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Religion, Politics and Gender in Serbia

*The re-traditionalization of gender roles
in the context of nation-state formation*

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Introduction

Last year, Women in Black in Serbia were not able to mark the 100th anniversary of the March 8 Chicago Demonstrations (at which women demanded equal political rights) the way they have been doing for the last fifteen years, organizing rallies and street performances in downtown Belgrade. Planned activities had to be cancelled last year because the city police did not issue a necessary permit. The letter from the police stated that the demonstrations “would cause traffic disturbances and endanger lives and property” (B92 news, online edition, March 8, 2008).

Upon reading the police explanation, I recalled how in January of the same year I had been stuck in traffic for about half an hour. It was the day of Epiphany and the Police stopped the traffic at several points in Belgrade to make a way for religious processions.¹ Apparently, it occurred to me, the police have been applying the traffic disturbance rule selectively while by no means randomly in the process of issuing permits for public demonstrations and rallies. My suspicion was going to be confirmed very soon.

Only a week after the March 8 rally was banned, an ultra nationalist group, Movement 1389², received the police permit for a protest rally to commemorate Serbian victims of violent unrests in Kosovo that took place on March 17, 2004³. The protesters submitted a declaration demanding from the government to halt the processes of European integration and to reinstate full sovereignty over Kosovo. As protesters walked from the Parliament to the main Orthodox Cathedral where a mass for the victims of March violence was held, traffic was stopped in a main downtown street and a square while the area was secured by several dozens of policemen. The rally was not interrupted even after calls for violence against Albanians were shouted by some protesters.

It is quite clear from the examples above that “traffic disturbance and endangerment of lives and property” was just an excuse for preventing public gathering of a prominent and vocal, secular, anti-nationalist and anti-militarist feminist group. The real reasons for (not) issuing permits for various rallies were political and did not have anything to do with normal functioning of the city.⁴ It seemed that after the Kosovo’s decla-

¹ Religion processions on the day of Epiphany are customary in Orthodox Christianity. The custom all but disappeared during the socialist period in Serbia and was revived in the 1990s. After a church mass, the congregation walks to the nearest river where few of them, mostly young men, dive into the water competing to retrieve a cross from the river. It is believed that retrieving the cross brings great luck to the winner.

² 1389 is the year of the Kosovo battle between the Serbian and Turkish armies at the time of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The battle marks the end of the Serbian Medieval state and the beginning of the Ottoman rule over current Serbian territories. The Kosovo myth, which is a foundational myth in Serbian national consciousness, emerged against the background of many legends that are associated with the battle.

³ The violence started on March 15 after an 18 year old Serbian boy was killed in drive-by shooting in Central Kosovo and a subsequent drowning of three Albanian children under unclear and unresolved circumstances. The broad scale violence that was sparked by these two events lasted through March 18 but peaked on March 17. During the riots, 19 persons were killed (11 Albanians and 8 Serbs), 900 were injured, 800 of Serbian homes and 35 churches destroyed, while over 4000 Serbs and other non-Albanians (primarily Roma) were expelled from Kosovo (United Nations 2004, 6).

⁴ Few other events related to the celebration of the International Women’s Day did take place in the streets of Belgrade. They, however, did not involve movement through the city and were organized by non-governmental organizations in cooperation with governmental institutions. Most importantly, the focus of these events was on women’s health and domestic violence. Namely, their content in the eyes of state bureaucracy was not political strictly speaking and did not challenge the official national(ist) politics of the administration in power at the time.

ration of independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008⁵, only those groups that would not challenge nationalism and nationalist politics were allowed in the streets to express their political views.⁶

Women in Black have been the most persistent critics of nationalist politics and militarism in Serbia in general and vis-à-vis Kosovo politics in particular. Movement 1389, on the other hand, is one of several youth nationalist groups that subscribe to the ideology of extreme, militant nationalism. All these youth groups, together with the few conservative political parties view Orthodox Christianity as the essence of Serbhood. Some of the nationalist youth groups are supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church logistically and financially.

The police explanation given to Women in Black for banning their rally becomes even cynical in view of the fact that groups of hooligans that subscribe to the same type of militant nationalism promoted by the Movement 1389 have caused violence and destruction in the city of Belgrade twice in the immediate aftermath of the February 17th Kosovo's declaration of independence. Women in Black on the other hand have stood peacefully in a Belgrade square every Wednesday for fifteen years in protest against militant politics of the Milošević regime often enduring harassment from passersby that sometimes verged on physical violence.

The events described above also illustrate that national(ist) and to them closely related religious issues took precedence over women's issues in Serbia. Moreover, women's rights and equality have been often challenged within the processes of national mobilization and increased de-secularization of society – processes that started in the late 1980s and peaked during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. The pace and scope of de-secularization make the Serbian case particularly interesting. From a highly secularized society, where religion and religious institutions were marginalized even more than in other parts of former Yugoslavia, over the course of only two decades, Serbia became a society with high rates of religious identification, while religion and the church gained a prominent place in public life (Blagojević, M. 2006, 2008; Đorđević, M. 1990; Radislavljević-Ćiprižanović, D. 2006; Vukomanović, M. 2001, 2005).

Even though according to its Constitution Serbia is a secular state, there are countless examples that show encroachment of religion and religious institutions into all pores of social life in Serbia.⁷ Some examples are bizarre but some show a **tendency** of clericalization of the state, particularly under the conservative-populist governments of Vojislav Koštunica (2004-2008) and some other represent a **potentially** serious infringement on women's rights. While the change in the position of religion and the church occurred in a short time span, their all pervasive presence and influence in soci-

⁵ Kosovo was effectively separated from Serbia at the end of NATO military intervention in 1999. According to UN Resolution 1244, which was adopted by the Security Council in June of 1999, the province became a *de facto* UN protectorate while *de jure* it remained part of Serbia (and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the time). Since that time, Kosovo has been governed by UNMIK, the UN appointed administration. After the declaration of independence in spring of 2008 that was followed by the recognition of Kosovo's independence by many countries, governance of the province has been gradually transmitted to the local Albanian-dominated institutions. Since December of 2008, the EU appointed EULEKS mission has been added to the already complex administrative structure in Kosovo.

⁶ This was going to change with the end of the second Koštunica government which was defeated at the last parliamentary elections in May of 2008. Vojislav Koštunica led two minority, populist coalitions (2004-2007 and 2007-2008). During this time the Serbian Orthodox Church made some important inroads into public and political life. More on this, later in the paper.

⁷ Women in Black compiled an exhaustive list of examples in a publication: *Fundamentalism at Work in Serbia* (Zajović, S. ed. 2007).

ety, as my analysis will show, is a result of a gradual process that can be divided in two phases. The first phase spanned from the late 1980s through the 1990s and the second began in 2000, after Slobodan Milošević was toppled.⁸

Abortion was among the first social issues taken up by the Serbian Orthodox Church in its attempt to regain influence in public and private spaces in post-socialist Serbia. It represents one of the first open attempts made by the Church to influence legal reforms. The anti-abortion campaign was started from within the Orthodox Church in 1993, initially as individual initiative by one of the bishops. In 1995, the initiative was officially endorsed in the Patriarch's Christmas Message.

Two salient characteristics of the politics of reproduction in socialist Yugoslavia were the uninterrupted history of liberal abortion legislation and official orientation towards family planning rather than population policies.⁹ Thus, challenging abortion legislation in Serbia in the 1990s meant a challenge to a longstanding right and well established practice among women (and couples) to rely on abortion for maintaining the desired number of children. Had the Church been successful in its attempt to criminalize abortion, the consequences would have been dire for women in Serbia. Because of that, the initiative was met with strong resistance coming primarily from women's/feminist groups, health professionals, liberal intellectuals and politicians. As a consequence, a broad public debate on abortion unfolded in the media, professional journals, the Parliament and the streets of Belgrade between 1993 and 1995.

The struggle for or against births, according to Yuval-Davis, is an example of the politics of reproduction that designates women as bearers of the collective (Yuval-Davis N., 1996). In Serbia, like in Israel, membership in an ethno-national community is inseparable from the membership in a religious community. Moreover, within the anti-abortion campaign of the Serbian Orthodox Church, ethical concerns and religious beliefs were put forward only second to the concerns for the biological survival of the nation. Thus, the abortion debate will serve here as a case study in an attempt to examine the implications that the intersection between religion and nation(alism) in Serbia has for the position of women.

The abortion debate made apparent that reproduction had a central place in the intersection of the categories of gender and nation assigning specific roles to men and women within the project of the nation-state formation. These newly assigned female roles in many ways challenged women's equality and threatened to reverse achievements that in this respect were made during socialism. Needless to say, attempts to criminalize or limit access to abortion infringe on women's bodily integrity, sexuality and social position in a fundamental way. For that reason, the outcome of the legislative reform and discourses that were utilized during the abortion debate are equally important for examining the position of women within the nation-state project in Serbia.

⁸ Milošević held high ranking political positions and had control over political life in Serbia between 1987 and 2000.

⁹ There is an important conceptual difference between family planning and population policy. The former is situated in the individual sphere and aims to provide social services that enable individuals to exercise the right to freely decide on child birth. Unlike the population policy, family planning is not an instrument for achieving demographic goals set by the state (Breznik D. 1980).

Religion, Nation and Gender

Feminist scholars point to many different ways in which the categories of nation and gender intersect and to the different subject positions men and women occupy within nation-state projects. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) identify various subject positions that women as producers and reproducers occupy within national collectivities: they are biological reproducers of members of national collectivities; they reproduce and mark the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; have the central role in the ideological reproduction of the collective and transmission of its culture; they are signifiers of national differences; as well as participants in national, economic, political and military struggle.

Nationalist constructions of masculinity and femininity support a division of labor in which women reproduce the nation physically, culturally and symbolically, and men protect, defend and avenge the nation (Bracewell, W. 1996; Iveković, R. and Mostov 2002; Papić, Ž. 1993).

Feminist scholarship on nationalism, citizenship and the state has revealed the pervasiveness and power of gender relations in shaping state formation, nations and nationalism. States and nations construct their subjects in gendered ways that constitute a critical part of the process of identity formation. Nations themselves are commonly gendered. Both gender and nation are social constructs and organizing principles of society and as such they are both products and producers of power relationships that in turn produce difference and are produced by difference. National difference is represented through notions of gender difference, justifying hierarchies based on assumed natural gender hierarchy (ibid.; Gal, S. & Kligman, G. 2000, 2000a; Papić, Ž. 2002, 1994; Verdery, K. 1997; Žarkov, D. 2007), gender being the oldest known category of difference.

Since the “oldest known difference” is based on interpretations of roles women and men play in biological reproduction, reproduction is a constitutive element of both gender and nation. In post-socialist Eastern Europe, reproduction has been a site of political contestation through which various groups compete to organize the new national order and ensure their own elite position in it (Rivkin-Fish, M. 2003). Gal and Kligman discuss four different political purposes served by the discourses on reproduction in the post-socialist context of Eastern Europe. According to them, discourses on reproduction redefine the relationship between the individual and society, between the state and its citizens; reconstruct the category of nation and identify groups that belong and do not belong to the particular nation; reconfigure the political legitimacy of the state; and constitute women as particular types of social actors (2000a:21-22).

The control of women’s reproductive bodies is an integral part of many nationalist projects and it serves to sustain continuity and ‘purity’ of the nation. Nationalist politics of reproduction appropriated women’s bodies for the purposes of biological survival of individual nations and for preserving their ethnic ‘purity’ throughout the former Yugoslavia at the time of its disintegration. In the wars in Bosnia and Croatia women’s bodies were additionally ethnicized through rape which, as an instrument of war, served to define the female body as an ethnic boundary and as the national territory (Žarkov, D. 2007).¹⁰

¹⁰ On rape as a war strategy and war instrument in Bosnia and Croatia between 1991-1995, see also Benderly, J. 1997; Browenmiller, S. 1993; Card, C. 1996; Hayden, R. 2000; Korać, M. 1994; Mostov, J. 1995.

Reproduction supports the continuity of individuals and social groups and systems (Ginsburg, F & Rapp, R. 1991) and is fundamentally associated with the identity of the nation and the family (Kligman, G. 1998). On the other side of the same coin is a possibility of discontinuity which is also often used for different political purposes (ibid.). Concerns about low fertility and ‘population decline’ have a long history in Europe and North America and are often associated with a ‘nation’s decline’ (Teitelbaum, S. and Winter, J. 1985). Throughout post-socialist East Europe not only low fertility but also high abortion rates have symbolized discontinuity and decline of the nation. The appropriation of women’s bodies through pronatalist and anti-abortion discourses threatens their reproductive rights and equality.

In this study, I analyze abortion debates and resulting legislation as an example of such a challenge to their rights and equality that Serbian women were faced with in the first half of the 1990s. The challenge to women’s reproductive rights and social equality came from several different sources, *religion and the Church being very important among them*. Like the nationalist discourses religious ones also draw on specific constructions of femininity and masculinity which in turn serve to determine male and female place in national-cum-religious community.

According to Rieffer (2003), by associating nation and nationalism with modernity, and treating modernity as inherently secular, the mainstream scholarship on nation(alism) (cf. Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawm) has been largely neglecting the relationship between religion and nation. Rieffer argues that the role of religion is often important for understanding the origins of nationalism and also that the strong relationship between religion and national movement usually leads to discrimination, violence, human rights violations and intolerant politics (ibid., 224).

According to Loizides (2000), authors that combine traditional and modernist elements in their theorizing on nation(alism) (cf. Smith, Hutchinson, Hroch), on the other hand, argue that religion had a decisive role in the formation of modern nations. Loizides asserts that religion had a crucial role in the formation of national identities in the Balkans because of the role and power of religious denominations through the Millet system within the Ottoman empire¹¹; because 19th century uprisings (liberation movements) were fought not only on nationalist but also on confessional terms; and because due to the uneven modernization, national centers relied on religion in order to control backward religious areas (ibid., 7-8).

Since religious discourses in general tend to reify motherhood and affirm women’s oppression and discrimination, feminist theorizing perceives religion and contemporary religious movements primarily as a threat to secular liberal politics (Bedi, T. 2006).

I agree with Bedi who, drawing on Basu (1995) and Mohanty (1991), argues that “to analyze ‘religious’ ideological structures as always and primarily responsible for patriarchy and oppression is somewhat misplaced” particularly in the post-colonial context and/or for examining women’s participation in right-wing political and religious movements. At the same time, however, I believe that focus on the patriarchal character of religious ideology and its social implications is well placed in the post-socialist context particularly for examining the politics of reproduction that emerges against the backdrop of nation(alist)-cum-religious discourses. Thus, it is also well placed for the case study that I undertake in this paper in which the nexus gender-nation-reproduction

¹¹ Within the Millet system all social and legal affairs were handled by religious communities. The Ottoman Empire’s Millet system left similar legacy in the Middle East where, according to Yuval-Davis (1997), there exists nowadays a special relationship between the state and the church.

occupy the central place. Since there are close ties between the national and religious identifications and between the state and church in Serbia, in the following section, I give a brief historical overview of the origin and development of these relationships.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC¹²) the State and the Nation in Historical Perspective¹³

From privilege to marginalization

Throughout history, the Serbian Orthodox Church has developed “a relationship of understanding, cooperation and mutual support with the state” (Blagojević, M. 2006:242). This, however, did not necessarily imply its strong social influence or political power. Even though the SPC enjoyed the status of the state church in the late 19th and early 20th century¹⁴ it was subordinated to the state and the state often interfered in its affairs (Marković, S. 2005:163; Blagojević, M. 2006:251). The only exception was a short period before the Second World War (1937-1941) during which the SPC was the only institution with enough power to challenge the state (Marković, S. *ibid*, Blagojević, M. *ibid*.). Clerical political movements that were founded in the 1930s never had a significant constituency. Another important feature of the SPC during the last two hundred years of history is that its popularity has rested more in its role as a national than as a religious institution. Even the actual Patriarch of the SPC acknowledged this fact without questioning it. Explaining why believers in Serbia know so little about religion the Patriarch stated that during the entire history including the twentieth century, the Church had to “leave its primary duties aside” because it was occupied with state politics participating actively in the struggle for “Serbian Unity” (Perović, L. 2004:123).

Like all other religious communities, the SPC was marginalized after the Second World War and socialist authorities closely observed and controlled its work. During the early period of communist rule (mid 1940s-1960s) the SPC suffered many losses: 25% of priests were prosecuted on various charges; the number of priests dropped by one half and the number of bishops by one-third compared to the pre-war period; over 80% of its land was confiscated. As a consequence, at the end of this period only 5-10% of children were baptized in villages, 10% of funerals were performed as religious rites and 25% of villagers celebrated Christmas (Dimić, Lj. 1998:87). Figures for urban areas were even lower. The secularization of society was broad, widespread and affected almost equally rural and urban areas. Overall, the consequences of marginalization of religion and of secularization of society had at least three dimensions: church and religion lost their social influence; according to empirical research, conventional religious be-

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