, these issues are important for understanding the context in which the initiative for the legalization of same-sex partnerships is happening — narratives of nationhood, reduced economic and social rights and welfare are framing discourses of current pro-natalist politics. In the next subchapter, I will present in detail the perspectives of LGBT activists on the legalization of same-sex partnerships, and its potential to challenge existing family politics in Serbia.

## “Light at the End of the Tunnel”: Perception of Same-sex Partnerships among LGBT Activists in Serbia

J. K. (24 years old) was the youngest activist I interviewed for the purpose of this paper. He currently lives in Belgrade, working for a local NGO. He is “out” to his family and friends — even publicly, — and decided to get “more involved” in LGBT activism after he volunteered in the organization where he is employed today. He thinks that the LGBT activist scene is conflicted and unnecessarily divided, and that there are organizations whose work and results are not transparent or visible — and this has contributed to the increase of mistrust among the LGBT community towards such organizations. But, Pride Parades that have been organized in recent years have significantly changed this situation: *“There were these older people, who were out like a hundred years ago but now we have younger ones, who are following and supporting these organizations.”* As a young gay man, he sees the legalization of same-sex partnerships as something that would prove him that he is *“No lesser than a straight man, below straight couples, just because of who I am. When someone is born with a higher economic status than you, it’s different, but this is an issue about rights.”* If he ever decides to “get married” the wedding would be *“nothing fancy”*, but it would provide him insurance in various situations — *“when one of us is in hospital, or prison, or any other difficulty... And when you’ve signed something, it puts some kind of pressure on you — you have to be better.”*

The wider LGBT community also wants same-sex partnerships to be legalized, and that is why legalization was one of the key demands of Belgrade’s Pride Parades in 2018 and 2019. *“People see this as a light at the end of a tunnel, although I believe that there are other important things to be done. For me, it is much more important for trans persons to have rights to documents. And when you open that one tunnel, you see that there are 50 other tunnels that you have to go through...”* Other activists I interviewed also emphasized that legalization of same-sex partnerships is based on the need that was recognized inside the community. For the majority of them personally, this issue is not important, since they do not intend to get married or have kids. Some of them also see it as *“fitting into existing patriarchal social values”* (D. B., 36); or as an initiative that *“no one is dealing with, since gay men are not interested — the issue is pushed by lesbians, who are completely invisible in the political or activist scene,”* (J. V. 42). P. A. (42) one of the prominent gay activists in Serbia stated: *“I am only afraid that we will get the law and, in a year from then, the media will publish that only three couples registered. And then we are fucked, because everyone will say how small and insignificant you are, and whatever else we demand it will be ignored because of that. Kids are tricky. But I can’t deal with that, I don’t like kids, don’t have them, and that should be pre-*

*sented by someone who does, as a personal story. On the level of the organization, we would never initiate that issue, I expect Labris to do that with women who have children. We can support it through the media."*

In spite of these hesitations and doubts on a personal level, and the overall reluctance on an organizational level in getting more actively involved in advocacy for the legalization of same-sex partnerships, all LGBT organizations in Serbia supported Labris's initiative and the draft legislation that was done in 2009. A. G. (40), a Labris activist, was involved in the process almost from the beginning. *"We expected that, after the adoption of Anti-discrimination Law,<sup>23</sup> this is the next, logical step, but it wasn't. The hardest part was to find a political party that would present the draft in the Parliament and push for its adoption."* In 2012, Democratic Party lost its majority in the Parliament and the Serbian Progressive Party took over power. In 2013, when the draft was finally supposed to be presented, a scandalous media campaign started, announcing that Democrats wanted to allow gays and lesbians to get married and have kids. *"They hesitated from the beginning but after that media attack they got scared and withdrew. It is a topic that is always used, beside Kosovo, as an argument for the defamation of opponents — the traitors who allowed gays and lesbian to get married and betrayed Kosovo. After 2012, we have a drama of the absurd: a prime minister who is a lesbian, living with a partner and they have a kid. She is also without any rights, or maybe she has some that we are not aware of. For the first time we have a politician in a position of power that can do something for this law, but nothing is happening."* (A. G. 29)<sup>24</sup>

The legalization of same-sex partnerships was, from the beginning, presented in a manner that wouldn't directly provoke the ideal of the traditional, patriarchal family. It never used the term "marriage" — according to the Constitution it is a unity between a man and a woman. In public presentations of the idea, they focused more on rights that should belong to everybody, like inheritance, joint property, so-

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<sup>23</sup> Anti-discrimination Law in Serbia was adopted in 2009, after long and furious debates in the Parliament, due to the opposition of some political parties on inclusion of sexual orientation as forbidden ground of discrimination. Nevertheless, the Law includes sexual orientation, gender identity and sex as forbidden grounds of discrimination. "Zakon o zabrani diskriminacije", available at: [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_zabrani\\_diskriminacije.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_zabrani_diskriminacije.html)

<sup>24</sup> In January 2020, representatives of several local LGBT organizations held a meeting with the Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Rights. One of the conclusions was that the Ministry will intensify its activities on "developing a draft of the legislation for the legalization of same-sex partnerships", in cooperation with local LGBT organizations. J.T.: "Ministar za rad održao sastanak sa aktivistima/kinjama LGBTIQ organizacija". Published at: [transserbia.org](https://www.transserbia.org), 01.02.2020. Available at: <https://www.transserbia.org/vesti/1653-ministar-za-rad-odr-zao-sastanak-s-aktivistima-kinjama-lgbtiq-organizacija>

cial protection, etc.<sup>25</sup> *“Traditional, patriarchal family is a wasted and empty concept, but it is not ours to attack it directly. We are picking at it, question it somehow, but I just can’t imagine that this kind of revolution and change of system is headed by LGBT organizations, LGBT or any other minority group. It takes someone who is in a privileged position, ready to put his/hers privileges at stake, so that some revolution might happen.”*

This prudence of LGBT organizations when it comes to challenging dominant (patriarchal) family politics becomes especially visible in relation to children. The hesitation to take more decisive attitude in the public toward parenthood rights of LGBT persons is a consequence of harsh public opposition to the idea that same-sex couples can have children,<sup>26</sup> but also of various existential fears that existed inside the LGBT community, which wasn’t ready to even think about parenthood, much less to ask for this right. The right to adopt children or have ones of their own is perhaps the most challenging aspect of advocating for the legalization of same-sex partnerships. This certainly does not mean that children do not exist in these units, so we can speak of same-sex families as “new forms of family” (Radoman 2019: 38) and already part of family reality in Serbia.

In general, parenthood rights of LGBT persons can be achieved through various forms of bio-medical assisted reproduction such as in vitro or surrogate motherhood (Ibid, 41). The relation between parents and children in same-sex families can be regulated through various forms of adoption: joint adoption, step-parent adoption, full joint adoption, or adoption by a single LGBT person (Ibid, 39). Although biomedical assisted fertilization is allowed for single women (Article 25)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> In 2015, the USA-based organization, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted a poll on the acceptance of the LGBTI community and their rights in 6 Western Balkans countries (B&H, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania). In regards to “same-sex marriage”, for 73% of questioners same-sex marriages are completely unacceptable. Nevertheless, opposition to this idea was mitigated once the participants were asked about specific rights. 39% of them think that LGBTI persons should have the right to visit their partners in hospital or prison; 32% agree with the right for LGBTI persons to have health insurance based on their partner’s insurance. See more at the following web pages: [https://www.ndi.org/LGBTI\\_Balkans\\_poll](https://www.ndi.org/LGBTI_Balkans_poll) and <https://www.slideshare.net/NDIdemocracy/ndi-public-opinion-poll-in-the-balkans-on-lgbti-communities>

<sup>26</sup> NDI research on LGBTI rights in the Western Balkans indicated that only 10% of respondents agree with the right for LGBT persons to adopt children. See more at the following web pages: [https://www.ndi.org/LGBTI\\_Balkans\\_poll](https://www.ndi.org/LGBTI_Balkans_poll) and <https://www.slideshare.net/NDIdemocracy/ndi-public-opinion-poll-in-the-balkans-on-lgbti-communities>

<sup>27</sup> Single women have the right to biomedical assisted fertilization according to the Law: “Zakon o biomedicinskoj potpomognutoj oplodnji”. Available at: [https://www.paragraf.rs/propsi/zakon\\_o\\_biomedicinski\\_potpomognutoj\\_oplodnji.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propsi/zakon_o_biomedicinski_potpomognutoj_oplodnji.html). Also, the Law anticipated the creation of a sperm bank, which significantly reduces the costs of IVF processes. Nevertheless, in March 2019, the Ministry of Health adopted the changes in regards to the se-

and there are announcements that Serbia might decriminalize surrogate motherhood in its new Civic Code,<sup>28</sup> same-sex parenthood is not present topic of discussion when local LGBT organizations are presenting the idea of same-sex partnerships. In the same time, they do recognize the fact that more and more LGBT persons and couples want to, or already have, children, “*and that has to be recognized in the law.*” (A. G. 29, see also Radoman 2019). How these possibilities are perceived by LGBT activists and what these measures mean for pro-natalist policies in Serbia will be discussed in the following subchapter.

### Negotiating a Family in Populist Times: LGBT Organizations and Pro-natalist Policies of the Serbian Government

So called “anti-gender” movements include various organizations, initiatives, political parties and academics, for whom “gender ideology” is an agenda of academic and activist circles related to gender and sexuality, implying the destruction of the traditional family and “normal” understanding of sex as a biological, natural dichotomy between men and women (see Jongen 2017; also Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Proponents of “gender ideology” advocate separation between gender and sex, and the right to self-determination and self-identification of one’s own sexual and/or gender identity, as well as the legalization of same sex families (Ibid.) The fact that these agendas are being presented to the citizens as “promotion of gender equality”, makes it even more tacit, as stated in a Pastoral letter issued by the Slovak Bishop Conference in December 2013: “(they) ... *want to convince the public, that none of us has been created as a man or a woman; and therefore, they aim at taking away the man’s identity as a man, and the woman’s identity as a woman, and the family’s identity as a family, so that a man does not feel like a man, a woman does not feel like a woman and marriage is no longer that God-blessed partnership possible exclusively between a man and a women. On the contrary, promoters of gender equality want the partnership of two men and women to be equal to a marriage between two people of different gender*” (Durinova 2015, 111, 112).

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lection criteria of the sperm and egg cell donors. Article 4. states those persons who have “history of homosexual relations in the past 5 years” are not allowed to be donors. In spite of the reaction from LGBT organizations and the Ombudsman for Human Rights, this criteria hasn’t been removed, and the Ministry of Health hasn’t made any official statement on the matter. The criteria are available on the following link: <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2019/27/8/reg>

<sup>28</sup> Article 2277, “Zakon o radanju za drugog”. Available at: <https://arhiva.mpravde.gov.rs/lt/articles/zakonodavna-aktivnost/gradjanski-zakonik/>



The opposition to “anti-gender” movements are so called “progressive” forces, recognized among various human rights organizations, especially ones dealing with women and LGBT rights; academics with a background in social sciences and especially gender studies; feminists; and leftists, all considered to be “progressives” or the “new left” (see Kováts and Põim, ed. 2015). Some authors (see Kuhar and Paternotte ed. 2017; Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Lazaridis, Campani and Benveniste ed. 2016; Kuhar and Zobec 2017) see “anti-gender” movements as an articulation of attempts to restrict or completely diminish achievements in the fields of women and LGBT rights, especially in regards to reproduction and same-sex marriages. Kováts and Põim (2015, see also Kováts 2018) see the conflict over “gender ideology” as more than a mere clash between human rights-based progressiveness and backward traditional populist forces (see Kováts 2018). “Anti-gender” narrative is using gender as a “symbolic glue” for articulating various fears and opposition to the negative outcomes of (neo) liberal transition in Central and Eastern Europe, and some of these do not necessarily have anything to do with “mainstream” gender politics (Kováts and Põim 2015; Kováts 2019; Kováts 2017/2018).

For Kováts (2018, 2019, 2017/2018) one of the key causes of “anti-gender” movements’ success in CEE countries is the de-contextualization of gender politics that are uncritically “copy-pasted” from the West into the post-socialist contexts, ignoring legacies of local feminist struggles and experiences (Kováts 2019; Kováts 2017/2018). Having in mind the fact that not even the word “gender” is properly translated into local languages (Kováts 2019) it is not so hard to understand the success of an “anti-gender” interpretation of “gender egalitarianism” as “*twentieth-century totalitarianisms and global terrorism, or even the deadly Ebola virus*” (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 797; see also Kayta 2018; Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Another problem, which can also be traced in modern gender policies, is their submergence in “identity politics” and ignorance of issues related to social and economic rights and inequalities (Kováts 2017/2018, 9). What seems to be the focus of gender politics today is the promotion of *gender identity* and “*ultra-individualism (...) based on the idea that gender is freely chosen, not constrained by norms, nature, and biological sex*” (Kováts 2018, 6). The “anti-gender” narrative offers simple answers to this criticism of “normal” and “natural”: “*They offer a livable, and viable alternative to this by centering issues on family nation, religious values and freedom of speech which is attractive because it rests on positive identification, promising safe and secure community as a remedy to individualism and atomization.*” (Kováts 2017/2018, 10) Thus, “progressive forces” have to turn their attention from politics of identity to the politics of distribution, in order to articulate a more comprehensive response to these “anti-gender” strategies (Kováts 2017/2018; also Mészáros, in Kováts ed. 2017).

There is also another important, but so far neglected, aspect of anti-gender narrative indicated in the work of Korolczuk and Graff (2018). The dominant understanding of “anti-gender” movements relates them with right-wing populism, especially in the context of Europe, both being based on the “politics of fear” (Wodak 2015), raising “*anxieties of people about the future of their family, and particularly their children*” (Kuhar and Zobec 2017, 35). Nevertheless, there is a strong relation between “anti-gender” initiatives in Europe, especially CEE and Balkan countries, and neo-conservatives that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s as “cultural programme” of neoliberalism,<sup>29</sup> promoting its main values: private property and personal responsibility, supported by “*shifting costs from state agencies to individuals and households*” (Duggan 2003, 12–14, see also Korolczuk 2019). For neo-conservatives (and neoliberals) the promotion and protection of a stable family and family responsibility against sexual liberties, single parenthood or reproductive rights became crucial in securing the transfer of social welfare from the public into the personal realms (see Cooper 2017; Duggan 2003; Mulholland 2012, 278). The neoconservatives’ insistence on family stability, priority and responsibility was a narrative that was in line with the neoliberal vision of society, comprised of “... *smaller, more efficient governments operating on business management principles, and (...) ‘civil society’ (or ‘the voluntary sector’) and ‘the family’ to take up significant roles in the provision of social safety nets.*” (Duggan 2003, 10; see also Cooper 2017).

After the downfall of communism and transformation into neoliberal peripheries<sup>30</sup> (Berendt 2001; Jakupec 2018; Horvat and Štiks ed. 2015; Suvin 2014) SEE and

<sup>29</sup> The dominance of neoliberalism as an economic system began at the end of the 70s of the 20th century, not only due to the economic crisis during the 70s, but also due to demands for more firm state intervention in the economy, which posed a threat to capitalist elites (Harvey 2005, 15). As a theory, neoliberalism insists on the establishment of a global free market, protected from the state — seen as a key guarantee for the protection of human dignity and individual freedom that can only be achieved through *liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills* (2005, 2). In practice, though, neoliberal freedom is restricted to “*private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations and financial capital*” (2005, 7) and it can be defined as a *political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites* (Ibid, 19). This new elite arose from the “new class of entrepreneurs” (2005: 31), such as CEOs, managers, financiers and other leaders of the financial economy and 4th industrial revolution (see also Lazic 2011; Dumenil and Levy 2011). Of particular importance for the new system in all countries where it was established, was the annihilation of a social welfare system, since any kind of state assistance or interference in the market (through legislative regulations of labor, for example) was seen as an obstacle to achieving full individual potential (see Harvey 2005; Mulholland 2012; Duggan 2017; Cooper 2017).

<sup>30</sup> At the moment when transition from socialism to “liberal democracy” began — 1989 — the model of Keynesian liberal capitalism, with a strong social welfare component, was greatly replaced with this neoliberal version, based on the idea of unfettered enlargement

Balkan countries significantly reduced social welfare and social rights on the idea of “social inclusion” and “social protection”, strictly separated from the economy (Lendvai 2007, 31). The publicly-owned social security system and health protection were mostly privatized or left to “alternative forms of social care”, with NGOs becoming key institutional partners in this regard (Maglajlić Holiček and Rašidagić 2007). These profound economic and social changes, inevitably, have had an enormous impact on the family. During socialism, women were able to have full time employment and achieve economic independence. This was mainly possible due to state-funded social services, such as kindergartens, day cares, public canteens, etc., which removed numerous housekeeping responsibilities from women, but also due to the strict legal protection of maternity rights (Burcar 2014, 122, Vilenica ed. 2013; Drezgić 2011; Čakardić 2015). Nevertheless, in the neoliberal model of family, women work in low-income economies with little or no rights protected, additionally taking over the role of family care-givers, replacing the social welfare responsibilities of the state (see Vilenica ed. 2013; Cooper 2017; Fraser 1997; Burcar in Kostanić ed. 2014).

Ironically, these negative trends of the destruction of the social welfare system have been presented as inevitable consequences of democratization processes, and a necessary step in the final “purification” of the socialist collective system, which did not allow individual freedoms and private entrepreneurship (see Berendt 2001; Roth 2012).<sup>31</sup> This new system urged the ideal heterosexual, nationally pure and patriotic, middle-class family as its pillar. Therefore, I would suggest that “anti-gender” narratives shouldn’t be analyzed solely in relation to illiberal tendencies and attacks on the human rights of women and LGBT persons, but in the context of the neoliberal transformation of CEE and Balkan societies, as new/old discourse on the

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of private property and personal responsibility for taking care of oneself — instead of the state. For post-socialist countries this meant the complete deconstruction of the known social protection system, labor rights, health protection — caused partially due to the strict loan conditions posed by international financial organizations, partially due to the senseless embracement of the new economic philosophy — and the eagerness to remove state control from all aspects of public life.

<sup>31</sup> In one of the rare empirical researches on populism and young people conducted in Croatia (Derado, Dergić and Međugorac 2015), young participants in the research — born long after the period of Yugoslavia and its dissolution — expressed *nostalgia for a more egalitarian economic system, or at least support for its fundamental elements, such as full employment, social housing, minimal social inequalities and overreaching economic and work security. In addition, most of our interviewees spoke negatively of the current economic situation and about the rising economic inequalities and poverty, which some perceive as the result of Croatia’s transition to a market economy and its accession to the European Union.* (2015, 156)

family and its role as a key replacement for the lost social welfare in post-socialist, neoliberal peripheries.

## The Strange Case of Surrogate Motherhood: Pro-natalism and LGBT Organizations in Serbia

The thing that connects current governmental politics of the “Law and Justice” Party (PiS) in Poland, the “Hungarian Civil Alliance” (FIDESZ) in Hungary and the “Serbian Progressive Party” in Serbia is their passionate devotion to the strengthening of the family and, consequently, the development of effective pro-natal strategies. In April 2016, Poland launched its “Family 500+” program, with the aim to “improve the financial situation of families and increase the fertility rate” in the country, by securing tax-free benefits for families with children.<sup>32</sup> The Hungarian government introduced its own family strategy: announcing that an interest-free, all-purpose loan would be granted to every married woman between the ages of 18 and 40 years and employed for a minimum of three years, and annulled in the case that she has a third child; subsidies for purchasing a home for families with two or more children; exemption from personal income tax for mothers of four or more children; and a non-repayable grant for purchasing a car for families with three or more children.<sup>33</sup> Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, also in 2019 proclaimed an increase of the birth rate as a top-priority for the current government, which is to be achieved by set of actionable measures including financial aid to families with three or more children and other social benefits. The existing population policies provide financial assistance in accordance with the number of children in the family; a one-time financial assistance for the gaining of baby equipment; compensation for maternity leave; and allowing bio-medical fertility assistance at the state’s expense for the couples without children.<sup>34</sup>

Governments and officials of Hungary, Serbia and Poland also exchanged their experiences and ideas on strategies for increasing the birth rate at international conferences.<sup>35</sup> Apparently, they are united in the final aim of these initiatives — to in-

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<sup>32</sup> See in: “Evaluating 500+ Program in Poland”. Published at: 4liberty.eu, 27. 6. 2019. Available at: <http://4liberty.eu/evaluating-500-program-in-poland/>

<sup>33</sup> See in: “All you need to know about the latest in Hungary’s pro-family policy”. Published at: [fidesz-eu.hu](https://fidesz-eu.hu), 19. 2. 2019. Available at: <https://fidesz-eu.hu/en/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-latest-in-hungarys-pro-family-policy>

<sup>34</sup> See in: “Mere populacione politike”. Published at: [mdpp.gov.rs](http://mdpp.gov.rs). Available at: <http://www.mdpp.gov.rs/latinica/populaciona-politika-mere.php>

<sup>35</sup> I am referring to the Third Demographic Summit held in Budapest in September 2019, where high representatives of the Hungarian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Czech and Slovak governments took part. See more in: TANJUG: “Vučić sa Orbanom u Budimpešti”. Published at

crease the number of “our” nation (white, Christian, Hungarian, Polish, Serbian) against the enemy (immigrants, Roma, Muslims, Albanians). Also, their joint approach is not based on policies of family planning, whose focus is on the improvement of overall social and economic conditions that would encourage couples to decide to have children. Instead, they push pro-natalist politics, which imply a direct influence of the state on this decision through taking restrictive (or even punishable) measures (see Drezgić 2011). For example, three years after its launching “Family 500+” in Poland, it has proved to be a failure: it did not increase the fertility rate or improve the financial situation for poor families, but it did contribute to the withdrawal of thousands of women with low-income jobs from the labor market and imposed additional expenses on the public budget. Also, none of these strategies seriously challenges the issue of labor rights and legal financial compensation for pregnant women and mothers, which directly targets the business sector. Basically, the proposed measures indicate that having children is not a matter of individual choice, but of personal and national responsibility, which is conveniently in line with neoliberal family values, as envisioned during the second half of the 20th century.

In the Serbian context, the government’s concern for the survival of the family went even further, with the announcement that surrogate motherhood will be decriminalized in its new Civic Code, as part of the government’s efforts to increase natality (Dekić 2019). Although it presents one of the most controversial methods of biomedical assisted fertilization (van den Akker 2017), mainstream media in Serbia presented it as assistance to childless, heterosexual, well-off Serbian couples to finally “gain descendants” (see Dekić 2019; Vilenica 2019). The opposite voices came from feminist circles and representatives of women CSOs, for whom the surrogacy presents the legalization of trafficking women and children, opening up possibilities for severe abuse and misuse (Macanović 2019).

Nevertheless, the voices that remained completely absent from the public debate are those for whom surrogacy might bring the most benefits — LGBT persons. Surrogacy can provide for gay couples to have a child that will bear the genetic material of one of the parents; lesbian couples can also use this method, with one partner carrying the pregnancy, and the other donating the egg cell. For transgender persons who wish to become parents, surrogacy is even more important, having in mind that medical transition implies forced sterilization. Moreover, surrogacy essen-

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rts.rs, 4. 9. 2019. Available at: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3649119/vucic-sa-orbanom-u-budimpesti.html>. Also, “Demographic Summit to be held in Budapest for the third time”. Published by the Ministry of Human Capacities, Hungary, 2 .9. 2019. Available at: <https://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-human-resources/news/demographics-summit-to-be-held-in-budapest-for-the-third-time>

tially deconstructs the idea of the traditional family, founded in blood relations and “nature”. There is nothing *natural* or *traditional* in surrogacy — it changes the idea of motherhood (and parenthood) by strictly separating its biological aspect from the social one. The act of reproduction is not based on heterosexual sex, resulting in pregnancy and birth of new members of the family and, consequently, the nation (van den Akker 2017, 6, also Dekić 2019). Although current draft law on surrogacy in Serbia does not mention LGBT persons as possible users of this method, it leaves place for various interpretation of Act 2277, which states that a single man or woman can use surrogacy if they can prove “especially justified reasons” for their wish to become single parents.

In spite of this, I would argue, remarkable chance to challenge the traditional family perspective, most of LGBT organizations in Serbia remained silent on the issue, and lesbians, gays and transgender persons were not even mentioned as possible users of surrogate motherhood. For my interlocutors, that was a wise thing to do, since it would only initiate a backlash among the public if gays and lesbians started to advocate for surrogate motherhood and talk about children: *“I am OK with that as long as there is no misuse or abuse of any kind. But, we are not the ones who should be talking about it (...) there are other, more burning issues to be taken care of.”* (A. Č. 29). Labris also remained silent, partially because of the fact that values or the organization are based in radical feminism which harshly opposes the idea of surrogacy, but also because they estimated that their voice would not contribute to the debate: *“It would only cause a pointless backlash, with right-wing voices over ours. We will get scared and withdraw from the public again. And yes, that is terrible because all these important processes are happening in half-light — some men in some working groups, deciding about something without taking into account all aspects of the problem. But, that is our experience — it’s best if you can avoid public discussion and do everything under the table.”* (A. G. 40).

A. G. also points out that even these positive legislative changes, present a possibility for those LGBT persons and couples who are well-off financially, and who can *“pay the sperm bank, in vitro process or surrogacy. Not everyone can afford that.”* She, herself, is a biological mother of three, living with her female partner, which remains completely invisible in terms of her family and partnership rights. *“She was not allowed to see the babies in the maternity hospital, she cannot take them anywhere without me, because she is not a ‘legal’ parent. But, she is their mother, and if something happens to the two of us, I want her rights to be insured and secured,”* A. G. said. For her, it is equally important to have same sex partnerships legalized, as well as to have state’s assistance and secured economic and social rights as a mother: *“Legally, I am recognized as single mother. Based on that position, I have received financial help from the state that was minimal, securing*

*only partially basic necessities for the babies. I can't afford a babysitter, so they are going to a public kindergarten, in which one educator is taking care of 30 children. But I am not a single mother. I have support from my family, my partner. And that is why I want my family to become recognized for what it is, to have that security,"* says A. G.

At the moment, the advocacy campaign for the legalization of same sex partnerships in Serbia includes three strategic litigations on discrimination. Based on the example of Italy,<sup>36</sup> three same-sex couples have filed a complaint on discrimination in regards to marriage rights on the basis of sexual orientation, and is heading toward European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg. *"If we manage to avoid any kind of possible crazy situations over Kosovo, the legislation will happen. It is only a question of whether we will manage to add amendments on children or not,"* A.G. concludes.

## Conclusion

The idea that two men or two women could be joined in marriage and have children seemed impossible until the end of the 20th century. Also, the idea that *"children have no right to the property of their parents, or parents to the property of their children"* (Ginsborg 2014, 31) prompted in Family Code in post-revolutionary Russia in 1918, seems impossible, even unnatural, in the 21st century. However radical these visions of family and family relations might seem, they were both mitigated in contact with reality. The Russian government adopted amendments to the Code which allowed the inheritance of smaller properties (Ibid.). Advocacy for legalization of same-sex families did not even question issues related to property rights, inheritance, economic and social inequality, urging with the rise of neoliberal hegemony: it just slides into the ideal of a *normal, well-off* neoliberal family model, disregarding its injustices and limitations. Thus, when discussing the final success of the advocacy campaign for the legalization of same -sex marriages in the United States, it is worth of noting Melinda Cooper's (2017) insight that two neoliberal theoreticians, Richard A. Posner and Tomas J. Philipson were pioneers of advocating "gay marriage" as an effective exit strategy for the state from providing social and health care to the persons infected with HIV and AIDS (2017, 173). In this

<sup>36</sup> The litigation is based on the case of Orlandi and others vs. Italy: "The applicants alleged that the authorities' refusal to register their marriages contracted abroad, and more generally the impossibility of obtaining legal recognition of their relationship, in so far as the Italian legal framework did not allow for marriage between persons of the same sex nor did it provide for any other type of union which could give them legal recognition, breached their rights under Articles 8, 12 and 14." Full information on the case is available at the following link: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-179547%22%5D%7D>



way, the care given to infected members of gay and lesbian community was transferred from the state and public sphere into the sphere of family responsibility and privacy (Ibid, 210). Family — regardless of its members' sex and gender identity — became the central point of social welfare, and a pillar of social and economic sustainability of the individual.

Another aspect of “gay marriage” that has to be taken into account, especially in relation to the rise of right-wing ideologies in Europe, is its presentation as an “*ideal of European values*” (Puar 2017, 20) of tolerance, diversity, liberal freedoms that have to be protected against regressive and violent *others* (see Brown 2006; also Rexhepi 2016). Defining it as “homonationalism”, Jasbir Puar (2017) also sees this trend as part of a normalization process of gay and lesbian identities, due to which “homosexuality” becomes a legitimate part of nationhood, of *us*. In this way, Western democracies provide themselves with the aura of “*liberty fortresses*”, “*defenders of civilization and tolerance*” (Puar 2017:21) against the backward, conservative, and fanatical other — Muslims, Arabs, Asians, the East — everyone who does not belong to the white, Christian entity. Moreover, these perceptions seem to be accepted by LGBT mainstream organizations (as well as LGBT voters in these countries), eager to protect LGBT human rights in “intolerant” and “repressive” others, but remain silent when human rights of “others” are being violated by the same system that respects rights of sexual minorities (see also Bruster, 2015. 23).<sup>37</sup>

It can be stated that the key role of the family in Serbia is to replace public social welfare and sustain the neoliberal ideal of private property and personal responsibility. Unfortunately, in this regard, the sharp contrast that seems to exist between “anti-gender” and “progressive” forces is blurred, since none of these actually proposes strategies that would seriously challenge these values and offer a radi-

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<sup>37</sup> In regard to the ambiguous relationship between right wing parties and LGBTIQI persons, it is important to remind ourselves that the former leader of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a right-wing party, is Alice Weidel, a publicly out lesbian, who has very “controversial” attitudes toward immigration, but also on the introduction of sex education in schools. See more at: <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/alice-weidel-lesbian-against-gay-rights>. Also, in Serbia, since 2017, Ana Brnabić, also a publicly out lesbian is prime-minister, closely attached to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, has highly controversial attitudes toward Serbia's role in the wars during the breakup of SFRY in the 90s. Brnabić herself stated that there was no genocide in Srebrenica, but a “terrible” war crime (see at: <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/alice-weidel-lesbian-against-gay-rights>). She also does not see Serbia as a “homophobic country” (see at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40297480>). This statement has been in the public focus since the 21st of February 2019, because her partner gave birth to their son; the media and LGBTIQI organizations are asking the question: can she be a legal parent to the child, bearing in mind that Serbia does not recognise same-sex partnerships or adoption rights for gay and lesbian couples? See more at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47312826>

cally alternative vision of family politics. Just a glance at the drafts of the law on the legalization of same-sex partnerships in Serbia might induce us that similar patterns are happening, as in Western democracies. The legalization of same-sex partnerships will secure social and economic rights and benefits for gays and lesbians, making them equal to heterosexual partnerships, contributing to the reduction of homophobia in Serbian society and, finally, Serbia's EU integration processes. Social and economic rights and benefits for those who live outside the registered partnership (single persons, single parents, "chosen families", etc.) remain out of the scope of the same-sex partnership paradigm. Critical interpretations of EU processes are also not on the agenda of advocating same-sex partnerships in Serbia.

The current initiative of Serbian LGBT organizations on the legalization of same-sex partnerships does not present a real alternative to the government's pro-natalist policies, primarily because they do not perceive themselves as carriers of this kind of revolution in family politics. Fear of violence and "backlash" were indicated by several of my interviewees, emphasizing the negative consequences of such a move — withdrawal and marginalization from and in the public sphere, which might bring into question all other aspects of their work. Also, as Dušan Maljković (2017, 321) rightfully claims, there is a significant shift in the Serbian right-wing paradigm on LGBT rights — the new border that cannot be exceeded are not Pride parades, but the legalization of same-sex partnerships and adoption of children. LGBT organizations in Serbia seem to be reluctant in opening this frontline, arguing that family rights should be advocated "under the table". Having in mind overall homo/bi/transphobia in Serbian society and public reluctance to the idea of same-sex families, this might seem as rational decision.

Nevertheless, this narrow approach prevents LGBT organizations from tackling more structural issues concerning family policies in Serbia, such as the lack of adequate and sufficient social and economic support for families with children, the protection of maternal rights, as well as working rights of mothers. Once we realize that there are gay and lesbian families with children, these issues become extremely important. Although interviewees were aware of this reality, the way in which same-sex partnerships are portrayed at the moment indicates that they are economically well-off, secured in terms of their social rights, and that state's assistance for raising a family is not needed. The remark of one of my interviewers, a representative of Labris, that creating a family through biomedically assisted fertilization processes is extremely expensive and unreachable for the majority of LGBT persons, is extremely important. Thus, the hesitation of LGBT organizations to get involved in debates over these issues is even more surprising. Another aspect of pro-natalist policies in Serbia is the one related to the protection of the nation, which can be defined as a legacy of the 1990s (see Drezgić 2011; Krek and Veljan-

ović 2019). The initiative on the legalization of same-sex partnerships ignores this issue, too. This leaves us with the question: if the current government accepts same-sex families and legalizes their existence, does that mean that children brought up in these families are equally valuable in defending Kosovo, or not? Is that an acceptable option for same-sex parents, or not?<sup>38</sup>

Having all these aspects of the initiative on the legalization of same-sex partnerships in Serbia, we might conclude that LGBT organizations have failed in providing a radically alternative vision of family politics. As a matter of fact, we cannot even speak about *politics* in this regard, since they are not offering a different vision of the family and its place in Serbian society, but a set of policy measures (such as draft laws, advocacy campaigns, public campaigns) that are more applicable to the overall context in which these organizations operate — a highly technocratic and neo-conservative vision of state and civil society, focused solely on the needs of *our* group. The creation of family politics would comprehend, for example, the inclusion of various interest groups and their family rights or pressures on the state to shift from pro-natalist policies based on nationhood, misogyny and restrictive social and economic measures towards mothers to the more inclusive and sustainable politics of family planning. It would also have to include topics that are already addressed by LGBT organizations, such as family violence against LGBT members, violence in same-sex partnerships, or the protection of older (LGBT) members of the family.

Nevertheless, this comprehensive approach to the family is not happening, at least not at the moment. Although LGBT activists I have talked to are aware of all the shortcomings and negative aspects of the traditional family model, as well as pro-natalist policies that are pushing for it, they somehow believe that this model will eventually fall apart by itself, and that their work will at least contribute to its abbreviation.

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<sup>38</sup> I am referring to the speech of Aleksandar Vučić, in which he presented his vision of demography in Serbia in which he stated that Serbia will certainly lose Kosovo, if there are no Serbs who can live in it, comparing the natality rate in some of the Serbian municipalities with the ones in Kosovo inhabited dominantly with Albanians: "Vučić: Nizak natalitet ključni problem Srbije". Published on 17. 3. 2018. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py5FyvU3dLs>

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