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## POLITICAL SEXISM AND POPULISM IN SERBIA: THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL AUTHORITARIANISM<sup>4</sup>

### Politički seksizam i populizam u Srbiji: uloga individualne autoritarnosti

**ABSTRACT:** Recent research suggests that sexist attitudes can significantly influence political preferences and electoral behavior. Studies of recent elections in countries such as the United States indicate that sexism is an increasingly important predictor of party preferences. This paper investigates the impact of political sexism on populist party preferences in Serbia. Given that the ruling party, Srpska Napredna Stranka (SNS), exhibits populist characteristics, we expect sexist attitudes to be more prevalent among its supporters. Using data from a 2021 online public opinion survey conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, which implemented the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems Module 6 questionnaire, we find that authoritarian and traditionalist party preferences are associated with higher levels of sexist political attitudes. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that individual authoritarianism plays a key role in shaping both sexist attitudes and populist support.

**KEY WORDS:** gender attitudes, sexism, populism, authoritarianism, Serbia

**APSTRAKT:** Nedavne studije ukazuju da seksistička uverenja mogu značajno uticati na političke preferencije i biračko ponašanje. Istraživanja nedavnih izbora u zemljama kao što su SAD pokazuju da seksistički stavovi postaju sve važniji prediktori partijskih preferencija. Ovaj rad ispituje uticaj političkog seksizma na podršku populizmu u Srbiji. Srbija u 2020-im predstavlja posebno zanimljiv slučaj za istraživanje ove teme. S obzirom na to da vladajuća stranka, Srpska napredna stranka (SNS), poseduje karakteristike populističke stranke, očekujemo da će seksistička uverenja biti izraženija među njenim pristalicama. Koristeći podatke

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4 Rad je napisan u okviru Programa istraživanja Instituta društvenih nauka za 2025. godinu, koji podržava Ministarstvo nauke, tehnološkog razvoja i inovacija Republike Srbije.

iz istraživanja Instituta društvenih nauka u Beogradu sprovedenog 2021. godine, koje je primenilo upitnik Komparativne studije izbornih sistema (CSES), utvrdili smo da su autoritarne i tradicionalističke partijske preferencije povezane sa višim nivoom seksističkih političkih stavova. Dalja analiza pokazuje da individualni autoritarizam igra ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju i seksističkih uverenja i podrške populizmu.

KLJUČNE REČI: *rodni stavovi; seksizam, populizam; autoritarnost; Srbija*

## Introduction

Political developments across many regions have revealed a simultaneous rise in populist mobilization and renewed backlash against gender equality. Rather than occurring in isolation, these trends appear to unfold in parallel, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 economic and financial crises, when reactionary actors increasingly sought to restrict women's rights (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Across Europe debates over gender equality have become increasingly polarized at the very moment when populist parties are gaining electoral momentum. This raises the question of the relationships between political sexism and populism – and how this relationship should be understood.

Politics has long been considered a male-dominated sphere, shaped by historical patterns of exclusion and entrenched gender norms (Lowndes, 2019). This gendered perception of political life reflects a broader view, which we may call *sexism in politics (political sexism)*. Political sexism assumes that men and women differ fundamentally in their political abilities, competencies, appropriate roles, and political rights. Such attitudes continue to shape not only public opinion but also institutional practices, influencing both access to political power and perceptions of legitimacy in leadership (Lowndes, 2019). Attitudes toward women in politics represent a salient political and social issue, drawing increasing attention from researchers and policymakers alike. Research in this area – including this paper – seeks to uncover political consequences of sexism. Understanding consequences of political sexism is essential for assessing the health of democratic systems, the inclusiveness of political representation, and the broader struggle for gender equality in public life (Longdon & Banducci, 2023; Gothreau et al., 2022).

Despite broad rhetorical support for women in political life (Dassonneville et al., 2021), persistent gender gaps remain in political interest, internal political efficacy, and political ambition. These gaps have proven remarkably stable over time, and classic explanations offer only partial insight into their endurance (Holman & Schneider, 2016). Women also continue to face obstacles to political engagement, particularly in higher-level electoral politics, where subtle but enduring stereotypes regarding their competence and suitability still shape evaluations of female politicians (Cassese & Holman, 2019).

Against this backdrop, a central theoretical issue emerges: are sexism and populism two distinct features of contemporary political life, or do they stem

from shared underlying orientations? Recent scholarship has begun to examine this intersection, highlighting the neglected but increasingly visible relationship between gender equality and populist politics (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024; Abi-Hassan, 2017; Spierings et al., 2015). Additionally, authoritarian orientations, characterized by preferences for strong leadership, conformity, and traditional hierarchies, appear closely tied to sexist attitudes, suggesting that sexism may reflect a broader authoritarian disposition rather than a purely gender-specific bias (Lodders and Weldon, 2019).

This article builds on this emerging insight by examining whether sexism helps explain political divides in Serbia, a context where gender is not a salient dimension of party competition but where populist governance and hierarchical political culture remain prominent. Building on a legacy of competitive authoritarianism from the 1990s and partial democratization after 2000, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has consolidated power over the past decade through a combination of populist rhetoric, media control, patronage networks, and institutional influence (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023).

In this article, we argue that examining sexism offers valuable insights into the extent to which political divisions are gendered, particularly in contexts where gender is not an explicit or salient aspect of political discourse. To this end, we investigate whether sexist attitudes predict like/dislike evaluations of the Serbian Progressive Party, the dominant authoritarian/populist party. We then assess whether this relationship can be understood through the lens of authoritarianism, exploring whether sexism's political relevance stems partly from its role as an expression of a broader authoritarian orientation. To investigate these questions and uncover the proposed link, the study draws on data from 2021, utilizing selected questions from the Module 6 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) questionnaire.

## Research on Sexism in Politics

### *About Sexism and Political Sexism*

Attitudes toward gender equality encompass a wide range of concepts (Burns and Gallagher, 2010). Our focus is on sexism which is generally understood as a belief system or set of attitudes that negatively evaluates individuals on the basis of their sex or that contributes to the perpetuation of sex-based inequality in society (Anduiza & Rico, 2024: 479). Broadly, sexism entails perceiving women as categorically inferior to men (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024). Although sexism can technically target both men and women, it is predominantly directed at women due to prevailing sexual hierarchies (e.g., Schaffner, 2022). This paper focuses specifically on prejudice toward women in the realm of politics. Literature clearly distinguishes sexism from broader attitudes toward women or traditional gender roles. While sexism can be defined as “attitudes reflecting potential prejudice toward the opposite sex,” gender attitudes pertain to “attitudes concerning what are perceived as appropriate gender roles or expressions” (Christley, 2022: 1145).

Research on sexism has developed a variety of measures to capture its different forms and better understand its influence on attitudes and behavior. Sexism against women can range from overt hostility to more covert or seemingly positive expressions. Ambivalent sexism theory distinguishes between hostile sexism, which reflects prejudice, resentment, and opposition toward women, and benevolent sexism, which frames women as delicate beings in need of male protection. While benevolent sexism may appear caring or prosocial, it still reinforces gender hierarchies by portraying women as weak and dependent, whereas hostile sexism is evident in discriminatory actions and negative evaluations of women (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Schaffner, 2022; Christopher & Mull, 2006; Fischer, 2006).

Modern sexism represents another dimension, characterized by denial of ongoing discrimination and subtle antagonism toward women's claims for equality. Unlike old-fashioned sexism, modern sexism is often expressed in veiled ways, reflecting awareness of social norms and the pressure to appear politically correct. This subtlety makes contemporary sexism harder to detect while still perpetuating inequality through resistance to gender-equality policies and skepticism toward women's social and political claims (Swim et al., 1995; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Within the literature on political behavior, however, several more specific definitions have been employed. In particular, neosexism scale developed by Tougas et al. (1995) aiming to identify a form of sexism that more effectively predicts political attitudes. Neosexism is defined as the "manifestation of a conflict between egalitarian values and residual negative feelings toward women," which contrasts with old-fashioned sexism – traditionally understood as "a prejudicial attitude or discriminatory behaviour based on the presumed inferiority or difference of women as a group" (Cameron, 1977: 340).

While general measures of sexism capture attitudes toward women in society more broadly, research increasingly highlights the need for a domain-specific approach that focuses on women in politics (Schaffner, 2022). Political sexism reflects beliefs about women's competence, leadership abilities, and appropriate roles within political institutions, which are not fully captured by measures of general or modern sexism. By targeting the political sphere specifically, such measures can reveal how sexist attitudes influence voting behavior, support for gender equality policies, and the representation of women in political life. This approach acknowledges that prejudice in the political domain may operate differently from broader gender biases, making it essential for understanding barriers to women's political participation and the inclusiveness of democratic systems (Longdon & Banducci, 2023).

### *Sexism and Populism*

Political scientists have increasingly focused on examining the role and forms of sexist attitudes in predicting electoral behavior. However, most studies in this area have concentrated on the United States. Specifically, since the 2016 election, empirical research on American political behavior has devoted considerably more attention to the influence of sexist attitudes (Bracic

et al., 2019; Cassese and Barnes, 2019; Schaffner, 2022). Research indicates that during the 2016 presidential election, both hostile and benevolent forms of sexism played a significant role in shaping political preferences – boosting support for Donald Trump while reducing support for Hillary Clinton (Winter, 2023). Sexism is politically relevant outside the United States as well, with most research focusing on its connection to party choice. In Australia, Beauregard (2021) demonstrated that hostile sexism shaped vote choice in the 2019 election, particularly for the National and Green parties. Similarly, in Britain, De Geus, Ralph-Morrow and Shorrocks (2022) found that hostile sexism was associated with voting Conservative in 2019. The available scholarship appears to lack studies on the link between sexism and voting behavior in non-Western countries. However, comparatively few studies examine the link between sexism and party preferences in non-Western countries. Also, most studies focus on preferences for radical-right parties (e.g., Anduiza & Rico, 2024) rather than on populist parties (although the categories often overlap).

The literature indicates that individuals holding sexist attitudes, whether hostile (Ratliff et al., 2019) or modern (Anduiza & Rico, 2024), are more likely to support populist radical-right (PRR) candidates. Radical-right parties, whether explicitly populist or not, generally oppose gender equality and feminist policies, receiving lower support from women (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018). By contrast, left-wing radical parties, including some populist left parties, often adopt egalitarian discourses and embrace feminism (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002). This raises a key question: to what extent is the association between party support and gender equality attitudes driven by populism itself, rather than by broader ideological positions strongly correlated with gender equality stances (Keith & Verge, 2016; Sevincer et al., 2023)?

Marcos-Marne et al. (2024) propose two main mechanisms connecting sexism to support for populist parties. First, the “people as homogeneous” mechanism: sexist individuals tend to see men and women as naturally complementary, reinforcing existing hierarchies and presenting society as unified. Feminist claims about inequality are thus perceived as unnecessary divisions, a logic that aligns with populist constructions of a singular, cohesive “people” (Heiskanen, 2021). The second mechanism linking sexism to populism relates to perceptions of elites. Gender-equality policies and feminist initiatives are often framed as elite-driven projects, promoting “politically correct” or “woke” agendas (Cammaerts, 2022). Populist rhetoric portrays these elites as acting against the interests of ordinary citizens, making sexist individuals more likely to support parties that oppose such initiatives (Graff, Kapur & Walters, 2019).

Empirical studies in Europe support these links. For example, Marcos-Marne, Inganzo, and Gil de Zuñiga (2024) investigate whether sexist and populist attitudes are connected, using original two-wave panel data collected online in Spain. Their findings reveal a general positive association between hostile sexism and populist attitudes, even in a context considered a “least-likely case” for such a relationship. Similarly, using panel data from Spain, Anduiza and Rico (2024) demonstrate that modern sexism is a key attitudinal

predictor of support for the far-right party *Vox*. Consistent with these findings, research has also shown that women are generally less likely than men to support PRR parties, although significant cross-national variations exist (Coffe et al., 2023).

Studies further demonstrate that individuals with stronger sexist attitudes are not only more likely to support radical-right parties aligned with anti-egalitarian views but also tend to develop more populist orientations over time (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024). Thus, research suggests a significant intersection between sexism and populism (Locke, 2022), raising the question of whether these are distinct political trends or interconnected phenomena. As we have pointed out, empirical evidence highlights a close association between sexism and support for populist parties (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024). However, the relationship between populism and gender equality remains insufficiently examined at the individual level. Addressing this gap is particularly important given that populist attitudes are often widespread across societies, sometimes even preceding the emergence of populist parties (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024). Based on the previously reviewed literature, we formulated the following hypothesis:

**H1: Sexism toward women positively predicts support for the main Serbian populist political party.**

### *Linking Sexism to Authoritarianism*

Based on Adorno et al.'s (1950) Fascism (F) scale, authoritarianism is linked to adherence to traditional values and obedience to authority, and it reflects a perspective of the world as dangerous, necessitating order and strong group unity for safety (Austin & Jackson, 2019: 35). Sexism, as a form of prejudice based on gender, and authoritarianism, which implies a tendency towards conformity, rigidity and obedience to authority, often occur in conjunction with each other, reflecting broader patterns of hierarchical thinking and resistance to social change. The connection between sexism and authoritarianism is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers who seek to understand the psychological and ideological foundations of social dominance. Several studies provide evidence that authoritarian values are associated with sexism. Literature reveals that individuals high in Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) may adopt sexist beliefs because they perceive the world as a dangerous place where women require men's protection and may also resist gender equality, viewing it as a challenge to traditional social order (Austin & Jackson, 2019: 35).

The relationship between benevolent and hostile sexism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) has been studied, showing clear associations. Much of the research on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) has proceeded from the assumption that these constructs are unidimensional. Recently, however, researchers have begun to seriously consider the possibility that they are multidimensional in nature and should be measured accordingly

(Crowson & Bransden, 2017: 366; Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013). The Dual-Process Motivational (DPM) model (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) explains how two dimensions (RWA/SDO) that shape social attitudes and behaviors emerge from certain personality dispositions and internalized worldview beliefs. Each of these dimensions is based on distinct motivational goals or values, which account for their specific and wide-ranging effects on the development of prejudice, including sexism. Research by Sibley, Wilson, and Duckitt (2007) shows that RWA and SDO predict different forms of men's sexism toward women, consistent with their distinct motivational foundations. Among men, RWA is more strongly associated with benevolent sexism, reflecting endorsement of traditional gender roles and resistance to social change. Men high in RWA may endorse benevolent sexism not out of a desire to directly subordinate women (as might be the case for men high in SDO), but rather from the explicitly held belief that men and women occupy different yet complementary, though unequal, social roles within the broader societal context (Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007: 163). Although RWA is also weakly associated with hostile sexism, SDO shows a stronger link to hostile sexism, reflecting antagonism toward women and a desire to preserve male dominance. Austin and Jackson (2019) demonstrated that RWA predicts both hostile and benevolent forms of sexism. Moreover, the correlation between benevolent sexism and RWA is further confirmed, consistent with findings from previous studies (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007).

Another particularly interesting study provides insight into the impact of gendered and sexist attitudes on electoral support for radical right parties (RRPs) in Europe. Lodders and Weldon (2019) examine the link between gendered and sexist attitudes and support for radical right parties (RRPs) in four countries: Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway. Consistent with expectations, the findings show that benevolent sexism plays a central role in men's support for radical right parties (RRPs), but not in women's. However, once authoritarianism is taken into account, benevolent sexism no longer significantly predicts RRP voting among men (and is actually negatively associated with RRP support among women) (Lodders & Weldon, 2019: 468). While sexism is relevant for understanding support for RRPs, it appears to be embedded within wider attitudes toward outgroups (Lodders & Weldon, 2019). This suggests that sexism operates as part of a wider attitudinal framework influencing political preferences. Building on this research, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H2: The association between sexism and the support for populism is mediated by authoritarianism.*

### *Is There Political Sexism in Serbia?*

As noted, the majority of research on sexism has been conducted primarily within the context of the United States. One of the distinctive aspects of this study is that it examines a relatively understudied region, namely Central and Eastern

Europe (CEE), focusing specifically on Serbia. Serbia, an Eastern European country emerging from half a century of authoritarian communist rule, has been marked by political instability and continues to confront significant economic challenges (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023; Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013).

A notable empirical question is not whether political sexism exists in Serbia, but to what extent it is present and whether it differs from other countries based on specific social factors. On one hand, Serbia's relatively late modernization and persistent traditionalist cultural undercurrents may suggest higher levels of sexism. On the other hand, the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia, where gender equality was embedded in the official ideology, could have exerted a long-term equalizing effect on gender attitudes, potentially moderating expressions of sexism in the political sphere (Ćeriman & Juroš, 2024). Nevertheless, previous achievements related to family roles, structure, and functions in modern society were often suppressed or reversed in post-socialist Serbia (Milić, 2004).

Since the introduction of multiparty politics in 1990, Serbia's electoral and party systems have undergone frequent changes, some under external pressure, others in response to opposition demands, but most engineered by the ruling elites. Pluralism can broadly be divided into two phases: the period of the dominance of the Socialist Party in the 1990s, and the post-2000 era following the fall of Milošević. The electoral system shifted repeatedly during the 1990s, moving from a two-round majority system (1990) to various forms of proportional representation, before stabilizing in 2000 into a single-constituency proportional model with later adjustments concerning minority and women's representation (Orlović & Kovačević, 2024). After the democratic changes, the party system moved between moderate and polarized pluralism. The early 2000s saw the fragmentation of the DOS coalition and competition between pro-European parties such as the Democratic Party and Democratic Party of Serbia on one side, and the Socialist Party of Serbia and Serbian Radical Party on the other. The split within the Serbian Radical Party led to the creation of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, whose victory in 2012 marked the rise of a dominant party. Since then, Serbian politics has been characterized by the SNS's consolidation of power, the weakening of other parties, and the emergence of populist tendencies (Orlović & Kovačević, 2024). This process gave rise to what has been termed *stabilitocracy* – a system in which governments claim to ensure stability and EU integration while relying on informal clientelism, media control, and manufactured crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law (Bieber, 2018).

During its EU accession process, Serbia was obliged to reform its legislation to comply with EU standards on gender equality and anti-discrimination, with LGBTQ+ rights serving as a key benchmark of progress (Kahlina, 2014). Yet implementation has been inconsistent, often emphasizing symbolic compliance over meaningful change. These EU-driven pressures were frequently framed as threats to the "traditional family." Radical-right actors explicitly invoked

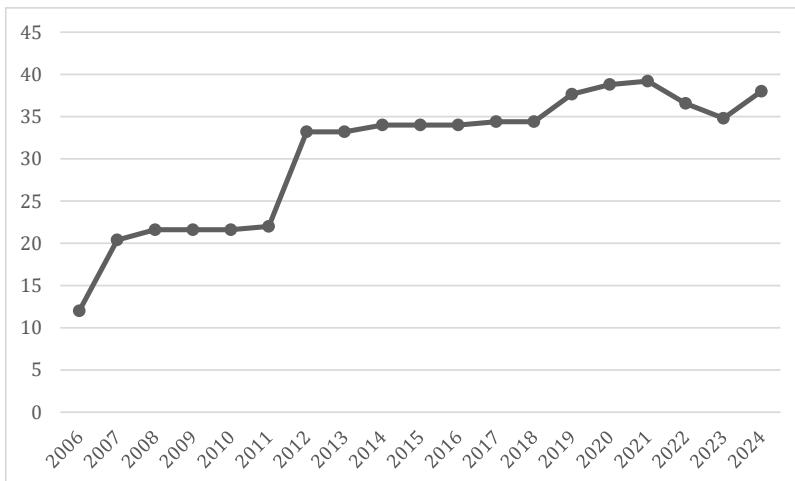
narratives of demographic decline, while religious-conservative groups, activists, and public intellectuals mobilized against gender and sexuality rights, portraying them as foreign impositions undermining Serbian cultural values (Ćeriman & Juroš, 2024).

Since 2012, Serbia has experienced democratic backsliding. Following the initial democratic consolidation after 2000, Vučić's rise to power marked a return to competitive authoritarianism, with centralization of power, personalistic politics, media control, populist rhetoric, and the marginalization of civil society (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023; Lončar, 2024). Despite EU integration efforts, the regime has leveraged gender equality reforms as a tool for international legitimization while maintaining authoritarian control domestically. The cooperative stance toward EU norms, alongside symbolic gender reforms, allowed the SNS to present Serbia as a credible partner internationally while sustaining domestic populist and nationalist appeals (Lončar, 2024).

Women in Serbia have held prominent positions across the political spectrum, including during the tenure of right-wing governments. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has simultaneously advanced the country's EU accession agenda and increased female representation in key governmental roles (see Graph 1). Notably, Ana Brnabić served as one of the world's first openly gay prime ministers and is the first head of government to have a child with her partner while in office. Yet, despite the visibility of women in leadership, their presence has not translated into substantive efforts to combat gender inequality, address violence against women, or advance LGBT rights (Dević, 2021). At the same time, women from opposition parties, critical media outlets, and even female officials within the ruling party remain frequent targets of misogynist attacks across parliament, state-run television, tabloids, and social media, highlighting the persistent vulnerability of women in public life<sup>5</sup>. This approach represents a uniquely Serbian form of "token feminism," where the visibility of powerful women masks the neglect of systemic gender inequality and the rights of marginalized groups (Dević, 2021). Recent research on Serbia's parliament further supports this interpretation, revealing a troubling paradox. Although mandatory gender quotas were introduced to increase women's political representation and create more gender-balanced institutions, these measures have inadvertently heightened women MPs' exposure to verbal, psychological, and sexual harassment (Vukomanović, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Media representations also contribute to the social construction of gender roles. Necić (2020) shows that, despite some progress, Serbian daily newspapers continue to depict women in ways that emphasize traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities. While certain coverage portrays women as equal to men, a substantial portion continues to focus on their private or domestic roles, illustrating the persistence of both subtle and overt sexism.

**Graph 1. Proportion of seats held by women in the Serbian parliament (%)**



Source: World Bank

Although the SNS is not always labeled a radical far-right party, it certainly exhibits elements of that segment of the political spectrum. Many traits typically associated with far-right politics are observable in Serbia, including ethnonationalism, opposition to immigration, resistance to European integration, a pro-Russia stance, and opposition to sexual minority rights (Bursać, 2025). As Minkenberg (2015) notes, distinctions between far-right, right-wing, and conservative center parties in post-communist systems are often blurred. Mainstream center-right parties frequently adopt nationalist agendas, employ populist rhetoric, and rely on authoritarian governance styles, producing fluidity across the spectrum (Bursać, 2025).

The SNS exemplifies this dynamic: its nationalist roots, populist practices, and mobilization of far-right sentiments enable it to consolidate support across the conservative and far-right spectrum (although populism is not necessarily an element of far-right ideology). As Dević (2021:227) points out “In Serbia, the “symbiosis” of the gendering of nationalism, repatriarchalization, and the New Right has been fundamental and constitutive of the triple “democratic transition”: the demise (and rejections) of the socialist regime, state-disintegration accompanied by the ethnonationalist wars, and the condemnation of Yugoslav multiethnic society and its trans-ethnic identities”.

From an analytical perspective, it is essential to examine how political sexism in Serbia is embedded within broader political attitudes and behaviors. In line with the literature and our hypotheses, we expect that supporters of populist parties, particularly the Serbian Progressive Party, which combines nationalist, populist, and far-right elements, will exhibit higher levels of political sexism (De Geus et al., 2022; Beauregard, 2021).

However, it is plausible that the political relevance of sexism is not direct. Instead, its effect on party support may operate through authoritarian orientations: political sexism may predict support for the SNS primarily because it reflects underlying authoritarian tendencies. In this sense, sexism does not act in isolation but forms part of a broader ideological framework through which individuals interpret social and political life, shaped by values, beliefs, and psychological orientations toward hierarchy, order, and identity.

## **Data, methods and measurements**

### *Data*

The Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) in Belgrade conducted a public opinion survey in Serbia, using the Module 6 questionnaire of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems<sup>6</sup> (CSES) project. CSES is a global comparative survey project oriented towards identifying institutional influences on political behaviour, through comparative studies of public opinion and electoral behaviour in a large number of today's democracies. Data for this study were collected between March and May 2021, i.e., after the parliamentary elections held on June 21, 2020, using an online, self-completion survey mode. The sampling strategy was non-random and based on convenience, which introduces certain limitations in terms of representativeness. Recruitment of the respondents was realised in two ways. First, invitations were sent via email to participants from ISS's pre-existing online panel, with two follow-up reminders issued to encourage participation. Second, additional recruitment was conducted through internet advertising and the dissemination of the survey link via digital communication platforms, including ISS's official website. This mixed approach facilitated a broader reach within the constraints of online data collection methods. Thus, the survey yielded responses from two distinct recruitment sources: an internet sample and an email sample. A total of 1,813 respondents fully completed the survey – 306 from the internet sample and 1,507 from the email sample. While the sample used in this study was non-random and based on convenience, it was nevertheless large and diverse, including respondents from nearly all municipalities in the country. To address potential biases and improve the representativeness of the findings, post-stratification weights were constructed based on key demographic variables, including gender, age, and education. Nevertheless, the main advantage of this study lies in its combination of different sampling strategies. Most importantly, the available data allow us to examine the role of sexism in shaping support for the current ruling party in Serbia.

### *Variables*

In this section, we describe the construction of the key variables used in our analysis: populist party preference, the Political Sexism Index, and the Authoritarianism Index.

6 Pilot-testing of the CSES M6 questionnaire. For more information about the CSES project, see <https://cses.org/>.

Our main dependent variable is *populist party support*, which we measure using respondents' like/dislike evaluations of the ruling party, Srpska Napredna Stranka (SNS). The survey question is as follows: *We would like you to tell us what you think about our political parties. Please rate them on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "strongly dislike" and 10 means "strongly like," indicating how much you like or dislike each party, including Srpska Napredna Stranka. If you have not heard of a party, please indicate so.* Responses on this 0–10 scale are used to capture the intensity of support or opposition toward the SNS, which serves as a proxy for populist support in the Serbian context.

The political sexism index (PSI) is designed to measure attitudes and perceptions regarding the role of women in politics. It is not intended to replace the concepts of hostile or benevolent sexism, nor could it fully do so. Rather, it focuses on a distinct dimension that is particularly relevant in the context of political science research. This makes the index especially valuable for examining how female politicians are perceived and how these perceptions may influence political behavior, voting choices, and support for gender-related policies. By targeting the political domain specifically, it provides insights that broader measures of sexism may overlook. This index captures elements of both hostile and benevolent sexism, as it reflects resistance to women's political advancement while simultaneously invoking gender-stereotypical beliefs about men's and women's suitability for different leadership roles (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003). Political Sexism Index is constructed from responses to four survey items designed to capture attitudes toward women's political roles (Table 1).

**Table 1. Items of the political sexism index (PSI)**

1. Please tell me whether you 1– strongly agree, 2– somewhat agree, 3– neither agree nor disagree, 4– somewhat disagree or 5– strongly disagree with each of the following statements:  <u>Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far.</u>
2. <i>The current percentage of women in Serbian parliament after the most recent election is 39,8%. Thinking about this percentage, would you say that it is 1– too high, 2– too low, or 3– about right?</i>
3. <i>Who is better suited to lead the country during a public health crisis: 1– male political leaders, 2– female political leaders, or 3– both equally?</i>
4. <i>Who is better suited to lead the country during an economic crisis: 1– male political leaders, 2– female political leaders, 3– or 5– both equally?</i>

To assess internal consistency of the index, we calculated Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.6$ ). The last two items were weaker contributors to the overall scale cohesion. The Alpha value is relatively modest, but we believe it is acceptable for an exploratory index that is also theoretically expected to be relatively heterogenous. The index is additive in nature: each sexist response (i.e., agreement with a sexist statement or disagreement with a pro-women statement) contributes +1 point; a neutral response is scored as 0; and each pro-women response contributes -1 point. As a result, the index ranges from -5 (indicating strong support for women in politics) to +5 (indicating strong political sexism).

*Individual authoritarianism index* is adapted from the F-scale (Adorno et al., 1950) and Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (Altemeyer, 1981). This index consists of 5 items<sup>7</sup>. Each statement reflects a belief in obedience, social conformity, or hierarchical thinking. Responses to each item are arranged on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 – represents strongly disagree and 5 – represents strongly agree. Together, these items form a reliable *Authoritarianism Scale*, capturing support for hierarchical authority, punitive discipline, censorship, and social stratification (for an example of an earlier used of the scale in Serbia, see Pavlović and Todosijević, 2017). The internal consistency of the scale is reliable, indicating that these items coherently measure the underlying authoritarian orientation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

We also included a set of control variables: gender, age, education, level of urbanization, attendance at religious services, external political efficacy, and identification with Serbia (for descriptive statistics, see Table 3 in the Appendix).

## Results

After introducing the main measures, we estimated two linear regression models to examine whether political sexism predicts like/dislike evaluations of the ruling party and to assess the potential mediating role of authoritarianism. We first evaluated the relationship between political sexism and SNS evaluations. Model 1 focuses on the association between political sexism and populism, while Model 2 incorporates authoritarianism to examine its interaction with political sexism in shaping support for populist party likes.

How do sexist attitudes within the political sphere influence individuals' evaluations of a populist party? When it comes to support for SNS, we observe greater differentiation in political sexism, which generally aligns with our expectations. Notably, SNS supporters tend to cluster around the broader average, indicating less deviation from general trends. People who positively evaluate SNS don't show extreme or unusual patterns. Their responses are close to the national average or typical across the whole population. Graph 2 presents how political preferences for SNS party vary across levels of political sexism.

7 Aut1. *Most of our social problems would be solved if we somehow got rid of immoral and deranged individuals.*

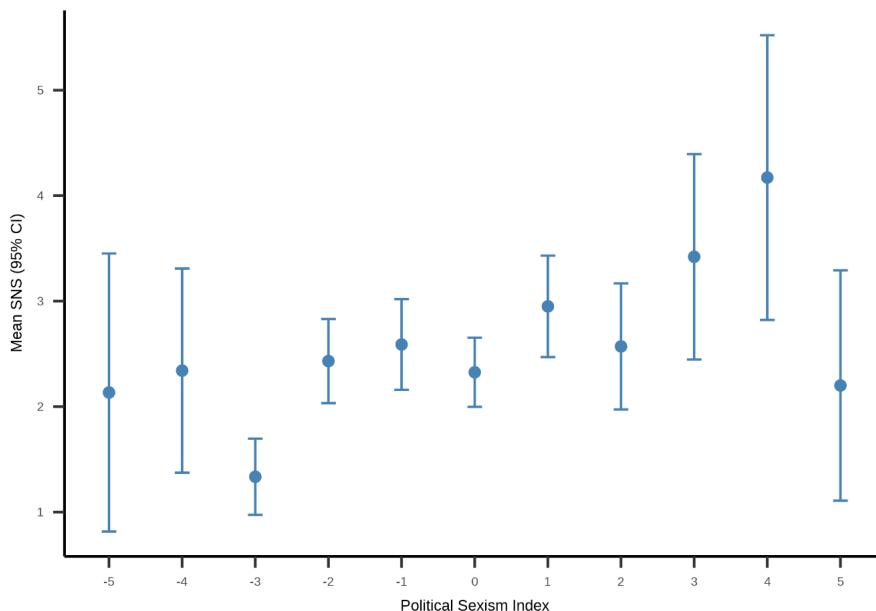
Aut2. *The most important virtues that children should learn are obedience and respect for authority.*

Aut3. *The state of immorality in our society is partly a consequence of the fact that both teachers and parents have forgotten that physical punishment is still the best way of education.*

Aut4. *It would be better for everyone if the authorities censored the press, movies, and other media so that garbage was kept away from the youth.*

Aut5. *People can be divided into two groups: strong and weak.*

**Graph 2. Relationship between Political Sexism Index and Like-Dislike of SNS**



The graph shows that as political sexism (PSI) increases, the mean SNS score also tends to increase (bivariate correlation coefficient is  $r=0.10, p<0.001$ ). Vertical whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the precision of the mean SNS estimate at each PSI level. These results suggest a positive relationship between political sexism and support for SNS: respondents with higher levels of sexism tend to express more favorable attitudes toward the populist party.

In order to examine this relationship in detail, we provided a model that incorporates sociodemographic characteristics, key political variables, and the Political Sexism Index, with the aim of explaining the dependent variable: like/dislike evaluations of the ruling party. Table 2 presents two linear regression models predicting like-dislike attitudes toward SNS. To address our second hypothesis concerning the potential mediating role of authoritarianism, Model 2 additionally includes this variable. Notably, individual authoritarianism is moderately and positively correlated with political sexism ( $r=0.33, p<0.001$ ). Model 1 explains a modest but meaningful portion of the variance (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.18$ ) and is based on a sample of  $N = 1,524$  respondents.

**Table 2. Multivariate models of populist support**

DV: like-dislike of SNS	Model 1					Model 2				
	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	Beta	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	Beta
Age	0.01	0.01	2.48	0.013	<b>0.06</b>	0.01	0.01	1.11	0.268	0.03
Gender (male)	-0.18	0.17	-1.08	0.278	-0.03	-0.07	0.17	-0.45	0.654	-0.01
Education	-0.07	0.07	-0.96	0.337	-0.02	0.03	0.07	0.50	0.618	0.01
Religious service attendance	0.51	0.06	8.10	0.000	<b>0.20</b>	0.40	0.06	6.36	0.000	<b>0.16</b>
Urbanization	-0.25	0.06	-4.59	0.000	<b>-0.11</b>	-0.19	0.05	-3.48	0.001	<b>-0.09</b>
External pol. efficacy	0.51	0.06	7.92	0.000	<b>0.19</b>	0.50	0.06	7.87	0.000	<b>0.18</b>
Identification with SRB	0.25	0.03	8.78	0.000	<b>0.21</b>	0.24	0.03	8.26	0.000	<b>0.20</b>
Sexism index	0.09	0.04	2.29	0.022	<b>0.06</b>	-0.01	0.04	-0.10	0.923	0.00
Authoritarianism						0.74	0.09	8.15	0.000	<b>0.21</b>
	Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =0.18					Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =0.21				

Source: JMS 2021, Serbia, weighted by Weight W4\_SAE: Sex, Age, Education

As shown in Table 2, several variables are statistically significant predictors. Age has a small but significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that older respondents are slightly more likely to express favorable attitudes toward SNS. Attendance at religious services is positively associated with SNS liking ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting stronger support among more religious individuals. External political efficacy is also a significant predictor of liking SNS ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that those who believe voting can make a meaningful difference in political outcomes (i.e., external political efficacy) tend to have a more favorable opinion of SNS. Identification with Serbia has the strongest standardized effect ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), showing that stronger national identification is a key predictor of SNS support. The level of urbanization is negatively associated with the liking of SNS ( $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), meaning that respondents in more urban areas tend to view SNS, on average, less favorably. The Political Sexism Index is an additional statistically significant positive predictor of SNS support ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that individuals with higher levels of sexism are more likely to favor SNS. This finding supports our first hypothesis (H1) that citizens with stronger sexist orientations tend to prefer the examined populist party. Other variables, such as gender and education do not reach statistical significance and thus do not meaningfully contribute to the prediction in this model.

Model 2 represents a regression model predicting like/dislike of SNS as the dependent variable (DV), highlighting key differences when authoritarianism is added. The adjusted R<sup>2</sup> increases from 0.18 to 0.21, indicating that the model with the authoritarianism scale explains more variance in support for SNS.

Most importantly, in Model 2, once authoritarianism is included, the effect of sexism becomes non-significant ( $\beta = 0.00$ ,  $p = 0.92$ ). This suggests that the influence of sexist attitudes on support for SNS is likely mediated or confounded by authoritarian tendencies which confirms our second hypothesis (H2). With a

standardized coefficient of  $\beta = 0.21$  ( $p <.001$ ), authoritarianism emerges as one of the strongest predictors, comparable to national identification and stronger than external political efficacy or identification with Serbia. Key variables like identification with Serbia, religiosity, and external political efficacy remain significant in both models, though the strength of religiosity slightly decreases when authoritarianism is added. The second model, which includes both sexism and authoritarianism, is superior in explanatory power. It reveals that authoritarian attitudes account for the apparent effect of sexism seen in the first model. This finding aligns with the idea that support for right-wing populist and authoritarian actors like SNS is driven more by generalized authoritarian worldviews than by gender-specific prejudice alone.

## Discussion

Political sexism is connected to a broad spectrum of political attitudes and preferences. This study examined the relevance of political sexism for attitudes towards the dominant political party in Serbia, contributing to the growing comparative literature on gendered attitudes and populist support. Consistent with prior research in Western democracies (Bracic et al., 2019; Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Schaffner, 2022; Beauregard, 2021; De Geus et al., 2022), we find that individuals with higher levels of political sexism are more likely to support populist parties, specifically the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). However, once authoritarianism is accounted for, the effect of sexism becomes non-significant, indicating that its influence on the support for populism operates primarily through broader authoritarian orientations. This aligns with findings from Lodders and Weldon (2019) and Austin and Jackson (2019), showing that sexist attitudes are closely intertwined with authoritarian worldviews and hierarchical thinking, rather than functioning as independent predictors of political attitudes and preferences.

Finally, the analyses highlighted the interplay between sexism, authoritarianism, and party preferences. Authoritarianism emerges as one of the strongest direct predictors of SNS support, comparable to national identification and stronger than external political efficacy. These constructs are strongly intertwined, sharing many socio-demographic and ideological correlates. In predictive models, the inclusion of authoritarianism frequently reduces or nullifies the direct effect of political sexism, suggesting that authoritarianism may exert political influence partly through sexist attitudes. This supports the Dual-Process Motivational framework (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), which emphasizes how personality dispositions and internalized worldview beliefs, such as authoritarianism and social dominance, shape attitudes including sexism and political preferences. In this sense, political sexism seems to reflects a broader attitudinal structure encompassing resistance to social change, adherence to traditional values, and preference for hierarchy, consistent with previous cross-national studies on Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation (Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007; Crowson & Brandsen, 2017).

The Serbian context presents additional complexity. While women hold prominent political positions and gender equality is enshrined in formal institutions, traditional gender norms and subtle forms of sexism persist (Dević, 2021; Nedić, 2020). Our findings suggest that support for SNS is less about gender-specific prejudice *per se* and more about alignment with authoritarian and hierarchical worldviews, which echo patterns observed in other European countries where populist and radical-right support is tied to sexist and authoritarian attitudes (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024; Anduiza & Rico, 2024).

Overall, this study underscores the importance of considering the intersection between sexism and authoritarianism in understanding political attitudes and preferences. While political sexism is present in Serbia, its relevance for party preferences is largely mediated by authoritarian orientations. This highlights the need for future research to examine how these attitudes interact across different political contexts, and to disentangle the effects of gendered prejudice from broader ideological dispositions in shaping support for populist and conservative parties. A key limitation of this study is that the data were collected from a non-representative sample. Consequently, estimates of mean levels of political sexism, authoritarianism, and support for SNS should be interpreted with caution. Future research using nationally representative and probability-based samples would help validate these results and strengthen inferences about the prevalence and political implications of sexist attitudes in Serbia.

## Appendix

**Table 3. Item wordings, means, and standard deviations of variables**

Variable:	Values range	M	SD
Age	Continuous variable (values in years).	49.56	14.664
Education	From 1 to 8, where higher values indicate a higher level of education	6.46	1.273
Religious service attendance	From 1 to 6, where 6 indicates Once a week/ more than once a week	2.25	1.359
Urbanization	From 1 to 6, where 6 indicates higher levels of urbanization	3.94	1.596
External pol. Efficacy	From 1 to 5, where 5 indicates Who people vote for can make a big difference	4.07	1.270
Identification with SRB	From 0 to 10, where 10 indicates very emotionally attached to Serbia	7.60	2.885
Political Sexism Index	From -5 to 5, where 5 indicates higher levels of sexism	-0.46	2.083
Authoritarianism index	From 1 to 5, where 5 indicates higher levels of authoritarianism	2.51	1.149
Like/Dislike SNS	From 0 to 10, where 10 indicates Strongly like	2.39	3.471
	Percentage		
Gender	Women	52%	
	Men	48%	

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