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The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space

A Comparative Study of Far-Right Movements
and Identity in the Region



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Preface

Liberal Democracy and Its Alternatives

The Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES), founded in 2005 at Södertörn University, Stockholm, promotes and develops research and doctoral studies focusing on the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe. CBEES organizes conferences, workshops, public lectures and advanced seminars, and hosts postdocs, guest researchers, and PhD students. CBEES also publishes *Baltic Worlds*, a quarterly scholarly journal which, like this report, and CBEES itself is funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (*Östersjöstiftelsen*).

The *CBEES State of the Region Report* is an annual publication, reporting and reflecting on social and political developments in the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe, each year taking a new and topical perspective. The first report, covering events in 2020, focused mainly on constructions or reconstructions of national historical memory in the region and the instrumentalization of the past. This year, the aim of the report is to present an overview of elements of far-right national identity and populist politics in the recent upsurge of authoritarianism, Euroscepticism and illiberalism in the Baltic Sea Region and Central and Eastern Europe.

Contrary to hopes and actual progress in the early 2000s, what we have seen in Central and Eastern Europe since the EU expansions

in 2004 and 2007 indicate that the state of democracy in the region is far from assured. Some scholars have pointed to the communist legacy in order to explain the resilience of non-liberal orientations among citizens in the region; while others have identified performance-related explanations (like corruption) for the emergence of low trust societies, where far right and populist parties may thrive. In order to understand the challenges that lie ahead, we need a better understanding of how far right ideas and attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe come to be manifested. That is the point of the 2021 report.

Ninna Mörner has edited the report, alongside CBEES-associated researchers Mark Bassin, Joakim Ekman, Tora Lane, and Per Anders Rudling. We hope that the report will stimulate informed academic debate as well as public discussion on the state of affairs in the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe. ●

Ulla Manns,
Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research,
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Joakim Ekman,
Director of CBEES,
Södertörn University

”

What we have seen in Central and Eastern Europe since the EU expansions in 2004 and 2007 indicate that the state of democracy in the region is far from assured.

The Core Idea is “Our Own People First”

by **Zoran Pavlović** and **Bojan Todosijević**

Identity politics has long been in the focus of scholarly research.¹ Fukuyama,² for instance, argues that the politics of today is more defined by questions of identity than by economic and ideological concerns. Aimed at explaining the political activities rooted in injustice and marginalization and reclaiming greater political freedoms for the “oppressed”, the concept of identity politics has been used in theoretical analysis of a variety of political upheavals, from women’s and civil rights movements to separatist and populist movements.

In general terms, it is based on the idea that some social groups are oppressed and their members more vulnerable to, for instance, cultural imperialism, marginalization, and even violence.³ Members of such groups feel deprived and believe that their identities, in whatever terms, are not receiving adequate recognition.⁴ As such, identity becomes utilized

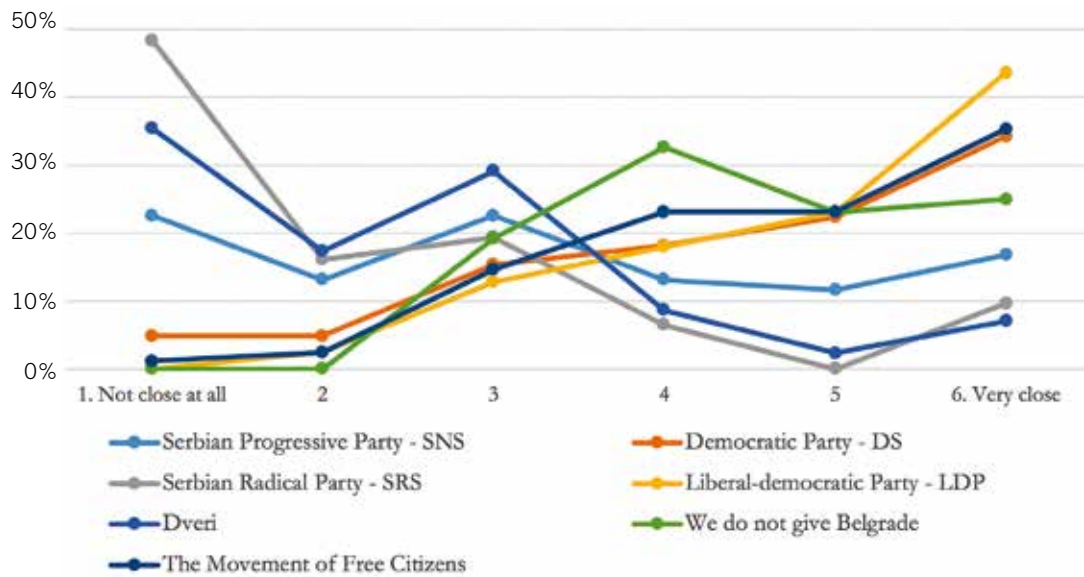
as a “tool to frame political claims, promote political ideologies, or stimulate and orient social and political action, usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice and with the aim of asserting group distinctiveness and belonging and gaining power and recognition”.⁵ In a way, identity becomes the expression of underlying social cleavage – a fracture between groups that differ in “objective” positions within society, developing a distinct and distinctive set of culture and values orientations, and a common “disadvantaged” identity. Such divisions often have a substantial potential political payoff and can forcefully motivate political action.

Although in essence related to the lived experiences of *minority* groups (for example, those fighting racial discrimination), which has traditionally been a leftist issue, identity politics has increasingly, especially in the context of the European politics, been used

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In a way, identity becomes the expression of underlying social cleavage.

Figure 1: Closeness to other Europeans by party identification



Source: JMS 2018 online survey (N=611)

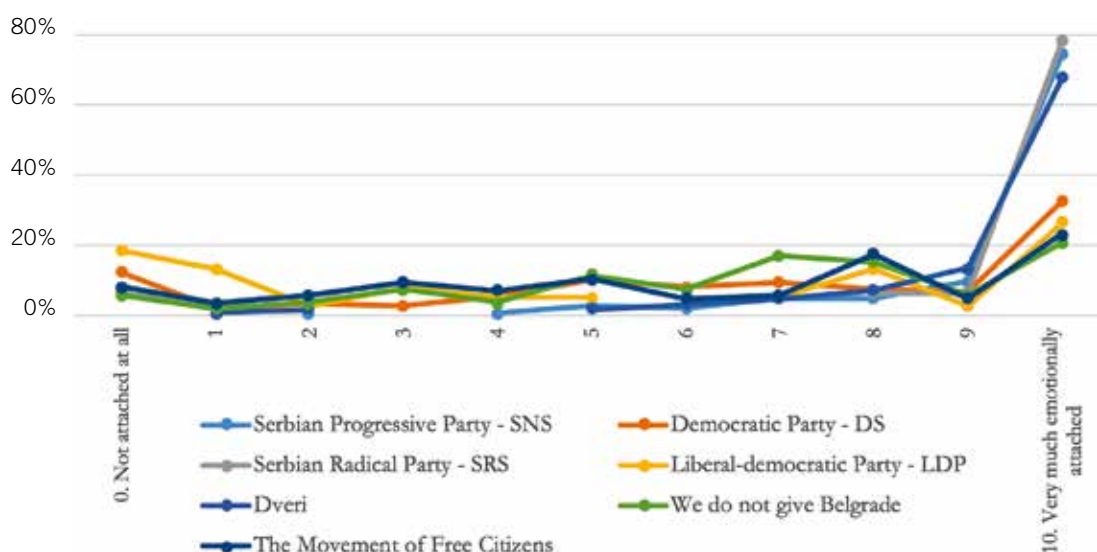
around the idea that the silent majority needs to be protected from globalization and immigration.⁶ Thus, identity politics has been embraced by right-leaning movements and parties. In a sense, the right has redefined its core mission as the patriotic protection of traditional national identity, which is often explicitly related to race, ethnicity, or religion.⁷ As a sort of “reactionary tribalism”,⁸ in the mission of the reproduction of the “white nation” as part of the endangered “Western civilization”,⁹ the core idea of (far) right politics has become: “Our own people first”.¹⁰ These specific grievances narratives and consequent hostility oriented against ethnic minorities have been extensively utilized in the East European context as well, both during and before the ongoing authoritarian-populist wave and recent immigration/refugee crisis.

There is a variety of theoretical reasons why narratives that focus on ethnic identities should be more voiced by those on the right. The main features of conservative/rightist ideology with its emphasis on hierarchy, status quo, and security,¹¹ the importance of nationalist sentiments and opposition to ideas, individuals and groups that disrupt social order and the traditional way of life, can easily be conceptu-

alized as the need to protect the *ingroup* from an *outgroup* threat, irrespective of minority/majority status or in a society (e.g., a minority can present a *symbolic*, rather than “real” threat). These issues are especially relevant in the context of relatively recent dramatic political and social history (including ethnic-based conflicts), such as those in Eastern Europe since the 1990s, or ongoing global social turmoil (economic & immigration crisis, pandemics, etc.). In particular, numerous empirical studies from Serbia showed that supporters of parties on the right are more prone to nationalistic, authoritarian, and traditionalistic values and attitudes.¹² This would additionally stress the relevance of the ethnic-national discourse as a way of political mobilization, which can be more utilized by those on the right side of the political spectrum.

Finally, identification with the national and supranational (i.e., European) community significantly varies between the supporters of political parties in Serbia. As shown in Figure 1, supporters of the main rightist political parties in Serbia, SRS, Dveri, and SNS,¹³ feel less close to other Europeans in comparison to the supporters of the more liberal political parties (e.g., Democratic Party, DS, Liberal-democratic

Figure 2: Emotional attachment to Serbia by party identification



Source: JMS 2018 online survey (N=623)

Party, LDP). The majority of those who support parties on the right are on the “negative” pole of the six-point closeness scale, while only a tiny fraction of supporters of other political parties stated that they do *not* feel close to Europe (see Figure 1).

Similarly, the attachment to Serbia is significantly more pronounced among supporters of the rightist parties than among those who support other political options (see Figure 2). For example, on an eleven-point national attachment item (0. not at all / 10. very much), approximately three-quarters of SNS and SRS supporters placed themselves on the positive end of the scale, stating that they fell *very much* emotionally attached to Serbia; the same goes for, say, “only” a third of (liberal and somewhat leftist) DS supporters. All this suggests that national identification, as a facet of identity politics, is polarized and politicized in Serbia. Clearly, national identification is more intense among supporters of the rightist parties.

The aim of this article is to analyze the main elements of the ethnic identity politics narratives in official documents of relevant rightist political parties and movements in Serbia. We proceed as follows: We first give a short

description of the political actors included, their ideologies and political relevance (i.e., the rationale for their inclusion in analysis). The results of the analysis of their manifestoes are then presented and discussed. We conclude with some final remarks.

Rightist Movements and Parties in Serbia

This analysis is focused on (far) right movements and political parties that are currently active in political life in Serbia or, at least, have some political ambitions.¹⁴ Below is given a short description of these:

- **Serbian Radical Party (SRS).** The SRS was founded in 1991, challenging the ruling former communists from an extreme nationalist position. However, during most of the 1990s, the SRS supported the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia’s (SPS) regime and had strong popular support until 2000, when they suffered a major defeat. The SRS is positioned on the far-right on the political spectrum and often labelled as nationalist, xenophobic, anti-Western, traditionalist, and Russophile.¹⁵
- **Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).** The

“Supporters of parties on the right are more prone to nationalistic, authoritarian, and traditionalistic values and attitudes.”

”
SNS's policies implemented since in power reveal clear neo-liberal, that is right-wing, economic leanings.

SNS was founded in 2008 as a splinter party from the above-mentioned extreme nationalist SRS. It retained the conservative outlook while expressing lip service to pro-European and neoliberal policies. In 2012 SNS came into power and has won every national-level election since then. Its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, is currently the President of the Republic of Serbia, while SNS has an absolute majority in the current Government and Parliament. SNS has been described as a catch-all, populist and nationalist political party and is actively balancing between “East” and “West”.

- **Serbian Right (SD).** Serbian Right is a minor ultranationalist and far-right political party in Serbia, founded in 2018 and led by Miša Vacić, mostly known for his anti-LGBT and xenophobic rhetoric.
- **Oathkeepers.** This is a minor far-right ultranationalist political party founded in 2012 that actively opposes EU and NATO and advocates pro-Russian politics. They participated in the parliamentary elections in 2020 but did not enter Parliament.
- **The Serbian Movement “Dveri”.** Dveri is a right-wing, conservative political party. It was formed in 1999 as a Christian right-wing youth organization promoting nationalism, Orthodox Christianity, and family values. In 2010 they became a full-scale political party, participating in general elections from 2012 onwards (they managed to enter the Parliament only once, in 2016, as part of a pre-election coalition with some other parties).
- **National Network.** This is a minor right-wing political movement founded in 2015 by a former prominent figure of the above-mentioned Dveri political party, Vladan Glišić, currently a member of the Serbian Parliament. Although they participated in the national elections in 2016, the National Network is a relatively inactive actor in Serbian politics, visible in public only through the activities of its leader.
- **I live for Serbia.** A far-right political movement founded and led by Jovana Stojković, a psychiatrist who recently has become well-

known for her anti-vaccination rhetoric and activities. She is a former member of the Dveri political party.

- **Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS).** This is a right-wing, monarchist, and conservative political party in Serbia, founded in 2017 after a split within the larger Serbian Renewal Movement political party. They participated in parliamentary elections in 2020, obtaining 2.67% of the valid vote, but did not enter parliament.

SNS is the dominant political party in today's Serbia, and its inclusion in the present analysis may seem controversial. The party is clearly on the right-wing side of the cultural aspect of the left-right dimension. SNS's policies implemented since in power reveal clear neo-liberal, that is right-wing, economic leanings. However, this is not much reflected in the SNS materials that were analyzed. The still-official party program was formulated back in 2011 before they won the major elections in 2012 and came to power. This document is, in some respects, the textbook of populism – full of blaming the then-ruling parties for all problems, presenting them as a corrupt, alienated group acting against the common people. There are very few references to identity politics.¹⁶ Hence, some of the overall conclusions of this article do not fully apply to SNS if we focus exclusively on the party program. However, the party's exclusive conception of national identity is clearly visible in their daily policies.¹⁷

Ethnic Identity Politics in Rightist Movements' and Parties' Platforms

As stated above, the analysis included the most important political movements and parties that represent the right wing of the ideological spectrum in current Serbian politics (see Table 1). Their main agendas are analyzed by way of combined narrative and thematic analysis, performed through several stages: familiarization with the text, systematically categorizing the data by generating codes and developing themes.¹⁸ We treated the manifestos and party programs as a sort of ideology narrative which,

Table 1: Movements and parties included, document types, and source

Party (Serbian name; acronym)	Document type	Manifesto date	Source:
Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka; SRS)	Party manifesto	2019	www.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/program.html
Serbian Right (Srpska desnica; SD)	Party manifesto	2018	www.srpskadesnica.rs/cir/program-stranke/
Oathkeepers (Zavetnici)	Party manifesto	2021*	www.zavetnici.rs/program-stranke/
National network (Narodna mreža)	Party manifesto	2015	www.narodnamreza.com/sr/manifest.html
Srpski pokret “Dveri” (Serbian Movement “Dveri”)	Party manifesto	2021*	dveri.rs/zasto-dveri/program/
I live for Serbia (Živim za Srbiju)	Party manifesto	2018	zivimzasrbiju.com/program-pokreta/
Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (Pokret obnove kraljevine Srbije, POKS)	Party manifesto	2018	poks.rs/dokumenti/program-statut-i-pravilnici/
Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS)	Party manifesto	2011	www.sns.org.rs/sites/default/files/bela-knjiga.pdf

* html/site version; Date refers to the date when the document was accessed.

like any other narrative, has specific content, structure and function.¹⁹ The main aim of such an analysis was the identification of the main elements related to the expression of national identity and communication of it in their manifestos. What constitutes “us”? Who are “we” and “they”? Are the criteria of “we-ness” ethnic? What aspects of it are ‘endangered’ by “them”? What can “we” do about it, and what policy implications arise? Can some underlying functions of such rhetoric be identified? These are some of the main research questions that guided the manifesto analysis.

Starting from the general, primarily socio-psychological, theorizing on social identity,²⁰ we expected that the “us” versus “them” distinction would be easily identified, mainly, but not necessarily, in ethnic terms. Ethnic ingroup and outgroup membership would be salient and underlying motivational processes that stress the (symbolic) threat that “they” pose strongly voiced. Various policy stances as a reaction to threat and ways of responding to it would be proposed in order to overcome the threat and maintain the positive (ethnic) group identity. As such, it would serve a different function like re-establishing group dominance,

system justification, or supporter mobilization. This is the well-described and evidenced dynamics of political conservatism in general terms²¹ and a reasonable starting position in analyzing the patterns of rightist groups’ political communication. But what constitutes “we” and “they”, what is perceived as threatened, and which policy should be introduced to answer it are empirically unanswered questions which our study tries to address (see Table 1).

Serbia represents a context where identity politics is particularly likely to be framed in national/ethnic terms, given the violent collapse of the former Yugoslavia. Specifically, Serbia supported the continuation of Yugoslavia, among other reasons, because this polity would keep all Serbs within a single country. However, this proved an impossible goal, and the country collapsed so that large Serbian minorities remained in some of the seceding countries (mainly Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). Since Serbia/Serbs emerged as the main losers of the 1990s wars, it is not surprising that ethnicity and nationalism have remained salient political issues. Yet, during the last decade, nationalism has been quite attenu-

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Yet, during the last decade, nationalism has been quite attenuated in the rhetoric of the main parties.

ated in the rhetoric of the main parties, even the right-wing ones. Not entirely, of course. In the case of the ruling SNS, for instance, the nationalist discourse mostly comes from the second echelon of their political figures.

Table 2 summarizes the core themes that emerged in the manifestoes in regard to the main elements of identity narratives. The first column denotes the issue of who the main narrative actors are (the WE), groups of people that are communicated to or on whose behalf the party speaks, whose interests and image they protect. The second column lists various “entities” (not necessarily members of groups with clear-cut boundaries) that are targeted as those who pose a threat to the ingroup in the broadest sense of the term (THEY). What is perceived as ‘endangered’ is given in the third column; these features include not just familiar elements of ingroup identities and symbolic markers of group membership, but, so to speak, anything that is perceived as “threatened” (WHAT) and is related to “us” or perceived as “ours”. The final column summarizes the policies that are formulated as a reaction to the perceived ingroup/outgroup dynamics, as a response to the question of how ‘we’ should deal with it (HOW). The following example illustrates the analytical strategies:

The current cultural politics in Serbia destroys the Serbian national identity [WHAT] and any cultural uniqueness [WHAT]. Serbia [WE] is under fierce attack of global colonialism groups [THEY], who promote violence and primitivism [...] The most important cultural institutions [WHAT] of Serbia, such as the Serbian Academy of Science and Art, National Museum, Serbian literary association, are being destroyed and marginalized by the plan [...] We advocate the protection of Serbian cultural heritage [HOW] and new cultural politics [HOW].

We aimed to identify the full range of “themes” in regard to these narrative elements. Under

each domain, we differentiated facets of content that are conceptually distinct (have a different meaning), relatively general (integrate various specific instances), extensive (cover all empirically identified instantiations), and exclusive (do not overlap). We did not seek to identify *all* policy positions that have been advocated in a specific manifesto, but only those that, in line with the above example, could have been unequivocally treated as motivated by or as a reaction to a perceived ingroup threat.

If we turn to Table 2 entries, it is clear at first glance that “we” are mostly the members of the *ethnic majority* in Serbia, in its various linguistic elaborations (e.g., “We have the best interests and sovereignty of the Serbian people at heart”; “The Serbs have always been at the Balkan crossroads”; “The Serbian nation is in crisis”). But the ingroup often comprises those upholding traditional values or a positive and unquestionable attachment to the nation as well (e.g., “We are not just another patriotic organization [...]”; “Emphasizing traditions and being a true patriot is the constructive and valid attitude towards one’s own nation”).

With this in mind, one would expect that “they” (labeled as those who pose a threat to the ingroup) should be defined as members of a different *ethnic* group. Yet that is, in fact, quite rare. Apart from the Albanians, “they” denotes quite heterogeneous non-ethnic groups:

- *international organizations and associations* that can be:
 - *political* (European Union, e.g., “The collapse of the Republic of Serbia is being carried out through the current process of implementing the legal system reforms ordered by the EU”)
 - *economic* (International Monetary Fund, e.g., “The domestic economy should not be based on the dictates of the IMF and the World Bank”)
 - *military* (NATO, e.g., “NATO attacked our country in 1999 [...] and supported the formation of the illegal Kosovo state”)
- *generic foreign* (factors/states/capital, e.g., “Serbia is currently under literal occupation by foreign structures”)

Table 2: The main elements of identity politics narratives in right-wing political movements and party manifestos in Serbia (alphabetically ordered)

Who are “WE”?	Who / What are “THEY”?	WHAT is ours that is “endangered” by them?	HOW to deal with is (core policy issues)?
<p><u>Ethnic ingroup</u> Citizens of Serbia Good people of Serbia Serbia Serbian nation The people The Serbs The Slovenians</p> <p><u>Shared values</u> Patriots Traditionalists</p>	<p><u>Ethnic outgroups (“enemies”)</u> Albanians</p> <p><u>Foreign (neoliberal) actors</u> Banks Brussels Capitalists International economic institutions (MF, WB) EU Foreign “factors” Foreign capital Power centers Foreign countries Global colonialism Globalization NATO The Globalists USA Washington “West”</p> <p><u>Foreign (neo/liberal) values</u> Consumerism European values Hedonism Individualism</p> <p><u>Domestic “enemies”</u> Corrupted elites Internal traitors Leftists Communists “Extremists” Feminists Liberals Neoliberals Regime Ruling parties Auto-chauvinists Separatists</p> <p><u>Other</u> “They”</p>	<p><u>Facets of ethnic identity</u> Collective being Collective consciousness Collective identity Collective memory Cyrillic alphabet Diaspora National identity Serbian “spirit” Our people Our biology Serbian soul Serbian language</p> <p><u>Facets of nation-state</u> Economy Environment Freedom Kosovo and Metohija Land Legal system National / cultural institutions National state Serbia Serbian banks Territory</p> <p><u>Culture, morality & religion</u> Cultural heritage Cultural uniqueness Family Family values Orthodox spirituality Orthodoxy Patriarchal society Social cohesion The church Traditional society Unity</p>	<p><u>International relations</u> Sovereigntist agenda State independence Economic protectionism EU scepticism Eurasian orientation Non-cooperation with Western countries Pro-Russian policy Pro-military</p> <p><u>Culture, morality & religion</u> Anti-immigration Anti-LGBT Anti-NGO Censorship Cultural assimilation Pro-family policies Pro-natality Protecting culture Protecting traditional values Patriotic education Unity</p> <p><u>Political system</u> Centralization Return to monarchy</p> <p><u>Economic system</u> Economic patriotism</p>

Note: Entries illustrate the full varieties of elements identified under each narrative domain; individual manifestos contain one or more of the listed entries under each domain, but none include all of the above.

”
The threat
narrative
represents
a sort of
coded hostility
towards
outgroups.

- *individual countries* that are often seen negatively by the Serbian right-leaning public (the USA, e.g. “[...] the USA and the majority of the EU countries made an illegal attack on our country, despite UN regulations”) or its metonymical denotation (Washington)
- large *cultural units* (‘West’, e.g., “For ages, the Serbs have been perceived by the West as “little Russians” on the Balkans”)
- *internal ‘traitors’*, as well as ruling political elite (e.g. “[...] the governing structures justified every concession toward the foreign demands that they made at the expense of the Serbian people”; “This method is being used by domestic traitors as a way of the dissolution of Serbia”)
- those that represent *ideologies* that are the antithesis to rightist beliefs and values (communism, individualism, feminism, neoliberalism, “European” values, e.g., “Feminism is an especially dangerous phenomenon [...] it destroys the very fabric of society – the family”; “European values are anti-civilization values which would lead Serbia into the dark ages of the new barbarism”; “All leftist theories and liberalism lead to the loss of national identity”).

Perhaps the broadest common denominator to the listed entities that represent a threat to “us” is that they represent liberal and, to some extent, leftist (although also economic neoliberal) ideology and discourse. This ideology is then identified with its source, which is “Western”, “foreign”, and so on.

“They” threaten different aspects of ingroup identity, variously labeled as a collective being, identity or consciousness, Serbian soul or spirit (e.g., “Current cultural politics decomposes Serbia national identity”; “[...] this is the issue of Serbian national identity and the archetypically coded soul of the Serbian people”; “[...] the crisis of the collective identity and value emptiness of our collective being”), as well as symbolic markers of ethnic memberships – cultural heritage, uniqueness, national identity, the Serbian language, Cyrillic alphabet, and Orthodox spirituality (e.g., “The protection of the national culture and identity, Orthodox

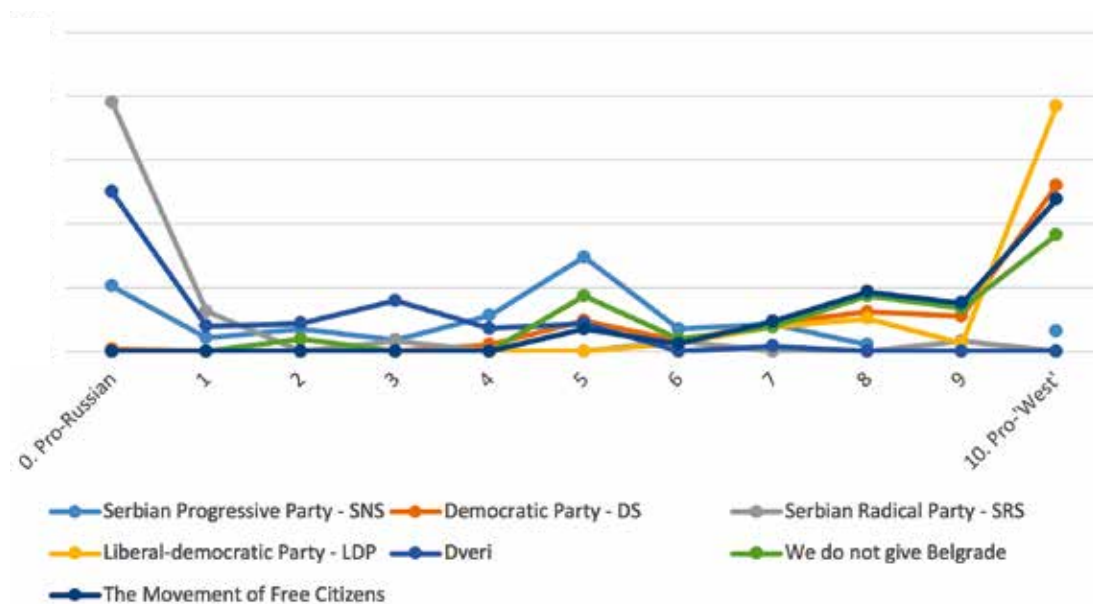
religion, the Serbian language, and the Cyrillic alphabet”; “We should work on protecting our own traditions and cultural heritage”; “[...] we should secure and maintain symbols and institutions that protect our very identity – a father figure, mother, family, army, work, authority principle [...]”).

Yet what needs protection is not just the matter of identity and symbolic issues, but different aspects of the nation-state (e.g., economy, territory, e.g., “For more than 20 years we have been watching the dissolution of the Serbian territory [...]”; “[...] foreign economic monopoly is favored over inadequate incentives for the domestic economy [...]”) and fabric of society (e.g., family values, patriarchal society, social cohesion, collective memory, e.g., “We oppose anything that endangers family values”; “[...] to protect various elements of tradition and organic patriarchal society”; “[...] we think that those ideological, political and theoretical matrices that are in contrast to social cohesion are the most dangerous”).

(See Table 2.)

The policy stances that are formulated as a response to outgroup threat are as pervasive. They cover the typical facets of rightist political ideology such as the re-establishing or maintaining *group domination and hierarchies* (e.g. anti-LGBT and anti-immigration, assimilation policies, e.g. “We will forbid the promotion of homosexuality to under-aged persons and fight anti-family ideologies”; “We will limit the passing of immigrants through Serbia”), emphasizing *traditional morality* (pro-family and natality agenda, censorship, patriotic education, e.g. “The strong family is necessary for the survival of Serbia”; “We will cancel or additionally tax reality shows”; “We will promote education in those areas that are important for [...] the development of the patriotic consciousness”), *security* (pro-military policies, obligatory military service, e.g. “We advocate the return of obligatory military service for all healthy men”; “The long and honorable history of the Serbian army demands and obliges the state of Serbia to provide all the conditions for a strong and efficient army, always ready to defend of the

Figure 3: Pro-Russian versus pro-“West”: self-positioning by party identification



Source: JMS 2018 online survey (N=627)

state and the people”) and *ingroup cohesion and solidarity* (centralization, unity agenda, e.g. “We advocate the unicameral National Assembly which is the expression of the unitary and centralized state”; “[...] regionalization and autonomy for the territorial subunits is nothing but the way to dissolve the Serbia”). *Nation-state independence* (political and economic anti-imperialism, anti-EU; e.g., “We must end the fatal EU dogma”; “We advocate urgent ending of EU-has-no-alternative politics”) or, at best, *pro-East’ orientation* (pro-Russian and pro-Asian agenda; e.g. “[...] getting closer to Russia in political, military, economic and cultural areas”; “Why spend enormous energy and resources for second-class membership in the Atlantic alliances, when, on the basis of our identity and history, we are already an important state and group of people within the Eurasian area?”) is strongly advocated.

Conclusion

This short and exploratory analysis has shown that the main elements of identity politics narratives can be easily identified in Serbian (far) right political parties and movements. It is typically developed on the grievance and threat motifs, which depicts the majority ethnic group,

the Serbs, as the target of attacks from various sides and one that needs protecting from “them” who have many faces.

“We” is primarily identified by ethnic criteria; “our own people first” is quite an adequate description of the principle that guides the selection of policy positions that are advocated. These include the usual facets of rightist ideology. However, our analysis points to a relatively specific function that these identity narratives have – these specific policies and, as a unifying theme, general ideology is, in part, justified by the need to protect those with a shared identity. The parties’ and movements’ programs and manifestoes are not just an ideological “menu”, evidence of policy agenda, but an “instrument” of persuasion, strongly addressing group-related and existential motivation. The threat narrative represents a sort of coded hostility towards outgroups (people, institutions, ideologies) that not only justifies the often radical policy stances but frame it as an unavoidable act for the “greater good” and necessary when faced with adversity and imminent threat to the group “survival”.

Shared identity most often means shared *ideological*, not necessarily ethnic identity.

”

The economic cleavage is depicted mostly from the angle of the (assumed) underdog perspective within the global scene.

“We” are the Serbs, but “They” are not primarily members of an ethnic outgroup but, broadly speaking, ideological dissidents. Despite recent history, “They” are more often the Liberals or Neoliberals than Albanians, and almost never Croats or Bosniaks.²² The economic cleavage is depicted mostly from the angle of the (assumed) underdog perspective within the global scene, presenting Serbia and Serbs as being threatened by the current global configuration of forces.

One reason for the predominance of “foreign” and “Western” over the ethnic neighbors as defining “they” is that the conflict with local national and ethnic groups is often perceived as being caused, or at least encouraged, by those global forces and actors. One often encountered view is that without such malign foreign influence, there would be no real conflicts in the Balkans or that Serbia would handle these conflicts easily if there were no interference from foreign powers.

This overall picture seems to be an expression of the pervasive and long-lasting ideological polarization in Serbia described in terms of East-West division. As shown in the this analysis, there is, for example, a prominent advocating of non-cooperation with Western countries and closer association with Eastern and Asian countries. It is an issue that has been very salient in Serbian public opinion and media discourse for decades. One quick look at Figure 3 is enough to spot a very prominent trend of more pro-Russian ideological orientation among those who support rightist political parties and more intense pro-Western orientation among those who support other parties. Just like their ideological counterparts in Western societies, which protect the “Western civilization”²³ more than the ethnic ingroup, the Serbian right seems to be more of a protector of “civilization” or an ideological world-view, just the Eastern version of it (see Figure 3).

Finally, it should also be mentioned that the manifestoes and programs examined contain abundant populist references, especially among those parties close to the SNS. They tend to emphasize the threat posed by domestic “en-

emies” – the allegedly corrupt parties and individuals that represent the liberal opposition. While the SNS leadership leaves the expression of extreme nationalism to the lower party functionaries, the smaller extreme right parties are free in expressing their anti-liberalism, against both domestic opponents and foreign ones.

An obvious weakness of the adopted approach is the focus on party programs. These are often simply listings of good wishes, with carefully chosen words in order not to antagonize those whose cooperation a party or movement might once want to obtain. For instance, the SNS program is full of references to cooperation with all countries and ethnic groups. However, in practice, it is very dependent on particular interests at stake and daily circumstances. So, for instance, enemies are not the USA, but Democrats in the USA, while Trump and his administration were portrayed as friends of Serbia. Once the US government changed, the rhetoric of the top party functionaries became much more careful.²⁴ Future research should include a wider variety of sources and combine quantitative and qualitative approaches more thoroughly. ●

References

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- 12 E.g., D. Pantić & Z. Pavlović, *Political culture of voters in Serbia*. (Belgrade: Institute of Social Sciences, 2009); B. Todosijević & Z. Pavlović, *Pred glasačkom kutijom: Politička psihologija izbornog ponašanja u Srbiji*. (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka 2020).
- 13 See below for the parties’ description and acronyms; we will mostly use Serbian version of the parties’ acronyms throughout the paper.
- 14 This is not an exhaustive list. The area of extreme right groups, organizations, movements, and sometimes political parties is in constant flux. However, the included list covers the most important ones, judging both according to their presence in the public sphere, and their recent electoral performance.
- 15 At the 2020 parliamentary elections, SRS obtained 2.05% of the valid vote, but failed to enter parliament. However, despite their poor electoral performance, the party is quite present in the public sphere due to extensive media exposure given to its leader V. Šešelj (convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia).
- 16 The main reason is the party’s populist character and careful evasion of any open ideological positioning. This enables them to manoeuvre almost without limits. At one time they could be anti-EU, at other times they would be cordially greeting Angela Merkel and talking about Serbia’s bright EU perspective. Yet what seems constant through all these years is the ‘extreme’ language directed against the domestic opposition. Not a day goes by without a post on their website about the opposition parties, mostly depicting their leaders as ‘tycoons’ who robbed the country, despite the fact that SNS has been ruling it for nearly a decade. For example, the post published on November 12, 2021, stated: “Đilas [authors’ note: the former DS leader] continues to squander his political decay. [...] His hunger for power is incurable, and in the abstinence from plucking the budget of Serbia, the crisis of Dragan Đilas is obviously for a madman’s shirt!” (<https://www.sns.org.rs/novosti/saopstenja/bozic-djilas-nastavlja-da-rasipa-svoju-politicku-trulez>)
- 17 A recent event could illustrate the point. It concerns the mural on a wall of a building in central Belgrade depicting Ratko Mladić, a convicted war criminal from the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The mural was a scene of conflict between the extreme right groups and liberal activists who wanted to paint over the mural. The police, some of them in civilian dress, arrested several liberal activists. SNS announced that police were not protecting the mural but public order. So, while on the surface it was a conflict of small radical groups, it was actually SNS, which holds power in Belgrade and Serbia, who protects the mural, but avoids saying so explicitly. Moreover, in 2007 current president of SNS himself organized replacing the street sign named after Zoran Đinđić with signs stating “Ratko Mladić Boulevard” (“*Street signs bearing Đinđić name vandalized*”. B92. July 6, 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2018.).
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- 21 Jost et al. 2003.
- 22 However, the underlying ethnically motivated sentiments are often manifested in suitable situations (sports matches, etc.), although it is not much evident in the official programs and manifestoes.
- 23 E.g., Keskinen, 2013.
- 24 An example of the vague and non-committal expressions is this quote from the SNS’s program (2011), about culture: “[SNS] believes that the preservation of Serbian cultural identity is one of the most important tasks of the state, but with the development of the authenticity of Serbian culture, it will be open to all cultures in Europe and the world”. So, the state should protect “Serbian culture”, but in order not to give impression that this is a nationalist concept of culture, they add that this culture will be “open”, whatever that might mean.