

## Habemus gender: The Serbian case

**Abstract:** The article discusses the emergence of ‘gender ideology’ in Serbia, focusing on the recent public outcry against the introduction of education packages on gendered violence in schools. The case demonstrates that this concerted action has been undertaken not by the ‘common people’ it purportedly represents, but by conservative academics. The struggle against ‘gender ideology’ divides ‘the people’ into two camps, upholding the values of the ‘normal’ (Serbian) family: that is, a middle-class, well-to-do family that wants to be left alone, unaffected and undisturbed by intrusions of the state. The article demonstrates the validity of the claim that gender acts as ‘symbolic glue’ in contemporary conservative struggles across Europe.

To the question “Why feminism in Serbia today?” one might offer a variety of answers. The obvious one would be that feminism is still needed everywhere, given that we live in a conservative, securitarian, post-truth world, in which inequality and poverty are on the rise. Serbia, in particular, as a state with contested borders and a postconflict and postsocialist society with a paradigmatic illiberal democracy, merits a multifaceted feminist analysis. In this short piece, I will turn to one particular facet, not because of its prominence, but because of its sheer novelty. Of late, Serbia joined the world-wide race against ‘genderism’, proving its own ability to pursue a witch-hunt.

Serbia has known several ‘witch-hunts’. Women have been, and arguably still are, among the most outspoken critics of the powers that be. During the wars for succession and in their immediate aftermath, women were outspoken in their struggles against militarization and the prevailing nationalist sentiment in society. The right-wing intelligentsia slandered some of them repeatedly and in a disgraceful fashion. However, only a few of these women regarded themselves as feminists, and the attack against them was always framed as a defence against treason, ‘anti-Serbian engagement’, unnatural alliance with the enemy, which were, in the Serbian case, many. Until very recently, in the eyes of the right-wingers, the ‘witches’ were only incidentally women, and the hunt was not directed towards their covert feminism but towards their pronounced antinationalism. Gender ideology, gender theory, or gender as such<sup>1</sup> were never part of those denunciations.

Feminist and gender studies scholars were rarely recognized as politically relevant figures. They remained, willingly or unwillingly, within their small academic ghettos, their theories marginalized, their policy proposals rarely receiving any kind of application without stubborn resistance from both the ‘usual suspects’ and the seemingly

‘well-meaning’. Admittedly, there was one exception to this rule. The book *Iskušenja radikalnog feminizma* [*Temptations of Radical Feminism*], the only non-feminist attempt to elaborate feminism in Serbia, took such policies seriously and warned, as early as 2011, of the many (theoretical and political) dangers of ‘gender feminism’. Truth be told, the arguments of *Temptations* were methodologically precise and ideologically unambiguous: not all feminisms were bad or unjustified: liberal feminism may be tolerated, while radical or ‘gender feminism’ aims at repugnant social engineering, at relentless authoritarian imposition of norms or, in other words, normative colonization of common people with strong biopolitical effects (Antonić, 2011).

This appeal was a portent, and not only in Serbia. Now these ideas can be situated within a world-wide movement mobilizing against “an enemy known as ‘gender ideology’, and ‘cultural Marxism’, in much of the Western world, ‘Gayropa’ in post-Soviet countries or ‘political correctness’ in the American context” (Grzebalska, Kováts and Petč, 2017). Biopolitical gender ordering, or a novel way to destroy the world *with gender*, begins with the implementation of gender equality policies, sex education, protection against gender violence, new reproductive technologies, LGBTQ and sexual and reproductive rights. And, despite the fact that it is often associated with the Catholic Church and chooses to portray itself as a distinctly national (French, Polish, Russian, Serbian etc.) phenomenon, ‘genderism’ is a truly international movement which plays on religion, but is infused with various conservative assumptions not necessarily religious in origin.

Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) give us valuable tools for diagnosing ‘genderism’. ‘Gender ideology’ targets scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalist assumptions about gender

and sexuality, as well as social reforms attempting to implement gender equality. ‘Gender ideology’ is therefore especially concerned with the threat of gender to children, who become indoctrinated in schools by the insidious school curricula, without their parents’ knowledge or consent. Children are seen as exposed to a planned ‘hyper-sexualisation’, which is not only insidious, but is also notably imposed – as being something absolutely foreign to the habits and morals of the home country. There is thus supposedly a covert political strategy at play here: a conspiracy of sorts “aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values to average people” (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, p. 6). Its main instrument is gender mainstreaming, a powerful weapon in the hands of persons who act as absolute foreigners – even if they are indeed locals – to the habits and morals of the local culture. Gender mainstreaming is backed by the elites, political and moneyed persons (most notoriously Soros) and international institutions that, by way of gender, undermine national sovereignty with the aim to bring it down. Such ‘ideological colonization’, itself a symptom of the depraved West or EuroAmerica, may also be understood as a new way of completing the communist social revolution that began spreading through the world over the 20th century. ‘Gender’ is a strategy of ‘cultural revolution’, of artful infiltrating with the sinister aim to reprogram common people’s minds.

There is of course a contradiction here. Gender as the ‘new DIAMAT’ provides an image of a constant, although smuggled revolution – sexual, but with strong communist overtones. At the same time, liberal elites are targeted as responsible for social and economic decline of the average hard-working men, their communities and families, while gender is being portrayed as an instrument of radical individualism, neoliberal globalization and global capital (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017). Contradictory argumentation aside, the common man, the average Pole, the average Slovene, the average Italian, the average Serb, is the one who suffers. The silent majority has announced its return through a concerted attack on perilous gender.

Let us now apply this conceptual framework and see if there are components of anti-gender ideology in the Serbian context. I will examine one particular case, not only because it seems emblematic, but also because it connects well to different European contexts (Grzebalska, 2016; Fassin, 2016; Giebel and Röhrborn, 2015):

namely, the case of an education package on the prevention of sexual violence in kindergartens and schools.

Incest Trauma Center – Beograd (ITC) is a Belgrade-based NGO, established in 1994, which provides psychological support to children and women survivors of sexual violence (ITC mission). In 2009 ITC rearticulated its strategic identity of focusing on sexual assault prevention and gained formal recognition as such by the Serbian Ministry of Social Policy in 2010. At the same time, the Council of Europe appointed it as the official national partner in the Campaign against Sexual Assault for the Republic of Serbia. Work on the education package began in 2014: in 2015 the first National Study of the Prevalence and Incidence of Childhood Sexual Assault was presented during two public hearings in the Serbian Parliament, organised in partnership with the Women’s Parliamentary Network (Prvi put 2015). ITC further led public discussions in 11 cities, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Science, Education and Technological Development. In November 2016, ITC and the Ministry representatives jointly presented the final version of the education package (Obrazovni paketi 2016), a hefty collection authored by 18 teachers, three representatives of the Ministry and seven experts in the field of violence against children and women.

The education package aimed at preventing various types of sexual violence against children and minors (with contents adjusted to age), instructing teachers how to approach issues of body image, sexuality, wanted and unwanted physical contact, how to advise youngsters in case of sexual and gender violence, how to identify the adults whom they can trust, and how to prevent or stop violence to which they are exposed. The package was conceptualised as answers to questions raised by children and minors themselves (62% of the contents had been piloted in kindergartens and schools).

In other words, a long-standing and internationally-recognized NGO conducted thorough research, consulted relevant international and national documents, in continuous cooperation with governmental bodies. All their actions were public, organized and implemented with the knowledge and support of the parliament and the respective ministry. And all seemed to be going smoothly, until April 2017.

Slobodan Antonić, the author of *Temptations of Radical Feminism*, raised the alarm with a text published on April 11 on an obscurantist

Russian-Serbian website. He accused the package of sexualisation and pathologisation of children and of committing surreptitious violence against children in the name of prevention of that very violence, referring to a sentence “my body belongs to me”. Pedantically quoting the text of the package, he then ‘revealed’ that ‘our children’ would get to know, with the shameful blessings of an obviously inoperative Ministry, what consensual sex, French kissing, oral and anal sex, and masturbation really are. “But why”, he asks sardonically, “stop there? Will our children soon also learn about SM, sex with animals, necrophilia, group sex, swinging and other kinds of ‘normal sexual activities’ which are perfectly fine if they are, according to our Ministry, a matter of ‘consent between persons making love’? Who gives them the right to do that?” (Antonić, 2017). The punch-line follows: the so-called education package on sexual violence is nothing other than propaganda for homosexual relationships. The proof is not only the illustration showing three couples kissing (a boy and a girl, two boys and two girls, on page 348) –which would in days to come accompany all other articles on the topic, with ominous subtexts– but also the fact that the ‘authors of the book’ (see above), i.e. the two representatives of ITC, are themselves lesbians.

Two days later, another representative of the Serbian academia wrote a completely non-academic piece in the respectable daily *Politika*. Unlike AntoniĆ, the author invokes well-known paradigms without properly referring to the package itself: the nation is waning, the white plague is upon us and the already shaken family is rendered even more vulnerable. The package is purely an instrument in the struggle for the “promotion of homosexuality [sic!] and pornography” (“circa 50% of the material promotes homosexuality and pornography”), using a well-known leftist manipulative tool, the gender/sex distinction, to encourage children to experiment with their sexuality, to despise religion and indulge in masturbation as something natural and necessary. The number of authors of the education package is now skilfully shrunken to only one, disparagingly labelled as lesbian. The article concludes with a fretful avuncular trope: his Christian and national rights, guaranteed by the Constitution, are under attack in the name of gender violence, and it is only normal that it provokes righteous (national) rage (Đurković, 2017).

Five days later, the Serbian Sputnik News Agency published a piece on the controversial package conjuring “a number of public figures, sociologists,

psychologists, political scientists and politicians who believe that an assumed prevention of sexual violence... turned into a declaration of war against the family and family values, and into propaganda of LGBT and gender ideology”. These two mere interventions were thus blown up and falsely framed as a significant number of reactions<sup>2</sup>. Sputnik added a third crucial dimension by consulting the most prominent conservative expert on family matters, who would become the first to argue that the Ministry was in fact manipulated – an argument that would come into frequent use later. One should actually blame an interest group that aims at tearing the fabric of the society, cleverly using children who would grow up to become utterly foreign to our own cultural and national identity. This uncritical importation of ways alien to us is what social engineering is all about, and one should only speculate *who* would have an interest in paying for an unstable Serbian family and, in the long run, an unstable and easily manipulated Serbian state (Kankaraš Trklja, 2017).

After only three articles scattered on the web, we were dealing with foreign lobbies that financed an education package in order to make us swallow radical individualism, extreme feminism and totalitarian LGBT and gender ideology<sup>3</sup>. Over the course of ten days, there was a storm in a teacup. The war on family values transformed into a blitzkrieg against the education package. On April 21 the new Minister of Education confessed that ‘Europe’ was demanding sexual education and to appease the raging public promised adjustments to the existing text. But the following day *Politika* boastfully announced the revocation of the package, the formation of a new team (that would listen less to Europe and more to what we really need and want), happily referring to its own contribution to this fruitful ‘public discussion’ (Pejović, 2017).

This case is seemingly very Serbian in kind. It expresses concerns about our own diminishing nation, about the loss of our values, traditions and ways of dealing with the inner and the outer world, about Serbian children, for whose future sake we are now rejecting morally dubious practices and beliefs, seeking a more stable and less contentious society, infused with the sacred doctrine of our Orthodox church. However, this is only the surface of things. Gender acts as a symbolic glue binding contemporary Serbian, Hungarian, German, Georgian and French conservatives in their struggle against liberalism,

global capital, communism, immigration, precarization and various types of foreign invasions. Although they may differ on questions of religion, social policy and the role of the state, their joint focus on genderism, Anti-Genderismus or *dženderizam*, defines a common enemy – the dangerous looming figure of the feminist or gender studies scholar.

The Serbian case testifies to the fact that a forceful and concerted action can indeed bring down an effort that required years of assiduous work. And while it ultimately presents itself as a victory on the part of the common man, stricken by myriad predicaments, this victory over a feminist Gorgon points in several important directions. The struggle is led not by the common people but by the conservative academia; dissenting voices are stifled and rendered meaningless. The struggle is led in an utterly undemocratic way under the banner of the people, albeit dividing it into two camps: the true representative of the ‘people’ and those who betray its essence, normalcy and inner nature. Finally, although it claims to speak for all (children as future citizens), it indeed speaks only in the name of the Serbian majority (not of Roma or other ethnic minorities in Serbia) and the prototype ‘normal’ family, that is, a middle-class, well-to-do family that wants to be left alone, unaffected and undisturbed by intrusions of the state. As Eva von Redecker (2016, p. 5) has argued, anti-genderism defends those very ideological formations that offer privileged identities validation and refuge from dire economic circumstances. It is precisely these kinds of ideological formations that gender studies has aimed at destabilizing deconstructing structures that have all too easily been taken for granted.

## Endnotes

- 1 A brief note regarding the term. In contrast to a number of East European languages, such as Czech, Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Polish, etc. – but also French [see Fassin 1999], which uses the English word *gender* [pronounced gɛndɜ̃ʁ] – Serbian has a valid and widely used word for gender, *rod*.
- 2 At the time, there was only one more reaction, and it argued against the conservative stance (Milenković, 2017). Also of note is the fact that eight similar reactions, defending the package and the need for it, appeared from April 14 to May 1 (see Zaharijević, 2017),

but none was quoted or in any other way invoked during the discussions about the package.

- 3 Curiously, this is a quote from the text published on the webpage of the Union of Serbian educational workers, which links to another un-authored blog. Nevertheless, the next day the serious daily *Politika* quotes this as a statement of the Union (Popadić, 2017a).

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