

Femopopulism: Discursive Instrumentalization of Women's Rights in the Populist Rhetoric of the Serbian Progressive Party

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Abstract

Treatment of women's rights is recognized as an essential indicator of the state of human and minority rights in a country. Seen as something that cannot and should not be compromised, gender equality is often instrumentalized for different political agendas. While major scholarly work on the instrumentalization of women's rights for political purposes has focused on countries of Western Europe and argued that women's rights are usually used as an alibi for Islamophobia and anti-immigrant campaigns, not much literature has been written on the phenomenon outside of Western Europe. This thesis aims to fill that gap by looking at Serbia, an EU candidate country, and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Based on the discourse analysis of the ruling party's officials, this thesis argues that the party has used women's rights as a tool for reaching its own political goals. The findings of the thesis suggest that these goals can be divided into two thematic units: the first one refers to the SNS officials' instrumentalization of discourse about gender equality in the EU accession process; the second one shows that the rhetoric about women's rights is an inseparable part of the SNS' comprehensive populist strategy of stigmatizing its political opponents with the aim of gaining support from the electorate. The findings imply that the ruling SNS invokes women's rights strategically – when it contributes to its political agenda – but fails to address structural problems related to gender equality and domestic violence on other occasions.

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Introduction

Topic, research problem and gap

Why *Femopopulism*? Writing the title of the thesis, and coining the term *Femopopulism*, I was heavily inspired by the term *Femonationalism* which can be found in the title of Sara Farris' book on the instrumentalization of women's rights.¹ Explaining the meaning behind this term, Farris wrote that "femonationalism refers both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam [...] campaigns".² Instead of the argument about the Islamophobic nature of political actors' invocation of women's rights, this thesis argues that populist actors instrumentalize³ these topics for different political goals, both domestic and international, which is why I decided to use the term *Femopopulism*.

Women's rights and gender equality issues have become increasingly present in politics globally, both among right and left-wing political actors. While some may argue that it is a result of global movements for gender equality in all aspects of the political and social life especially in Western European countries,⁴ scholars have shown that some political actors' initiatives to invoke women's rights in their countries did not come from genuine care for the issue, but that their gender equality

¹ Farris, S. (2017). *In the Name of Women's rights. The Rise of Femonationalism*. Duke University Press

² Ibid, pp. 4.

³ The term *instrumentalization* will be used in this thesis with the following meaning: to render instrumental; to use something or someone as a crucial means, instrument or a tool.

⁴ Celis, K., Kantola, J., Waylen, G., & Weldon, L. S. (2013). Introduction: Gender and Politics: A Gendered World, a Gendered Discipline. *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. OUP USA, pp. 1-27.

programs are exploited for their own political programs, which are often opposed to the idea of women's emancipation.⁵

Academic work on gender and populism has only dealt with a handful of topics so far. Most of the work produced has been focused on right-wing populism and treatment of gender equality issues⁶ or the increased number of women in such political movements.⁷ Many authors argue that the sudden "gender turn" in right-wing politics leads to an illusory image of sensitivity or genuine interest in issues related to gender (in)equality, but that it is the result of right-wing political actors' instrumentalization of women's rights for different purposes.⁸ Many authors argue that the discourse of populist radical-right parties in Western Europe, which says that these countries have to protect the achieved level of women's emancipation, reflects their anti-immigrant or Islamophobic politics.⁹ However, apart from academic papers that have focused on the case of Turkey and explained how the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) treats issues related to women's rights,¹⁰ the topic of instrumentalization of gender equality discourse in contexts outside of Western Europe remains rarely studied. Additionally, not much research has been done on the topic of populist actors' discursive utilization of gender equality, especially by those actors or

⁵ Siim, B., Krizsan, A., Gruziel, D., & Nissen, A. (2016). *D9.7 Report of case studies on gender equality as a focus point of national and nativist discourses*. Available online at: <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/beucitizen-european-citizenship-research/publications>

⁶ Dietze, G., Roth, J. (Eds) (2020). *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*. Transcript-Verlag.

⁷ Meret, S. & Siim, B. (2017). A Janus-faced feminism: Gender in women-led right-wing populist parties. Conference: European Conference on Gender & Politics, Lausanne, Switzerland.

⁸ Meret, S. & Siim B. (2013). Gender, populism and politics of belonging: Discourses of right-wing populist parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria. In B. Siim & M. Mokre (eds), *Negotiating gender and diversity in an emerging European public sphere*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹ Akkerman, T. (2015). Gender and the Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Agendas". *Patterns of Prejudice* 49 (1-2), pp. 37-60; De Lange, S. & Mügge, L. (2015) Gender and Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: Ideological Variations Across Parties and Time". *Patterns of Prejudice* 49 (1-2), pp. 61-80.

¹⁰ Akman, C. A. (2017). The Rising Tide of Populism and Women's Authoritarian Inclusion in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party Governance. Paper presented at the ECPG (The 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender), University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland; June, 2017, pp. 12.

parties which are not typically seen as radical or right-wing, or in contexts where Islamophobia is not omnipresent. Finally, the exploitation of women's rights agenda has rarely been analyzed in the context of EU integrations.

This thesis aims to fill that gap by exploring how a (populist) government in an EU candidate country outside of Western Europe instrumentalizes gender equality issues to reach its own political goals. In order to explore that, I aim to focus on the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, an actor which, despite the nationalist history of political affiliations of many of its members, is not seen as a radical right-wing party. Moreover, as I shall explain, the party has adopted a flexible and pragmatic approach, and often adjusts its political agenda and program to fit various goals, but is, generally, seen as a center-right party, and a catch-all party. Additionally, and very important for this thesis, it is a ruling party of an EU candidate state, whose goal is to adopt objectives and plans which are necessary for the EU accession path. Treatment of minority and women's rights are essential indicators of the country's democratic development, which is necessary for convincing the EU that the country is a credible and trustworthy partner. Finally, it is the ruling party of a country with high rates of domestic violence and femicide and a country where gender pay gap and inequality on the labor market are some of the main problems that thousands of women are faced with every day. In such a country, gender equality and women's rights are issues that can easily be exploited for one's political programs.

Research goals, research questions and hypotheses

As previously explained, the scholarly work on the exploitation of women's rights for political purposes mostly focuses on the treatment of gender equality issues by right-wing populist actors,

and the role of women in such political movements.¹¹ Some of the main conclusions of this literature focus on anti-immigration policies as an explanation for the gendered rhetoric of political actors.¹² This leaves us with a question: what do we know about other cases of instrumentalization of women's rights? How are gender equality matters instrumentalized for the EU accession process and in domestic political battles?

The aim of this research is twofold. On the one hand, I aim to show that some decisions by the ruling party, as well as legislative changes with regards to the improvement of women's position in the political life of the country, have been made due to the pragmatic approach that the ruling SNS has adopted with regards to the incentives received from the European Union. This part of the analysis relies on Schimmelfennig's distinction between three types of political parties based on their readiness and motivation to adopt and implement liberal reforms which are typically associated with "Western organizations", and especially on the "mixed party constellations" because they take a flexible and opportunistic approach to integration into "Western organizations", or in this case, the EU.¹³ I aim to show that the Serbian Progressive Party fits well into this category, due to their pragmatic, or practical approach which can be seen in the way they adjust their actions and decisions according to the requests or expectations set during the EU enlargement process, including the obligation to adopt the EU *acquis* on gender equality. The norms, principles and values of the EU, which the candidate countries are expected to adopt, are seen in a normative way, as specific standards that each candidate country should aspire to reach

¹¹ Köttig, M., Bitzan, R. & Pető, M. (Eds). (2017). *Gender and far right politics in Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹² Keskinen, S. (2013). Antifeminism and white identity politics: Political antagonisms in radical right-wing populist and anti-immigration rhetoric in Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 3(4): 225–232

¹³ Schimmelfennig, Frank. (2005) Strategic Calculation and International Socialization: Membership Incentives, Party Constellations, and Sustained Compliance in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Organization* 59:827-860

in order to be considered "European" enough. Gender equality is seen as one of the core values of the EU, and for that reason, all countries who aspire to join the EU have to demonstrate that it is perceived as such in their domestic legislation but also practiced in all aspects of the public and political life of citizens.

The first research question that this thesis aims to answer is:

Why and how has the ruling SNS exploited gender equality issues in the context of EU integrations of Serbia?

The hypothesis which corresponds to this part of the research is as follows:

The ruling party perceives matters related to gender equality, such as adoption and implementation of the laws and regulations whose aim is to improve the position of women in Serbia, as an issue that has an instrumental, rather than intrinsic value. This part of the pre-accession process is seen as a necessary step that would help the country close Chapter 23 and move one step closer to the EU accession.

In addition to that, the other aim of the research is to show that the discourse about equality between women and men is very commonly deployed in the statements and speeches of the ruling party's representatives and that it is a significant part of their populist rhetoric, whose aim is to connect with people, the electorate, in this case, the female part of it. Another critical aspect of the party's discursive exploitation of matters related to women's rights is "otherizing" their political opponents, and stigmatizing them as those who neglect gender equality, and who treat women disrespectfully. In this part of the research, I aim to recognize and point to the parts of their discourse on gender equality which can be considered populist, i.e., those aspects of their rhetoric which address women as belonging to "the common people", and which imply that (the ruling

party's) politics is an expression of the general will of people. Here it is mainly related to the "feminist politics" or those actions which are taken to change the dynamic of gendered power relations and norms associated with them, and this is typically done through the inclusion of new issues like gender-based violence to the political agenda.¹⁴ Here I build on Sahar Abi-Hassan's idea that "treatment of gender issues in populism is highly contextualized"¹⁵ and that we should be aware of differences in socio-political contexts, as well as differences in the political agenda, or goals of populist actors.

This part of the research aims to answer the following question:

How is gender equality discursively instrumentalized (utilized) in the domestic political arena and with which purpose(s)?

The hypothesis of this part of the research is the following:

Discursive utilization of rhetoric about gender equality and women's rights on the side of representatives of the SNS has become an essential part of their populist rhetoric, and it has been deployed mostly with an aim increasing the electoral support of (female) voters for this party and creating antagonism towards their political opponents, mainly oppositional parties.

Methodology and theory

Discourse analysis is used as the primary research method in this thesis. This methodological approach focuses on the use of language in a particular social and political context, and on the way that it influences social and political reality. For that reason, it has proven to be the most effective

¹⁴ Lombardo, E. & Verloo, M. (2009). Institutionalizing Intersectionality in the European Union? *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11:4, 478-495, DOI: 10.1080/14616740903237442

¹⁵ Abi-Hassan, Sahar. (2017) Populism and Gender. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Kaltwasser, C.R., Taggart, P., Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. Oxford University Press, p. 18

methodological tool in analyzing the way political actors discursively utilize specific topics, and for detecting certain indicators in their rhetoric.

In the first part of the analysis, I aim to look for the discursive strategy of nomination and to detect the *pars pro toto* device, which is one aspect of the synecdoche as a figure of speech.¹⁶ Detecting the *pars pro toto* device in the statements of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party regarding the appointment of Ana Brnabić as prime minister, the new Law on Gender Equality and the amendments of the electoral laws aims to show that each of these three events and occasions is discursively used as something that represents the EU pre-accession process of Serbia, and are used as single indicators of the progress that the country has made on its EU integration path.

The second half of the empirical analysis is based on Wodak's observation of three recurring concepts, which can be found in all (right-wing) populist discourses. The first concept is the notion of the "people" as a pure and homogeneous community, the second one includes antagonism towards "others", and the third one refers to distancing from "others" and moving closer to "the people".¹⁷ Additionally, I aim to prove that the ruling party's rhetoric on women's rights and gender equality is populist, and in an attempt to prove that, I aim to find Wodak's three recurring concepts in the statements of the ruling SNS.

Overview of the chapters

The first chapter will introduce literature on populism, gender and European integrations, and more precisely on populism in Serbia and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. The theoretical chapter also includes an observation of the gap in the literature on these topics and the emphasis on the

¹⁶ Wodak, R. & Reisigl, M. (2009) *The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*. London, Sage, pp. 87-121.

¹⁷ Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*. London, Sage.

relevance of the present research. The second chapter which includes the first part of the empirical analysis shows that the SNS discursively instrumentalizes gender equality matters in order to create the image of the party as a modern and trustworthy partner to the EU, which endorses and values human and minority rights, or in this case – women's rights. The chapter presents the current state of the art related to the country's EU accession process, and reflects on Chapter 23 of the EU *acquis* which deals with fundamental rights and judiciary, and aims to show that some political decisions are made by the ruling SNS with the aim of meeting requirements and expectations set by the EU, and to demonstrate its alignment with the EU gender equality *acquis*. The analysis includes statements of the SNS officials regarding the appointment of the first female prime minister Ana Brnabić, the (delayed) adoption of the new Gender Equality Law, and the amendments to the electoral laws which include a provision on mandatory 40% of female candidates on electoral lists on national and local elections. In addition to the instrumentalization of women's rights for EU integrations, the last chapter of the thesis shows that the ruling party in Serbia exploits gender equality matters in order to increase the support of the domestic electorate. As the chapter demonstrates, it is used as part of the party's comprehensive populist strategy to stigmatize and delegitimize their political opponents. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the things that the ruling party has (not) done to improve the position of women in society and explains why this topic matters at all.

Chapter 1: What has the scholarly work on the instrumentalization of women's rights achieved so far, and what will the present research contribute to?

1.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to show what the literature on populism, gender and European integration has accomplished so far. Apart from presenting some of the most relevant contributions to these scholarly fields, I aim to detect shortcomings in the literature on gender and populism, as well as on the instrumentalization of gender equality issues in countries which are not traditionally seen as belonging to "the West". Finally, I will emphasize where the present research stands and what it aims to add to the field.

1.2. Literature Review

Populist parties' exploitation of the gender equality agenda is not a new topic in the literature on populism and gender. Most of the authors who have worked on this issue agree that in many developed European countries, Islamophobia is the primary and common reason for populist parties' and political actors' rhetoric regarding women's rights.¹⁸ In her book on Femonationalism, Sara Farris argued that there is a growing trend among right-wing populist political actors in contemporary France, Italy and the Netherlands to take on a gender equality agenda.¹⁹ She uses the term "femonationalism" to refer to the exploitation of feminist themes by conservative, xenophobic political actors. Farris argues that these right-wing populist actors aim to present

¹⁸ Akkerman, T. (2015). Gender and the Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Agendas". *Patterns of Prejudice* 49 (1-2), pp. 37-60; De Lange, S & Mügge, L. (2015) Gender and Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: Ideological Variations Across Parties and Time". *Patterns of Prejudice* 49 (1-2), pp. 61-80.

¹⁹ Farris, S. (2017). *In the Name of Women's rights. The Rise of Femonationalism*. Duke University Press

themselves as those who stand for women's rights, whereas they use feminism as an alibi for their Islamophobic and anti-migrant political projects.

Similarly, Susi Meret and Birte Siim write about right-wing populist parties in Western Europe and argue that their discourse about the threat to national identity, social cohesion and women's rights is used to cover their xenophobic and anti-immigrant politics.²⁰ In an article written several years later, the same authors wrote about women on high-ranked positions in prominent right-wing populist parties in Europe.²¹ The authors focused on female populist leaders in Denmark, Norway, France and Germany and on the gendered nature of populist parties. They showed the discrepancies that exist between populist parties' discursive articulation of gender issues and their politics of improving the position of women in these societies. In addition to that, Tjitske Akkerman and Anniken Hagelund address the issue of radical-right populist parties' exploitation of the divisions, which were created as a result of the controversial policies regarding immigration, multiculturalism and citizenship.²² The authors focus on the examples of Norway and the Netherlands and compare how radical-right populist parties in these two countries have dealt with policies regarding cultural diversity, immigration and citizenship policies.

While this is hugely relevant for the general literature in this field, as it helps to explain how feminist agenda has been appropriated by populist actors in certain countries in order to present their Islamophobic politics as their attempt to "defend women's rights", I argue that most of this

²⁰ Meret, S. & Siim, B. (2013). Gender, Populism and Politics of Belonging: Discourses of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria. In B. Siim & M. Mokre (eds), *Negotiating gender and diversity in an emerging European public sphere*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

²¹ Meret, S. & Siim, B. (2017). A Janus-faced feminism: Gender in women-led right-wing populist parties. Paper presented at the ECPG (The 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender), University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland.

²² Thitske, A. & Hagelund, A. (2007). 'Women and children first!' Anti-immigration parties and gender in Norway and the Netherlands. *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 197-214.

literature heavily relies on empirical cases from Western European countries and that it neglects a plethora of countries outside of this region where we could notice similar trends.

In some cases in non-Western countries, parties are primarily worried about the demographic state of the country, and they address women as the "reproducers" of future citizens, and sometimes even of the nation. In those cases, women's role in the society is presented as extremely important, and women (that is mothers) are seen as sacred.²³ Such rhetoric can be found in some speeches of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, according to Canan Askan Akman's paper on women's authoritarian inclusion in Turkey.²⁴ Akman writes that Erdoğan's rhetoric on women's rights often includes ideas that women should be "protected" from "all kinds of exploitation in the West under the pretext of equality". In those cases, the argument regarding women's rights is based on the idea of "women's difference" as opposed to the "Western" ideas of gender equality, which are criticized for undermining women's "primary roles" as mothers and wives. Akman explores the position of women in the context of the authoritarian regime led by the JDP and aims to discover the implications of the populist inclusion of women's interest by this party, particularly in the promotion of women's political representation and gender equality in employment. The findings of this paper are particularly crucial for my research, as they provide an essential insight into the relationship between gender and populism in political contexts outside of Western Europe, and show that instrumentalization of gender equality agenda is a trend that has been adopted even among authoritarian, illiberal governments.

²³ Felix, A. (2015). "Old Missions in New Clothes: The Reproduction of the Nation as Women's Main Role Perceived by Female Supporters of Golden Dawn and Jobbik". *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, pp. 166-182.

²⁴ Akman, C. A. (2017). The Rising Tide of Populism and Women's Authoritarian Inclusion in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party Governance. Paper presented at the ECPG (The 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender), University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland; June, 2017, pp. 12.

In other cases, populists' instrumentalization of women's rights agenda in contexts outside of the "West" suggests that anti-migration and Islamophobic rhetoric is not the only reason why political actors decide to talk about the necessity to "accomplish" gender equality, especially in politics and on the labor market. Gender equality is often perceived as part of a broader set of liberal "European" values, which are manifested in and promoted by the European Union. As Bretherton writes, the EU has identified and presented itself discursively as an "ethical foreign policy actor committed to the promotion of values such as democracy and protection of human rights".²⁵ Bretherton argues that the EU is seen as the promoter of democracy and human rights through its legal framework and through imposing values and norms that the EU member states should adopt. The EU exerts its influence on candidate countries as well by "encouraging" them to adopt the values and principles which are set out in the EU *acquis*. However, adopting these liberal values and reforms and demonstrating the country's readiness to close chapters of the EU negotiations process does not come easy in all countries. As Frank Schimmelfennig argues, it heavily relies on the readiness on the part of the ruling political parties to conform to these liberal standards.²⁶

In some countries, the adoption and implementation of these norms, which can be called liberal or "European", comes very quickly, due to the readiness on the part of ruling political parties to conform to these liberal standards, and because these political parties' programs are aligned with the liberal norms, respect them and advocate for the implementation of the norms. Schimmelfennig labeled such party constellations as "liberal", and they are the first out of three types of party constellations which he distinguished, based on the parties' readiness and motivation to adopt and

²⁵ Bretherton, C. (2002). Gender mainstreaming and enlargement: The EU as negligent actor? National Europe Centre Paper No. 24, pp. 4.

²⁶ Schimmelfennig, Frank. (2005) Strategic Calculation and International Socialization: Membership Incentives, Party Constellations, and Sustained Compliance in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Organization* 59:827-860

implement liberal reforms. The second type of party constellations are labeled as “antiliberal,” and they are extremely opposed to the idea of implementing liberal norms, including the value of gender equality, as they argue that their adoption would undermine the basis of their rule.²⁷ The third type is “mixed party constellations”, and Schimmelfennig argues that these parties take a pragmatic, or flexible approach to integration into “Western organizations”, and they are usually ready to adapt their political program and objectives according to incentives or requests of the “West.” Schimmelfennig argues that those parties might not have as smooth and fast of approach to “socialization” as liberal parties would, but that they are still “likely to be socialized effectively”, and that they opportunistically “adapt their political goals to preserve the achieved benefits of integration”.²⁸ For this research, I aim to focus on the third type, that is mixed-party constellations because they perceive the final goal of integrating into a Western organization as the ultimate goal, and adoption of liberal norms is seen merely as a necessary step, or rather an instrument which would help them reach their goal. As Schimmelfennig explains, these party constellations take a pragmatic approach, and they are often ready to change their political programs in order to make the “West” satisfied.

While I explained Serbia’s position with regards to the EU integration process, in the following part, I will explain why I argue that the ruling SNS qualifies as a populist party. This claim relies on the literature on populism, which argues that populism is a “thin-centered ideology, which considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 837.

²⁸ Ibidem.

pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people".²⁹

Because it is a "thin-centered ideology," which means that, unlike a full ideology, it does not have a position that covers the full range of policy domains,³⁰ Kaltwasser and Mudde argue that it is highly dependent on socio-political and economic contexts.³¹ Cas Mudde emphasizes that populist rhetoric often includes "pseudo-democratic" ideas, according to which politics and political actors should serve the will of the people.³² This popular idea that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people gives populist leaders space to manipulate the electorate in order to achieve specific political goals. Mudde also writes about populists' tendency to speak in the name of people who are oppressed or underprivileged, but they do not tend to contribute to the change or improvement of the oppressed people's position in the society. This idea is particularly relevant for this research, as it aims to show how a populist party in Serbia presents its politics as one that speaks in the name of an underprivileged group, in this case, women.

Acknowledging the context-specific characteristics of populist rhetoric, Zoran Lutovac and Ksenija Marković wrote about the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić.³³ Lutovac and Marković claim that SNS is a populist party, since this party is a political organization without a rigid ideology, which uses catch-all rhetoric to addresses everyone, and strives to include all parties in the ruling coalition, regardless of their political program or ideology,

²⁹ Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser. (2012) Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework for analysis, in C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (eds), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 8.

³⁰ Mudde, Cas (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39:4, pp. 542–563

³¹ Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser. 2011. "Voice of the peoples: populism in Europe and Latin America compared," Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Working Paper 378, 1–47.

³² Mudde, Cas (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39:4, pp. 542–563

³³ Lutovac, Z. (ed). (2017) *Populizam*. Institut društvenih nauka, Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, pp. 88.

and they do it all "in the interest of the people."³⁴ The authors also argue that after the populist-nationalist regime of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s, populism returns to the political sphere in Serbia in 2012, with a new style of political rhetoric and political actors which used to hold high political positions in the 1990s. This time, it returns in the form of a political coalition of the Serbian Progressive Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia, and as Lutovac and Marković write, this coalition represented the beginning of the ruling of the "coalition of the two populisms".³⁵ The authors emphasize that this meant the beginning of the populist government of Aleksandar Vučić, who was the embodiment of all the elements of a populist: rhetoric, a political style which is characterized by the strong cult of personality, ruling "in the name of people" which he achieves by opposing the "corrupted elite", that is the previous government, and the political fight for the interests of the people.

In their article on populism and gender, Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser compared left-wing populist parties in Bolivia and Venezuela and right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands and Denmark.³⁶ They found that political ideology and the political and cultural context in each country profoundly influence these parties' gender politics.³⁷ Similarly, Sahar Abi-Hassan argues that gender issues in populist rhetoric are contextualized, that is, that one has to pay attention to the political, social and economic background of a case, and also to the ideological background of the populist actors which deploy the gender equality discourse.³⁸ In the case of this research, it means that it is not enough to claim that the ruling party is populist. Instead, we also have to take into

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 91.

³⁶ Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2015). Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America. *Patterns of Prejudice* 49(1–2): 16–36

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Abi-Hassan, Sahar. (2017) Populism and Gender. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Kaltwasser, C.R., Taggart, P., Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. Oxford University Press, pp. 18.

consideration the political and social context in which this party operates, the demographic and social characteristics of the audience to which it speaks, and the populist actors' stance on various political and social issues.

1.3. Contributions to the field

This research aims to add new perspectives to the question of how gender equality matters have been instrumentalized in countries outside of the “West” where Islamophobia is not so omnipresent. In countries and regions which are not typically perceived as belonging to the “West”, on many instances, women's rights have typically been treated as a matter of secondary importance. However, populist parties, especially those on the right, have shown a tendency to instrumentalize gender-related issues, nonetheless.

Analyzing the case of Serbia would show how a populist government of an EU candidate country uses liberal values, and in this case, gender equality, to satisfy the requirements set by the EU. Additionally, the research conducted for this thesis will provide a new perspective on studies of populism in Serbia and add a gender dimension to the analyses on populist rhetoric of the ruling SNS. Empirical findings from this thesis will be of relevance to the general field, which has, so far, mostly focused on the evidence from Western Europe. Finally, the research presents a novel approach to the studies of European integration, adding a perspective on the ways that the ruling party of an EU candidate countries exploits gender equality rhetoric for making progress on the country's EU accession path.

Chapter 2: How is gender equality instrumentalized for the EU accession process?

2.1. Introduction

In this part of the empirical analysis, I aim to show that some political decisions and changes in Serbia have been made by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in order to accomplish a more significant political goal of meeting the requirements set by the EU, especially those related to the adoption of liberal values which are endorsed by the EU, including gender equality. In so doing, I aim to show how women's rights have been instrumentalized by the ruling SNS to improve the country's position on the EU integration path. For elaboration on why I argue that the ruling party's sudden turn towards gender equality issues does not reflect the party's ideology or political program in general, but that, instead, these issues have been instrumentalized for other purposes like EU accession process, see subchapter 3.5. of this thesis.

Chapter 23 of the *acquis*, which deals with fundamental rights and judiciary is of particular importance, as it was one of the chapters of the negotiation process that Serbia has opened so far, but, according to the European Commission's "Serbia 2019 Report", the country has made limited progress in this area. For a candidate country to demonstrate progress in their pre-accession process and to close chapters that represent 35 policy fields, it has to take measures and actions which are in line with the *acquis* and to make visible and measurable progress in a specific policy area. For example, in the case of Chapter 23 which deals with fundamental rights and judiciary, a candidate country has to demonstrate its alignment with the legislation, that is to accept, incorporate in its national legal framework, and implement those liberal values and norms which are as such listed in this particular chapter, and the Fundamental Rights Charter and the EU *acquis*. When it comes to values of gender equality, a candidate country has to adopt laws which guarantee equal access and opportunities for women and men on the labor market, equal

pay for the same work, gender balance in decision making and politics, and gender equality in other aspects of the life of the country.

As Bretherton writes, the EU has identified and presented itself discursively as an “ethical foreign policy actor committed to the promotion of values such as democracy and protection of human rights” through its *acquis* which sets out broad values and principles to which the EU and the Member States are committed.³⁹ Thus, it is vital to analyze how through the enlargement process, the EU influences the politics of candidate countries, because, in order for a country to become a full-fledged member, it has to go through “a highly complex policy process through which the external becomes internal”.⁴⁰ In 2015, the EU launched the New European Neighbourhood Policy, and some of the most significant changes compared to the previous Policy was the fact that an important role was given to the promotion of gender equality as an essential ingredient of Europeanisation.⁴¹ The EU also adopted the Gender Action Plan 2016-2020, in order to promote gender equality in all its external policies and to support its partners and aspiring members to work on the protection of human rights by all women and girls.⁴²

Gender equality, being one of the core values of the EU, thus has to be incorporated in the legal framework of the country, but it also has to be demonstrated as a value that is endorsed in every aspect of the social, political and economic life of the country. For that reason, countries that are on their EU integration path often have to make political decisions that are related to gender

³⁹ Bretherton, C. (2002). Gender mainstreaming and enlargement: The EU as negligent actor? National Europe Centre Paper No. 24, pp. 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 15.

⁴¹ Kunz, R. & Maisenbacher, J. (2017). Women in the neighbourhood: Reinstating the European Union’s civilising mission on the back of gender equality promotion? *European Journal of International Relations*, 2017, Vol. 23(1), pp. 123.

⁴² Gabriel, M. (2017) Women’s rights are human rights. Union for the Mediterranean Report: Visions and actions to promote gender equality in the Mediterranean, pp. 14.

equality in order to satisfy the EU. However, for this research, it is particularly relevant to analyze the discourse around these political decisions in order to see whether they were justified as a necessary step to improve the position of women in the society, or as a necessary step to improve the position of the country with regards to the EU integration process.

Firstly, I will focus on the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the Prime Minister in 2017, and I argue that this occasion is especially relevant as Brnabić is the first female PM in Serbia and the first openly gay PM of the whole region. In order to do that, I aim to look at newspaper articles, as well as reports from media outlets in the country on this occasion. Secondly, I will analyze statements and speeches of SNS officials on the delay in the adoption of the new Law on Gender Equality, and the importance of that Law for the EU integration path of the country. Lastly, I aim to analyze the discourse of the ruling party's officials regarding the amendment of the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and analyze how the mandatory provision of 40% of women on electoral lists has been talked about concerning the EU integration process. In order to show the position of the ruling SNS with regards to the EU accession process, I rely on Schimmelfennig's categorization of party constellations which is based on their readiness to adopt specific changes in order to conform to the liberal standards, which is a necessary step for integrating into "Western organizations".⁴³ This analysis will be based on the third type of party constellations, that is "mixed-party constellations", which, Schimmelfennig argues, take on a pragmatic and flexible approach with their political programs and objectives, in order to adapt to the requirements and standards of these "liberal" organizations. In an attempt to show that the ruling SNS has adopted this flexible approach on the country's EU integration path, I will

⁴³ Schimmelfennig, Frank. (2005) Strategic Calculation and International Socialization: Membership Incentives, Party Constellations, and Sustained Compliance in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Organization* 59:827-860

demonstrate some of the political decisions that SNS and their discourse regarding these decisions, to show that EU integration is perceived as the ultimate political goal.

This part of the analysis aims to detect the discursive strategy of nomination and to show that each of the three aspects of the analysis, i.e., the appointment of Ana Brnabić, the new Law on Gender Equality and the amendments of the electoral laws include a *pars pro toto* device, one aspect of the figure of speech synecdoche, which is used when one part of something refers to the something as a whole. This device can be found in the fact that each of the three events is talked about as something that represents the EU pre-accession process of Serbia, and even when talked about separately, they represent this process as a whole.⁴⁴ In addition to that, this analysis aims to show *how* the ruling SNS *talks about* the decisions to appoint Ana Brnabić as the Prime Minister, to adopt the new Gender Equality Law, and to change the electoral laws, which include mandatory provisions of 40% of female candidates on electoral lists. Finally, I aim to look for words and expressions such as “European Union”, “EU”, “Europe” and “Chapter 23” to show that the relevance of each of these cases is valued through the prism of European integrations and that instead of the intrinsic value of these cases, they are seen as instruments for ensuring the EU that the country is making progress.

The reason why I have chosen to analyze the discourse around these three events is the fact that each of them represents a different way that the ruling party tends to use political occasions to make progress on the country’s EU integration path and to satisfy the requirements set by the EU which involve the adoption of liberal values such as (gender) equality, human rights, democracy, the rule of law and minority protection. The first event has symbolic importance, because, as I

⁴⁴ Wodak, R. & Reisigl, M. (2009) The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis. London, Sage, pp. 87-121.

shall argue in the following part of this chapter, the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first woman elected as prime minister, and Brnabić herself, serve as a symbol or embodiment of equality in the society. The appointment serves to present the issue regarding women and minority rights as far better than it is and to create an image of the country as a liberal, modern and progressive EU candidate country. Secondly, the (delayed) adoption of the new Law on Gender Equality is of procedural importance, because the adoption of the Law was listed as one of the requirements by the EU for closing the Chapter 23 of the EU accession negotiations for Serbia. For that reason, the Law is often talked about as an essential step that must be taken in order to make progress in the pre-accession process of the country. Lastly, the amendment of the electoral laws, which will introduce a mandatory 40 percent of quotas for women on electoral lists, is vital because of its content. The amendment itself would lead to a more significant representation of women in representative bodies. However, the Law does not tackle the issue of the number of women or their executive power in other political bodies like ministers, heads of parliamentary groups, and others.

2.2. Appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first female Prime Minister

In June 2017, the newly elected President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić announced that Ana Brnabić was appointed as the new Prime Minister of the country, and added that the decision was tough, but that it is in line with *interests of the Republic of Serbia* and its political goals.⁴⁵ Most domestic as well as international media outlets published this news, adding that Brnabić is the first woman and the first openly declared LGBT person appointed as Prime Minister. Before taking the office of the PM, Brnabić had been the Minister of Public

⁴⁵ Ana Brnabić mandatarka za sastav nove Vlade. [Ana Brnabić is the mandatory for forming the new Government] N1, June 15, 2017. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a276314/Ana-Brnabic-nova-premijerka.html> [accessed May 11 2020]

Administration and Local Self-Government of Serbia since 2016. After Vučić was elected and inaugurated as the President of Serbia in May 2017, he proposed Brnabić to be elected as the Prime Minister in June. This decision surprised many because Brnabić was elected as a non-partisan politician, as well as a woman and an openly gay person. Many analysts argue that Brnabić's appointment was an attempt of "pinkwashing", and that it serves to improve the position of Serbia, or at least the way the EU and the West perceive the country. Some of the statements given by the ruling party's officials and other politicians affiliated with SNS as a reaction to the appointment of Ana Brnabić reveal that the motivation behind this political decision was to demonstrate Serbia's adoption of EU values, and the attempt to turn the attention of the international community away from other issues in the country.

Although one could argue that Brnabić was elected as prime minister due to her education, as she holds an MBA degree from the University of Hull, or due to her experience working for international organizations, in the public sector in the country, for local self-government units, and projects funded by foreign investors in Serbia, it is still worth noting that she had less than a year-long experience in Serbian politics before becoming prime minister. However, her appointment was explained and justified to the domestic public when the newly elected president Vučić said, very vaguely, that this decision was made *considering some of the highest interests of the country*, and added that in that period it was particularly *important to improve the position and the reputation of Serbia in the international community*, both on the West and the East, thereby improving their relations with the EU, as well as the Russian Federation, China and the USA.⁴⁶ Zorana Mihajlović, the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, and member of the ruling SNS,

⁴⁶ Mandatarka Ana Brnabić. [Mandatar Ana Brnabić] Vreme, June 15, 2017. Available at: <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1507529&fbclid=IwAR1NE26TAg48dBdnFkV4jPtayi7byByU8aJ64fqKYUyfCY6maXIHEnJzBjo> [accessed May 13 2020]

supported Aleksandar Vučić's decision to appoint Brnabić and said that it was "in the interest of Serbia" and added that she is sure that Brnabić would lead Serbia in the direction of cooperation with the world, and the economic development and reforms. "I expect Ana Brnabić [...] to be the *leader of the team which will lead Serbia towards the EU* and our society in the direction of the adoption of the necessary European standards", Mihajlović added.⁴⁷ Even officials of the Serbian Renewal Movement, a conservative and monarchist party which is part of the ruling coalition, supported Brnabić's appointment, saying that this decision of the ruling SNS is a *clear indicator that Serbia will continue its European integration process* and that her appointment is of crucial importance in implementing political reforms related to relations between EU and Serbia.⁴⁸

These statements regarding Brnabić's appointment already reveal the discursive strategy of the ruling party's officials, which includes the *pars pro toto* device in a way that Brnabić and her appointment are presented as the representation of the progress that the country has made on its EU integration process. Moreover, she is presented as the embodiment of the country's future accession to the EU.

The fact that these initial reactions of state and party officials to the appointment of Ana Brnabić include explicit mention of the EU in the first words after her name implies that her role in the Government is perceived as one that leads the country closer to the EU membership. Even though party officials and domestic political actors in their comments on Brnabić's appointment hardly ever mention the fact that she is a woman and a lesbian, except for those conservative politicians

⁴⁷ Reagovanja povodom imenovanja Ane Brnabić za mandatara. [Reactions regarding the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the mandatory] RTS, June 15, 2017. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2770773/reagovanja-povodom-imenovanja-ane-brnabic-za-mandatara.html>. [accessed May 14 2020]

⁴⁸ Ibid.

who were strongly opposed to this, and even claimed that Brnabić is “not their Prime Minister”,⁴⁹ the mention of the PM’s name is usually associated with liberal, “European values”. Even the resistance and criticism that Vučić received from conservative politicians from the opposition as well as from the ruling coalition regarding the nomination of Brnabić were used by Vučić in his favor, when he tried to show to the international community that making such political decision was very difficult, but that he had to bear with the criticism that he receives daily, in order to make Serbia a modern, stable country which values human rights, tolerance and differences, and which is ready to join the EU.

Being the first female and gay PM of Serbia, she is not perceived as a modernizer and an actor who will improve the position of human and minority rights in Serbia, but rather as the embodiment of all the liberal and progressive values that an EU candidate country is expected to adopt. This implies that her role in politics is not seen as one of intrinsic value, which holds actual power and possibility to enact changes, but as that of instrumental value, which serves other purposes. Although in most of these statements they refer to Brnabić as the “leader” of the team which is in charge of Serbia’s EU integration process and try to emphasize her active role and engagement in this political process, many political analysts argue that this is just a part of a comprehensive strategy of the ruling SNS to present itself as a party with progressive and emancipatory politics towards gender equality, and inclusion of women in politics.⁵⁰ Although formally, the position of prime minister carries the most prominent power, many analysts in Serbia and abroad argue that Brnabić is just a “puppet” of the ruling party led by President Vučić

⁴⁹ Dragan Marković Palma: Ana Brnabić nije moj premijer. [Dragan Markovic Palma: Ana Brnabić is not my prime minister] Politika, June 15, 2016. Available at: <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/383002/Dragan-Markovic-Palma-Ana-Brnabic-nije-moj-premijer> [accessed May 13 2020]

⁵⁰ Čičkarić, Lj. (2017). Antifeminizam i nacionalizam: Uloga i atraktivnost desničarskih stranaka za žene. [Antifeminism and nationalism: The role and attractiveness of right-wing parties to women] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Beograd, pp. 1

and that she does not exercise real, executive power in the country. Boban Stojanović, a political scientist from the University of Belgrade, stated that he does not believe that Brnabić will lead or have an impact on foreign policy, but that this will "remain the exclusive domain of President Vučić".⁵¹ Stojanović added that her appointment is used as a cover-up for the real situation regarding civil and human rights in Serbia and that it might be used as an indicator of the state of human rights, which is far from reality.

Most of the media outlets, including opposition ones, in the news about Brnabić's appointment, have emphasized the fact that she is a woman and openly gay, with the information regarding her expertise and education provided only in the last paragraphs of the news. However, different media outlets interpret this decision by President Vučić to propose Brnabić as the PM differently, and these interpretations vary from images of Brnabić as a successful non-partisan politician and a modernizer who would contribute to the process of implementing the reforms which are a necessary part of the EU integration process. On the other hand, far-right political parties and the media outlets, which represent their point of view argue that Brnabić was not the choice of any of the politicians in the country, but rather "the choice of the West".⁵² For example, Sanda Rašković Ivić from the liberal-conservative People's Party argues that Vučić's decision to propose Brnabić as the PM presents his capitulation to Washington and that this political decision was expected, as it does not come from Vučić himself, but from the "West".⁵³ In contrast to that, many media

⁵¹ Serbia gets its first female- and gay- prime minister. The Guardian, June 15, 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/serbia-gains-its-first-female-and-gay-prime-minister-ana-brnabic> [accessed May 13 2020]

⁵² Opozicija: Vučić je izabrao Anu Brnabić po nalogu Zapada. [Opposition: Vucic has chosen Ana Brnabić by order of the West] Aljazeera Balkans, June 16, 2017. Available at: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/opozicija-vucic-je-izabrao-anu-brnabic-po-nalogu-zapada> [accessed May 14 2020]

⁵³ Opozicija različito o izboru Ane Brnabić za mandatarku. [Opposition speaks differently of the appointment of Ana Brnabić] N1, June 15 2017. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a276338/Reagovanja-opozicije-na-izbor-mandatara.html> [accessed May 13 2020]

outlets, mostly international, published the news emphasizing that Brnabić was the first openly gay person appointed PM in the "conservative Balkans", and that she is the first woman in the history of Serbia to be elected to that position.⁵⁴ In most cases, her appointment was presented as very unexpected, emphasizing that it had happened in a traditionalist society, thereby utilizing a very *orientalizing* discourse to say that in the "EU hopeful" and "deeply conservative Balkan state," this would have been unthinkable a few years before.⁵⁵

In her article written for the Washington Post, Valerie Hopkins, a journalist working in the Balkans, argues that Vučić's decision to nominate Brnabić was only meant to "reassure the West that [Serbia] supports European values while masking a trend of rising authoritarianism."⁵⁶ Hopkins argues that Vučić is trying to secure a balance between trying to remain in power, which means gradually undermining democratic institutions in the country and joining the EU. In her view, Brnabić's appointment was "just for show" and meant to convince the EU that Vučić is a "trustworthy liberal democrat who respects diversity and values tolerance".⁵⁷ The way Hopkins addresses this issue shows that she does not perceive Brnabić as a politician who has no agency, or real political power, but rather as an instrument of the ruling party, or rather President Vučić, and embodiment of all the values and ideals that the "West" represents, and whose role is essential to improve the relations of the country and the EU. Vučić even suggested that the newly elected

⁵⁴ Serbia to have first gay prime minister as Ana Brnabic is chosen. BBC, June 16 2017. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40297480> [accessed May 14 2020]

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hopkins, V. A gay woman is Serbia's next prime minister. Was her selection just for show? The Washington Post, June 26, 2017. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/06/26/a-gay-woman-is-serbias-new-prime-minister-was-her-selection-just-for-show/> [accessed May 14 2020]

⁵⁷ Ibid.

prime minister does not have real political power in the country and that she will be in charge of the economy, while former prime minister Ivica Dačić will "lead the political part."⁵⁸

Lastly, political analyst Boban Stojanović argues that Brnabić's appointment, especially her gender and her sexual orientation, gives Vučić some type of reputation and respect from the international community, and he warns that the state of human rights and civil freedom in Serbia now might be perceived and evaluated based on the fact that the Serbian prime minister is a woman belonging to the LGBT community.⁵⁹

These statements and articles suggest that having a female prime minister does not necessarily mean that women, in general, are visible and represented in the political life of Serbia and that they, or at least the current prime minister, does not hold actual political power. Instead, the fact that many party and state officials openly talk about Ana Brnabić's appointment as a huge step forward in the EU integration process and the fact that many political analysts, as well as journalists from Serbia and abroad, suggest that Brnabić has no agency or political power implies that her appointment to such a high and such visible political position was but an attempt of the ruling party to improve the way the EU sees them and to create a false image of the government as one that advocates for human and minority rights. The statements given by the SNS officials reveal their discursive strategy of nomination, and synecdoche as one its instruments, to suggest that the appointment of Brnabić as the prime minister represents the progress that Serbia has made

⁵⁸ Serbia gets its first female- and gay- prime minister. The Guardian, June 15, 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/serbia-gains-its-first-female-and-gay-prime-minister-ana-brnabic> [accessed May 13 2020]

⁵⁹ Ana Brnabić mandatarka nove Vlade Srbije. [Ana Brnabić the mandatary for forming the new Government of Serbia] Radio Slobodna Evropa, June 15 2017. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-mandatar-vlada-srbija/28557169.html> [accessed May 14 2020]

with regards to the country's EU integration process, and clear evidence of the adoption and endorsement of liberal values, like women's and minority rights.

2.3. The (delayed) adoption of the new Law on Gender Equality

National Assembly of Serbia adopted a Gender Equality Law in 2009, but on several occasions, many different experts suggested that, due to the advancements in the field, the Assembly should adopt a new Gender Equality Law. Since 2015, experts have been working on the new Law, but this process was followed by many obstacles and conceptual changes, which can be seen in the fact that the title of the Law has been changed several times already. Initially entitled "Law on equality between women and men", the updated version of the Law was then renamed to "Law on Gender Equality." The Government's Council for the Equality of Genders decided that it is not enough to amend the previous Law, but instead to adopt a new one due to several reasons, including the fact that the country ratified several international documents which are relevant for this field (Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention), and whose standards had to be included in the domestic legislature in Serbia. Secondly, since the previous Law was adopted in 2009, Serbia also adopted several laws (Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, Labor Law, Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence), and the new Law on Gender Equality had to be adjusted to the new legal framework.

The part of the Action Plan for Chapter 23 adopted in 2016, which deals with "anti-discrimination and position of socially vulnerable groups", emphasizes the development of gender equality as one of its goals.⁶⁰ The action plan includes a set of activities that are aimed at improving the position of women, and adoption of the new Law on Gender Equality is mentioned as one of the most

⁶⁰ Action plan for chapter 23. Republic of Serbia Negotiation Group for Chapter 23, April, 2016. Available online at: <https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/files/Action%20plan%20Ch%2023.pdf>

important actions which must be taken. Furthermore, the new Law is expected to be fully adjusted to the *acquis* and provisions of the Istanbul Convention. According to the initial plan, the Law was supposed to be adopted in 2016, but even in May 2020, the Law has still not been adopted. Many activists and analysts are interested in finding out why the Law still has not been adopted, even though many highly ranked state officials argue that they are dedicated to the improvement of the position of women in society.

Although delayed in adoption, the Law is often mentioned concerning the EU integration of the country, and especially as a step that has to be taken in order to close the Chapter 23. The last European Commission's "Serbia 2019 Report" argues that "Serbia has *some level of preparation* to apply the *acquis* and European standards" in the area of judiciary and fundamental rights.⁶¹ The part of the Report which deals with equality between women and men criticizes the country for the delay in the adoption of the new Law on gender equality. Additionally, it argues that the division of responsibilities between the sector for anti-discrimination policy and improvement of gender equality within the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs and the coordination body for gender equality is not clear, and not efficient enough. Although Serbia was the first non-EU country to introduce the Index of Gender Equality, which was praised by Sem Fabrizi, the Head of Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, the Index for Serbia published in late 2018 shows that real progress in this area has been made only in political participation of women, and that older women, women in rural areas, women with disabilities and Roma women are the most discriminated in the society.

⁶¹ Serbia 2019 Report. European Commission. Brussels, May 29, 2019. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf>

Faced with (moderate) criticism of the EU bodies regarding the alignment of the anti-discrimination laws with the EU *acquis*, state and ruling party officials in Serbia often address the issue of the new Gender Equality law in public. In most cases, they talk about the new Law as something that will help the country move a step closer to the EU accession, and in particular help it closes Chapter 23.

Even in February 2018, Zorana Mihajlović, the deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, claimed that Serbia was ready for the adoption of the new Law on Gender Equality and that there was no reason why the Law should not be discussed in the Assembly.⁶² Mihajlović added that due to the "strategic goal of Serbia to join the EU", the Law had to be aligned with EU standards and approved by Brussels. In order to move forward on the EU integration path, she argued, the Law must be discussed in the Assembly as soon as possible, and all MPs should get a chance to contribute to the improvement of the Law to ensure it is the best it can be.⁶³ Lastly, Mihajlović emphasized that the Law is *particularly crucial for Chapter 23*, which deals with the judiciary and fundamental rights and that there is no reason why the Assembly should wait until the end of 2018 to adopt the Law.

Minister Mihajlović is known for her activism related to women's rights and gender equality and often advocates for visibility and representation of women in politics but also warns about the alarming number of women who are victims of domestic violence. However, her and other party officials' discourse regarding the new Gender Equality Law suggests that it is as a necessary

⁶² Zorana Mihajlović: Pitajte Brnabić šta koči Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti. [Zorana Mihajlovic: Ask Brnabić what is standing in the way of the Law on Gender Equality] Blic, February 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/zorana-mihajlovic-pitajte-brnabic-sta-koci-zakon-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti/nh50p9y> [accessed May 16 2020]

⁶³ Ibid.

precondition, or even an instrument for reaching a higher goal – closing the Chapter 23 of the EU *acquis* – rather than a goal itself.

At the public debate on the Draft Law on Gender Equality in June 2018, Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of Serbia Zoran Đorđević said that since the first Gender Equality Law was adopted in 2009, there has been a need to improve the legislation in this field, and stressed the importance of adopting the new Law, considering the effort to fight all forms of discrimination and to achieve equality, as well as to protect human rights. Additionally, he added that this issue is “crucial for EU Negotiation Chapter 23” and that the new Law is “adjusted to all the EU directives in the field”.⁶⁴

Minister Đorđević’s statement here again suggests that the real motivation for adopting the new Law on Gender Equality in Serbia might be the necessity to satisfy the demands and meet the standards and requirements set by the EU in this field. The EU here is perceived or presented as a normative or “civilizing”⁶⁵ actor, which means that the EU *acquis* is seen as a standard, or ideal that the domestic legislation of aspiring EU member states has to look up to. His statement does not reveal any details on the particularities of the draft law or any specific issues that the Law would tackle, but it does emphasize the importance of adopting the Law for the EU integration process of Serbia.

In June 2018, at a roundtable discussion organized by the Institute for Social Sciences in Belgrade entitled “Gender Equality Law: Importance, necessities and obstacles” Zorana Mihajlović once

⁶⁴ Public Debate on Gender Equality Draft Law at National Assembly. National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. June 26, 2018. Available at: http://www.parlament.gov.rs/Public_Debate_on_Gender_Equality_Draft_Law_at_National_Assembly.34380.537.html [accessed May 17 2020]

⁶⁵ Helene Sjursen (2006). The EU as a ‘normative’ power: how can this be? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2, 235-251

again emphasized the importance of adopting the new Law and said that it is crucial because it is in line with the process of European integration of Serbia and all the obligations of the country regarding the Chapter 23.⁶⁶

At the conference called “Development of gender equality through regional cooperation” held in December 2018, State Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy of Serbia Bojana Stanić stated that the Government of the Republic of Serbia actively works on protecting human rights. Stanić added that international legal norms and political obligations of Serbia aligned with the legal framework of the EU and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which deal with the prevention of discrimination and development of gender equality, are part of the work of the Ministry of Labour.⁶⁷ Stanić emphasized that these obligations are particularly crucial for the EU Negotiation Chapter 23, which can be seen in the ongoing process of adoption of the Law on Gender Equality. Additionally, Stanić stressed that the adoption of the Law is one of the priorities of the Action Plan of the Government and the planned activities of the Ministry of Labour.⁶⁸

This statement once again shows that state officials, especially those which are included in the work of bodies that oversee gender equality issues in the country, talk about the adoption of the new Gender Equality Law as an obligation that the country has to fulfill according to the pre-accession process. Moreover, the Law is typically mentioned as a necessary and inseparable part

⁶⁶ Mihajlović: Srbija na korak od Zakona o rodnoj ravnopravnosti. [Mihajlovic: Serbia is one step away from the Law on Gender Equality] Blic. June 20, 2018. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/mihajlovic-srbija-na-korak-od-zakona-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti/hjwhl1f> [accessed May 18 2020]

⁶⁷ Održan konferencija “Razvoj rodne ravnopravnosti kroz regionalnu saradnju”. Ministarstvo za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja. [Conference “The development of gender equality through regional cooperation” was held. Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs] December 10, 2018. Available at: <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/srb-lat/aktuelnosti/vesti/odrzana-konf%D0%B5r%D0%B5ncija-%E2%80%9Erzvoj-rodn%D0%B5-ravnopravnosti-kroz-r%D0%B5gionalnu-saradnju%E2%80%9C> [accessed May 17 2020]

⁶⁸ Ibid

of the EU pre-accession process, and the adoption is seen as a single event that would represent the readiness of the country to join the EU as a whole. Despite the importance of adopting the Law, which is often emphasized, the Law has not been adopted even in May 2020.

2.4. Amendment of the electoral laws

This part of the chapter will cover the discourse of state officials regarding the decision to amend the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament and the Law on local elections, both of which aim to increase the number of women in politics. The amended Law will introduce a minimum quota of 40 percent of female candidates on electoral lists for parliamentary and local elections.

In February 2020, Serbian Assembly voted for amendments to the law on the election of MPs and local elections. The amendments provide for a reduction in the census to three percent and a 40 percent representation of women on election lists. According to the adopted amendment, "among every five candidates in the order on the list (the first five seats, the other five seats and so on by the end), there must be at least two candidates belonging to the underrepresented gender on the list".⁶⁹ The amendment was proposed by Gordana Čomić, an MP of the oppositional Democratic Party, and 157 MPs voted in favor of amending the law.

In late 2018, Maja Gojković, the Speaker of the National Parliament, announced that the parliament would raise the number of women, and that introduction of gender quotas has led to a drastic increase in the number of women in politics. Gojković added that in 2000 there was only 12.4 percent of women in the National Parliament, and that this number continues to rise, and that,

⁶⁹ Amendments adopted: Census three per cent, 40 per cent of women on the election lists. B92.net. February 8, 2020. Available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=02&dd=08&nav_id=107918 [last accessed May 22 2020]

thanks to laws, women have won the right to hold prominent political positions in the country.⁷⁰

In February 2020, after the amendment was adopted in the Parliament, Gojković stated that once in the future, this law *will be a great achievement in the field of women's rights* in Serbia. Although Gojković and other state officials often emphasize that 93 out of 250 MPs in Serbia are women, they rarely talk about the number of women who hold prominent political positions. Despite the high percentage of female MPs, only 3 out of 15 parliamentary groups are led by women, and only 4 out of 21 ministries are led by female Ministers. When it comes to the local level, women are the head of only 12 municipalities and towns in Serbia, and in 23 municipalities in the country, there are no women in the municipal or town council. According to research on gender equality on the local level, in about 33 percent of towns or municipalities in Serbia, the number of female councilors is below the legal minimum.⁷¹ Despite the legally required minimum of, now, 40% of women on electoral lists, women remain underrepresented and underprivileged in politics. When those women who get elected as MPs or councilors in local representative bodies resign, lose their mandates, or go on maternity leave, despite the quotas, they do not get replaced by another woman, but by the next person from the electoral list. Since the number of women on electoral lists is usually no more than the legally required minimum, the next person on the electoral list is almost always a man. This shows that, despite the quotas, there are still legal loopholes that lead to an underrepresentation of women in politics.

When the amendments to electoral laws were announced in public, President Aleksandar Vučić said that most MPs would support the proposition by Gordana Čomić to have at least 40 percent

⁷⁰ Serbian parliament has raised number of women, speaker says. N1. December 10, 2018. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a442764/Serbian-parliament-has-raised-number-of-women-speaker-says.html> [Accessed May 22 2020]

⁷¹ Žene u politici – njihovo prisustvo i uticaj. Nacionalna Koalicija za Decentralizaciju. [Women in politics – their presence and influence. National Coalition for Decentralization] September 26, 2019. Available at: <https://nkd.rs/2019/09/26/zene-u-politici-njihovo-prisustvo-i-uticaj/> [Accessed May 22 2020]

of women on electoral lists. In a press conference which followed Vučić's meeting with EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, president Vučić added that once the country adopts these amendments, Serbia will be among five countries in Europe with the highest percentage of women in national parliaments.⁷² Vučić did not discuss anything related to gender equality in the country and representation of women in politics; he only added that adoption of these amendments will contribute to the stabilization of politics in Serbia because women are "cold-blooded and always care more about the future than the past."⁷³

In these statements of the state officials, we can notice that the adoption of the amendments to the electoral laws is perceived as a part of the country's invocation of women's rights which represents the whole process of adopting necessary legal changes in order for the domestic legislature to be fully aligned with the EU *acquis*. The amendments of the electoral laws are, thus, not talked about as just one aspect of the country's efforts to improve the position of women in politics, but as *the* proof of the progress that the country has made on its EU integration path.

When discussing and announcing the amendments to the electoral laws which deal with the representation of women in politics, the President, MPs or the Speaker of the National Assembly did not mention the fact that, despite the quotas which may increase the number of women in representative bodies on all levels in the country, women remain primarily underrepresented on all executive positions, especially on local and municipal levels. Apart from that, gender equality in politics in Serbia was only discussed through quotas, and as a matter of numbers, rather than a matter of actual power and representation. Instead, the newly introduced quotas were only

⁷² Vučić: Prihvat ćemo predlog Gordane Čomić da na izbornim listama bude bar 40 odsto žena. [Vucic: We will accept Gordana Comic's proposal to have at least 40 percent of women on electoral lists] Nedeljnik. February 6, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/vucic-prihvat-emo-predlog-gordane-comic-da-na-izbornim-listama-bude-bar-40-odsto-zena/> [Accessed May 22 2020]

⁷³ Ibid.

mentioned as something which would improve the position of the country on the list of European countries with the highest share of women in parliaments. This suggests that the adoption of the amendment regarding the number of seats held by women in the national and local representative bodies did not come from genuine care for the position of women in politics in Serbia, but is instead treated as a matter which can present Serbia as a country where liberal values such as gender equality are adopted and implemented even at the highest level of political representation. This might suggest that Serbia is a credible and competent EU candidate country, which is on par with EU member countries when it comes to the treatment of human and minority rights. Vučić's claim that the adoption of these amendments will lead to the positioning of Serbia as one of the five European countries with the highest percentage of women in national parliaments is (almost) valid,⁷⁴ but he fails to mention the percentage of women on other positions, like ministers, heads of parliamentary groups, and female mayors, or local councilors in Serbia, as these rates are much lower than in EU member countries.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ According to the Eurostat data from 2019, with 40% of women in the National Parliament, Serbia would be on the 7th place among all European countries (with Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Spain, Norway and Portugal, and with the same score as North Macedonia), and on the 6th place among EU member countries (after Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Spain and Portugal). Source:

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_50/default/table?lang=en

⁷⁵ Ceciari, S. (2019) Women in politics: Local and European trends. *The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)*

Chapter 3: Serbian Progressive Party's discourse about gender equality as an essential aspect of their populist rhetoric

3.1. Introduction

The second part of the empirical analysis will focus on speeches and statements given by the ruling SNS party to the domestic public which primarily address women in Serbia. These statements and speeches given by SNS officials usually include narratives about women as the “driving force” of the democracy of Serbia and about strong women who are needed to build a stable country. On the other hand, they often talk about women as “mothers, wives and daughters” who are the pillar of their families and the whole country. In my analysis, I will try to locate specific indicators which will help me prove my hypothesis that the party's discourse about women's rights has become an essential part of their *populist* rhetoric whose aim is to gain support from the domestic electorate, in this case, the female part of it. Moreover, I aim to show the ways party officials use rhetoric about women's rights to stigmatize and ostracize their political opponents.

This part of the analysis relies on Ruth Wodak's observation that there are three recurring and central concepts which can be recognized in all (right-wing) populist discourses: the first one is the notion of the “people” as a pure, homogeneous community, the second one refers to antagonism towards “others”, and the third one is the process of distancing from such “others” and moving closer to “the people”.⁷⁶ In order to prove that SNS's rhetoric about women and gender equality satisfies the criteria to be considered populist, in my analysis, I aim to locate all three of these indicators in the statements and speeches which will be analyzed. The speeches were given on various occasions and events organized as part of pre-election periods or electoral

⁷⁶ Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*. London, Sage.

campaigns of the SNS, as well as on events dedicated to the International Women's Day or meetings organized by the women's section of the ruling party. This part of the research hypothesizes that rhetoric about gender equality and the necessity to improve the position of women in the political and public life of Serbia, which has become part of the populist rhetoric of the SNS has been deployed mainly to increase the level of electoral support of female voters.

3.2. Populism and the recurring concepts in all populist discourses

As Sahar Abi-Hassan writes “treatment of gender issues in populism is highly contextualized”⁷⁷, which means that we have to be aware of differences in socio-political contexts, as well as differences in the political agenda, and goals of populist actors when analyzing how gender issues are dealt with by populist actors. However, when writing about populism, it would be impossible to ignore the thin-centered ideological approach, which argues that, despite the context related differences, populism has several core characteristics.⁷⁸ The first characteristic is that populism is people-centered, which means that populist rhetoric often includes narratives about the people as the basis of the democratic decision-making process. Secondly, populist rhetoric contains clear distinctions between the people versus the elites, where the people are seen as the ultimate good and righteous actors, and the elites are presented as evil, corrupted and inherently harmful. The third characteristic of populism is closely related to the second one, and it aims to emphasize the antagonistic nature of the relation between “the people” and “the elites”. The fourth characteristic of populist actors' rhetoric aims to emphasize that these actors are the only legitimate

⁷⁷ Abi-Hassan, Sahar. (2017) Populism and Gender. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Kaltwasser, C.R, Taggart, P, Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. Oxford University Press, p. 18.

⁷⁸ Muddle, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39:4, 542-563.

representatives of the general will of the people.⁷⁹ These characteristics of populism can be found both in the rhetoric of parties on the radical left, and populist parties on the radical right.⁸⁰

Additionally, this part of the analysis will rely on Ruth Wodak's notion that three central characteristics can be found in all right-wing populist discourses.⁸¹ Although in my analysis I do not focus on either right-wing or left-wing parties as such, nor will I discuss the differences in populist rhetoric on the two sides of the ideological spectrum, instead I aim to locate these general characteristics of populism in the statements and speeches of the ruling SNS in Serbia, primarily related to the gender equality matters. In order to do so, the "recurring and central concepts" that Wodak writes about will be used as indicators that I aim to locate in my analysis. The central concepts which will be located here are the following: the notion of the "people" as a pure, homogeneous community; the antagonism towards "others"; the process of distancing from such "others" and moving closer to "the people".

Related to Wodak's central concepts of populist discourses, the indicators that I aim to locate in the rhetoric of the ruling SNS are as follows. The first indicator will be a representation of women as the central community in the society, and representation of them as "pure", but also superior, and more rational part of the electorate (women as those who always make the rights decisions, and vote for peace, stability and security). Secondly, I will search for rhetoric which talks about women as a separate entity of the society and as opposed to "others", in this case, the opposition parties and more specifically the previous government (rhetoric about the necessity to protect women from the violent and aggressive "others"). Lastly, I will look for statements that deploy the

⁷⁹ Akkerman, A & Mudde, C & Zaslove, A. (2014). How Populist Are the People? A Comparison of Left- and Right-Wing Populists. ECPR General Conference. September 3-6, Glasgow.

⁸⁰ Cas, M. & Kaltwasser, C.R. (2013). Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition*, 48: 12, 147-174.

⁸¹ Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*. London, Sage.

antagonistic discourse and aim to present "them" as a cruel and dangerous "other" and to present "us" as the pure people (women as mothers, wives and daughters, as one of "us"). As Wodak writes, regardless of political or ideological preferences, these "liberal values of 'freedom for women' also appeal to some groups in a progressive and left-wing electorate. In this way, gender issues may well serve as an overarching framework integrating voters from both the left and the right."⁸²

This presentation of populist arguments about women as morally pure, rational and peaceful can also be found in the literature on feminist peace politics, which aims to present women as strongly opposed to *male* violence and aggression, as sensible and peaceful actors who actively work on ensuring a peaceful and non-violent society, which is why they should be included in the politics.⁸³

While these feminist arguments are seemingly similar to the populist arguments presented above, the difference lies in the fact that the argument regarding feminist peace politics relies on the theories about the relationship between war and patriarchal system of gender relations, which emphasize men's domination of women in all aspects of the social and political life of the country. The reason why I aim to focus on the populist instead of the feminist argument lies in the fact that the ruling party in Serbia talks about the rational, peaceful and "pure" nature of women only sporadically, and rarely – if ever – reflects on the issue of women's subordinated position in all aspects of the society. In the last subchapter, I will present some of the cases which underline my hypothesis that SNS invokes women's rights only occasionally and strategically in those events and occasions which benefit the party and its populist strategies. At the same time, it remains quiet

⁸² Ibid, pp. 42.

⁸³ See: Ruddick, S. (1989) *Mothers and Men's War. Rocking the Ship of State: Toward a Feminist Peace Politic*, ed. Harris, A. & King, Y. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 75-92.

when it comes to issues that show very well how the unjust and unequal treatment of women in Serbia.

3.3. Women as the morally pure, superior and rational part of the society

As Wodak writes, with reference to Taggart, the first recurring and central concept which is used to characterize populist discourse is related to the notion of “the people” as its most important feature.⁸⁴ The following part of the empirical analysis aims to show how the ruling party in Serbia talks about women, especially those that support the party or are members of the party, as the central part of the society, and as morally and rationally superior. Women are presented as those who always make rational decisions, especially with regards to elections, and who are responsible for ensuring a peaceful and stable society.

During the presidential campaign in 2017, the then-presidential candidate Aleksandar Vučić organized a meeting with female voters in Belgrade, where he said that he hopes to see an even higher number of diligent and hard-working women in power.⁸⁵ In the meeting, held less than a month before the presidential elections, Vučić said that women understand how serious and important it is to have the right and responsible approach to society, as well as all the complicated, sometimes too serious topics that men take for granted.⁸⁶ Vučić added that the most important thing is the fact that women, unlike men who always look to the past, like to feel the present, to look into the future, take care of the children, and to think about tomorrow. In these statements, as well as in the ones which will be analyzed in the following part of the chapter, we can see the discursive representation of women as rational and those who are the pillar

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Vučić: Ne glasaju žene za lepotu, već za odgovornost. [Vucic: Women do not vote for beauty, but for responsibility] RTS. March 28, 2017. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/2660/izbori-2017/2682306/vucic-ne-glasaju-zene-za-lepotu-vec-za-odgovornost.html> [Accessed May 27 2020]

⁸⁶ Ibid.

of the society, the ones who lead the country towards progress, and the ones who are always responsible and accountable for their actions. Very often, we can notice that members of the ruling SNS, and most notably president Vučić, present women as the ones who always make rational choices, and vote for stability, peace and security.

This exact idea can be found in statements like: “Peace and stability are the most important for us, and only when we have peace and stability can our children have a safe future. Us men, when our heads are above the water, we tend to show our muscles and to make irresponsible decisions. Women, on the other hand, are much more sensible and responsible, and they look into the future”.⁸⁷ In his speech, Vučić went on to emphasize that women are the ones who understand the messages better than men, and those are the messages that he always insists on - peace and stability. Not only are women in these speeches presented as a uniform and homogeneous part of the society - one that is entirely inerrable, as well as both morally and intellectually superior, but Vučić argues that his “messages” and his politics are harmonized with opinions and attitudes of (all) women because peace and stability is something that everyone wants for their country. The fact that this meeting was held right before the presidential elections in 2017 in a large venue where each woman received a flower and a gift with the logo of Vučić’s presidential campaign, and the fact that most of Vučić’s speech was about praising the role of women in the society and them as rational and responsible voters implies that the meeting was organized with the aim of “encouraging” and “empowering” women to use their electoral rights and make “the most rational” decision on the elections, that is to vote for Vučić. He also touched upon other pressing issues that thousands of

⁸⁷ Ibid.

women in Serbia face in their everyday lives, such as domestic violence, and their parental rights after divorce.

In other speeches and statements, usually those which were given on the International Women's Day, Vučić talked about women as the pillar of the society, and the central part of it which enables the stability and security in the country. On this day in 2015, the then prime minister Vučić said that women are the pillar of their families and the whole society and added that the whole country has to take better care of them.⁸⁸ On that occasion, Vučić gave out roses to women who work for the border police at the Belgrade airport and added that women are more careful and more prominent fighters than men, and thanked them for taking care of the whole country, their families and their careers. On his Twitter account on the same day, Vučić wrote, "Without successful and strong women there cannot be successful and strong Serbia."⁸⁹ In 2020, on the same occasion, now president Vučić published a photo on his Instagram account where he said, "Thank you for being the pillar of your families and our Serbia!"⁹⁰

In these examples we see how women are portrayed as the central community in the society and as those who actively work for the development of the whole society, but also their own families. In both cases, women's role as citizens is twofold: as those who take care of their families, and those who are responsible and accountable for society as a whole.

⁸⁸ Vučić: Žene stub porodice I društva. [Vucic: Women are the pillars of families and society] B92. March 8, 2015. Available at: https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=03&dd=08&nav_category=12&nav_id=966013 [accessed May 28 2020]

⁸⁹ Vučić, A (@avucic). "Без успешних и јаких жена не може бити ни успешне и јаке Србије. Драге наше, желим вам срећан 8. март." March 8, 2015, 7:53 AM. Tweet.

⁹⁰ Vučić, A. [buducnostsrbiyeav]. (2020, March 7). "Srećan 8.mart drage dame. Hvala vam što ste stub svojih porodica I naše Srbije." [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9ch_PUp335/

In December 2018, the ruling party SNS organized a meeting entitled “Strong women for strong Serbia”, where president Vučić stated that all women who were present there are a guarantee for a better and safer future of the whole country, and added that women are always those who vote for peace, stability and security. Vučić also stated that he encourages the political participation of women, because the higher number of women in politics, the better and healthier the country would be.⁹¹ These statements are clear indicators of how the ruling party, and the president of the country, more than anyone, tend to present women as the rational and reasonable part of the electorate. Addressing women this way, and talking about them as responsible and those who take care of their families, and the society as a whole, is one of the populists’ rhetorical strategies of showing that they respect and value effort of the “pure” people, and all their contributions, both in the private and the public sphere. Telling women that they are respected and valued in the society where gender-based violence, discrimination of women in all spheres of the society, and gender pay gap are serious issues that numerous women face every day is nothing but a populist strategy to gain political points and support from women who constitute more than half of the electorate in Serbia.

3.4. Women as the “pure people” vs. aggressive “other”

Wodak argues that the second recurring concept in populist rhetoric is the notion of “the people” as opposed to or antagonistic towards “others”, and that these “others” can be “elites”, “minorities” or “immigrants”.⁹² In the following subchapter, I will show how populist rhetoric of the ruling party aims to present women as a separate entity in the society and as clearly divided and even

⁹¹ Skup SNS u Beogradu “Jake žene za jaku Srbiju”. [SNS Meeting in Belgrade: “Strong women for strong Serbia”] RTS. December 9, 2018. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3348944/skup-sns-u-beogradu-jake-zene-za-jaku-srbiju.html> [Accessed May 29 2020]

⁹² Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*. London, Sage, pp. 42.

antagonistic towards the "elites", in this case, the opposition parties. The notion of "the people", in this case, women, excludes the demonized "Other", as Wodak writes. As Cass Mudde writes, populism sees the society to be separated into two antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite".⁹³ Here I aim to show how the ruling party in Serbia tends to use an antagonistic discourse to show that women are part of "the pure people" and vehemently opposed to "the elite", a group which is often demonized and "otherized".

On several occasions are political opponents, that are members of oppositional parties in Serbia "otherized" or discredited by members of the ruling party who claim that these "others" are well known for their physical and verbal violence and attacks on women. One such occasion was a protest organized in 2017 by the Serbian Movement Dveri, a right-wing conservative movement which is part of the oppositional coalition "Alliance for Serbia". During the protest, two female journalists from the pro-regime Pink TV got injured after a man attacked them. Although the leader of Dveri and the organizer of the protest Boško Obradović argued that neither he nor other members of the Movement were responsible for the attacks, and even though the investigation on this incident has never proven that the attacker was a member of the movement Dveri, the ruling party's officials still claimed that it is part of the Movement's comprehensive misogynist and violent campaign.⁹⁴ Accordingly, the Speaker of the National Parliament, Maja Gojković and the Deputy President of the Government Zorana Mihajlović both strongly condemned the attack, and added that it is impermissible for MPs like Obradović to organize protests which lead to brutal

⁹³ Muddle, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39:4, 543.

⁹⁴ Tuča tokom protesta Dveri, napadnute novinarke. [A fight during Dveri's protest, journalists attacked] N1. September 16, 2017. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a318455/Tuca-tokom-protesta-Dveri-povredjena-novinarke.html> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

attacks on women, and that organizing such an event the Movement showed precisely what it stands for, and how they see the whole country.

Moreover, the Deputy Mayor of Belgrade Goran Vesić added that if the organizers of the movement could hit a woman, "who knows what they would be capable of if they were in power".⁹⁵

The way this event was used by the ruling SNS to promote its antagonistic image of political reality in Serbia and to "otherize" their political opponents can be seen in the official statement published by the ruling party where they claimed that the movement Dveri and its leaders showed that they are "weak" for attacking those who are physically weaker than them, and then not taking responsibility for their actions. The statement also said that the "politics of bullying and primitivism" was felt by those two women who were brutally attacked simply for doing their job.⁹⁶

Until this day, members of the opposition, mostly Boško Obradović, are addressed by the ruling SNS as "those who beat women", thereby creating the image in the public of the "other" as aggressive, violent and uncivilized, and of "the people", or "us" as reasonable, prone to the conversation instead of conflict, and as peaceful. Thus, anti-regime protests in Serbia have been wholly ignored by the pro-regime media outlets, but once the protests started being mentioned in these media channels and newspapers, the ruling SNS presented the protestors as a small group of people who are extremely aggressive, and who beat women. On several other occasions, president Vučić argued that "those who beat women" have organized a comprehensive campaign against

⁹⁵ Na protestu Dveri napadnute novinarke Pink televizije. [Pink TV journalists attacked at Dveri's protest] Politika. September 16, 2017. Available at: <http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/388938/Na-protestu-Dveri-napadnute-novinarke-Pink-televizije> [Accessed may 30, 2020]

⁹⁶ SNS: Politika siledžijstva Obradovića I Stamovića. [SNS: Politics of violence of Obradović and Stamović] Studio B. September 16, 2017. Available at: <https://studiob.rs/sns-politika-siledzijstva-obradovica-stamatovica/> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

him, although he has never raised his hand against women.⁹⁷ In a statement given before the European Forum Alpbach in 2018, president Vučić said, mockingly, that Boško Obradović cannot be the leader of anything, except for beating women.⁹⁸

Another incident which caused strong reactions from the ruling party happened in April 2019, when members of the oppositional “Alliance for Serbia” tried to enter the building of the Belgrade city assembly, allegedly in order to talk to the Mayor of Belgrade, but were prevented from doing so when a group of employees, mainly women, blocked their way.⁹⁹ The women forced them out of the building and shouted “fascists”, and “stop violence against women”.¹⁰⁰ After the incident, Belgrade city council of the SNS gave a public statement where they asked the competent authorities to stop the everyday terror and violence of leaders of the Alliance against women. Zorana Mihajlović, the Deputy Prime Minister, stated that she supported the reaction of women from the City Assembly, and added that “women have had enough of Obradović’s violence, causing trouble, conflicts, unmannerliness, pushing, insulting and shouting.”¹⁰¹ The day after, about 400 women, members of the ruling SNS gathered in front of the same building, as they argued, to send a message that that party stands for peace and stability, and one of the members of

⁹⁷ Predsednik u jutarnjem TV Pink: Vučić: Protiv mene govore oni koji tuku žene, nikad na ženu nisam podigao ruku! [President in a morning program: Vucic: Those who beat women speak against me, I have never raised my hand to a woman] Alo.rs. February 25, 2018. Available at: <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-izborima-i-drugim-aktuelnim-temama/148419/vest> [Accessed May 29, 2020]

⁹⁸ Vučić: Treba da razmišljamo o budućnosti sve naše dece- Borimo se da sačuvamo ono što je moguće! [Vucic: We should think about the future of all our children – Let us fight to preserve whatever possible] Pink.rs. August 25, 2018. Available at: <https://www.pink.rs/politika/85807/vucic-treba-da-razmisljamo-o-buducnosti-sve-nase-dece-borimo-se-da-sacuvamo-ono-sto-je-moguće> [Accessed May 29, 2020]

⁹⁹ Predstavnicí SzS pokušali da uđu u Skupštinu Beograda. N1. [Representatives of the Alliance for Serbia tried to enter Belgrade City Assembly] April 4, 2019. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a473529/Predstavnici-SzS-ispred-Skupstine-Beograda.html> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

¹⁰⁰ Lideri SzS nasilno pokušali da uđu u Stari Dvor, ogradom blokirali REM. [Leaders of the Alliance for Serbia violently tried to enter the building of the Belgrade city Assembly, used fence to block the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media] RTV.rs. April 4, 2019. Available at: https://rtv.rs/sr_ci/politika/lideri-szs-nasilno-pokusali-da-udju-u-stari-dvor-ogradom-blokirali-rem_1006493.html May 30, 2020]

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the "peaceful protest" stated that these women came to "condemn brutal attempt of attack [...] and humiliation of women".¹⁰²

The discourse of the ruling party's officials on this occasion shows that they purposefully created an image of the women who prevented the leaders of the oppositional Alliance from entering the building as a separate, and independent entity, a group of women who got together on their own to show their condemnation of violence and aggression of leaders of the oppositional parties.

All of these examples point out to the comprehensive campaign of the ruling SNS to portray its political opponents as the "demonized Other", as Wodak argues, and to create a clear distinction between the ruling party and here most importantly, women (members of the Party), as the "pure people" who are continually being attacked by the violent and primitive "others". On many occasions, women are instrumentalized, and presented as independent and separate actors even in the cases when they are members of the ruling party, or even hold high-ranked political positions in the country, but their diligent work is being disrupted by violent and aggressive acts of the oppositional actors. These actors are shown as antagonistic towards the "pure people", and who violate some of the women's fundamental human rights.

3.5. Populists as close to "the people" and distanced from "the elites"

As Wodak writes, the third recurring concept in populist discourses is one which still preserves and makes use of the antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the others", and aims to present the populist actors as those who are close to "us", "the people" and distanced from "them", "the elites".¹⁰³ Here, women are presented as mothers, wives and daughters, like those belonging

¹⁰² Živi zid i poruka - žene su pobedile nasilje. [Message: Women have beaten violence] RTS.rs. April 5, 2019. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3480191/zivi-zid-i-poruka---zene-su-pobedile-nasilje.html> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

¹⁰³ Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*. London, Sage, pp. 42.

to "the people". Populist actors in their discourse tend to emphasize that they are not like "the others" who treat women disrespectfully, who are violent and aggressive, but instead as those who understand women, who respect them and value their role in the society. Such narratives are the indicators I will look for while analyzing speeches and statements given by the ruling party's officials to prove that their discourse on women's rights issues is part of their comprehensive populist rhetoric and strategy to discredit their political opponents and gain more support from the part of the domestic electorate, namely women.

In 2018, the ruling SNS organized a meeting entitled "Strong women for strong Serbia" (Serbian: *Jake žene za jaku Srbiju*) when president Vučić said that himself, and the Party, will continue to fight for the country where no one will have the right to use insulting or derogatory words for women, or to beat and humiliate them "like those who are considered as the icons of opposition in Serbia still do", thereby referring to Boško Obradović, the leader of the movement Dveri.¹⁰⁴ Before the meeting dedicated to women took place, Vučić invited everyone to come and said that at the meeting, people would have the opportunity to hear speeches of people who respect women, who have never beaten women, and who have never raised their hand against children. He added that there would be no violence on the meeting, emphasizing that the people who will be there ("us"), will discuss brighter and better future, and a far better position of women in the society. The discourse around this particular event was based on the antagonistic images between "us", the ruling SNS, who organized the event intending to peacefully celebrate strong women who actively work on the economic, demographical and other progress in the society, and "them" who are well known for their attacks on women, and who only speak the language of violence. More than

¹⁰⁴ Vučić: Beskrajno zahvalan ženama na visokoj podršci SNS. [Vucic: I am endlessly grateful to women for supporting SNS] Novosti.rs. December 9, 2018. Available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:765079-Skup-SNS-u-Beogradu-Jake-zene-za-jaku-Srbiju> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

praising women for their diligent work, the rhetoric is based on showing that "we" are not like "them", because "we" value "our" people, our women, unlike "them" who disrespect and humiliate women.

In January 2019, Union of women of SNS in many municipalities organized press conferences where they claimed that they, much like the ruling SNS, stand against violence against women, and added that violence and aggressive rhetoric is continuously being used by the oppositional "Alliance for Serbia".¹⁰⁵ Even though 35 women were murdered in domestic violence in Serbia the year before, and even though several SNS officials have been publicly accused of violence against women, the Union of women of the ruling party has never given any public statements or organized press conferences to discuss these matters. In this case, the issue was not addressed as a systematic issue regarding gender-based violence, but instead as the violence of "the others", that is the violence of the oppositional Alliance for Serbia against women. Representatives of the Union of women of SNS added that members of the opposition base their political activities on inappropriate claims about women, just because they are more successful than them, and because they believe in the work of the SNS. They added that, unlike "them" (the oppositional political actors), the ruling SNS fights for a modern society where women would have equal rights to that of men, and where women would not be insulted and humiliated.

In these statements, the ruling SNS uses the discursive strategy which is very commonly used in populist rhetoric which creates a sharp dichotomy between "us" and "them", and antagonism towards "the others". In addition to that, it aims to present itself as the only legitimate voice of

¹⁰⁵ Unija žena SNS: "Lideri Saveza za Srbiju promovišu nasilje nad ženama!" [Union of Women of SNS: Leaders of the Alliance for Serbia promote violence against women!] Kruševac Press. January 23, 2019. Available at: <https://krusevacpress.com/unija-zena-sns-lideri-saveza-za-srbiju-promovisu-nasilje-nad-zenama/> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

“the people” (in this case women) who advocates for their rights, unlike “the others” who represent the minority of those who disrespect the people and tend to humiliate them. On the last occasion, after the group of women prevented oppositional leaders from entering the building of the City Assembly, a member of the ruling SNS who was among the 400 women who organized “independently” in front of the same building, argued that “it is *their* politics, politics of violence against women, and *our* politics is one of peace, politics of stability, politics of economically strong Serbia and strong women in Serbia”.

The last statement mainly shows the ruling party’s discursive utilization of populist rhetorical strategies, which include antagonistic and opposing images of “us” and “them”, and here it particularly aims to show the difference in “their” politics, and politics that “we” promote. “They” are associated with violence, aggression and conflict, whereas “we” are known for our ideas of peace, stability and non-violence. Apart from the emphasis on the dichotomy of the two “politics”, the actors aim to show the proximity of their politics and their values to that of “the people”, and distance from those ideas which are allegedly propagated by “the others”.

3.6. What can we learn from these particular cases, and what has the ruling SNS done for women’s rights so far?

Looking at these particular events and incidents, one can get an idea of the way that the ruling SNS speaks about women and women’s rights. It may seem that these cases are cherry-picked as they present those events and occasions where the party uses women’s rights as an instrument for their political battle against the opposition, and as a populist tool for increasing the level of support from the domestic electorate. However, as I presented in this chapter, women’s rights and gender equality are invoked by the ruling SNS very rarely, and these events are strategically chosen because reflecting on them would benefit the party’s status or reputation.

The term “domestic violence” or “violence against women” has in the last couple of years been publicly used by SNS officials only on two instances: the first one was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25th, 2019 when Forum of Women of SNS in several towns organized street campaigns when they gave out leaflets and badges which were used as promotional material for the party with their logo and name written all over it, rather than a source of information for the awareness-raising campaign about the systemic problem of domestic violence. This event was very briefly written about in the media, and not much information on it was published. Apart from their party members, the organizers of the event did not invite anyone from women’s safe houses or from organizations in Serbia, which offer support for women survivors of domestic violence. The second instance, when officials of the ruling party speak publicly about violence against women, and most importantly, use this phrase in particular, came several times as a response, as SNS claims, to the violent and misogynist campaign of the Alliance for Serbia. In these instances, not only the central board of the ruling SNS, but also representatives of the Forum of Women of SNS on local levels spoke out, and argued that “humiliation of women is an example of the irresponsible politics of Dragan Đilas’ Alliance”.¹⁰⁶ Local media outlets in many towns, as well as mainstream media and online portals on the state level, have published SNS officials’ statements on these occasions. In one of the responses to the alleged violence against women which is done by the oppositional Alliance for Serbia, one of the female representatives of SNS even stated that she speaks on behalf not just of female members of the SNS but of all women when she urges them to stop the violence, be it verbal, physical or

¹⁰⁶ Žene u SNS Zrenjanin deo orkestra za borbu protiv nasilja nad ženama? [Women of SNS Zrenjanin are part of the orchestra for fight against gender-based violence] Z1info.rs. January 24, 2019. Available at: <https://z1info.rs/zene-u-sns-zrenjanin-deo-orkestra-za-borbu-protiv-nasilja-nad-zenama/> [Accessed June 5, 2020]

sexual.¹⁰⁷ According to the OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women conducted in 2019, about 34% of women reported that they had experienced sexual or physical violence from their intimate partners in the last 12 months.¹⁰⁸ In a country where domestic violence is a serious issue, it is very easy to use it in a campaign to collect political points, and not only does the SNS' discourse regarding the Alliance's campaign of violence and humiliation of women instrumentalize the fight against gender-based violence, but they only present it as more than their political battle – as a battle of all women. The statute of the ruling party does not contain any provisions on gender equality or women's rights, and women are only mentioned in the part which indicates that the Union of Women of SNS is one of the advisory bodies of the Party. This also suggests that the fight against gender inequality and subordinated position of women is not a part of their comprehensive political agenda, but instead, an issue they occasionally invoke.

Condemnation of violence against women, social and public ostracism of those political actors who are associated with gender-based violence and humiliation of women is something that should be applauded and praised, be it part of one's populist strategy or not, and regardless of whom this criticism is directed against. However, a proof that issues of women's rights and fight against gender-based violence are matters that the ruling SNS only *selectively* cares for can be found in the fact that, although they call their political opponents as “those who beat women”, the same does not apply for members of their party. On several occasions, members of the ruling SNS were

¹⁰⁷ OO SNS Bogatić - Stop vređanju i nasilju nad ženama. [OO SNS Bogatić – Stop with the insults and violence against women] Mačvainfo.rs. January 23, 2019. Available at: <http://www.macvainfo.rs/page.php?secid=3&pageid=7&contid=4109&model=videoclanak&ct=oo-sns-bogatic-stop-vredjanju-i-nasilju-nad-zenama> [Accessed June 5, 2020]

¹⁰⁸ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). (2019) OSCE-led Survey on Violence against Women: Main Report. Vienna, Austria: OSCE Secretariat.

accused of different forms of violence against women, and have publicly humiliated women numerous times, although the Party has rarely addressed these issues in public.

One of the best examples of this selective fight against humiliation and abuse of women can be seen in the case of Milutin Jeličić Jutka, former mayor of Brus, who was accused of perennial sexual harassment and humiliation of Marija Lukić. In 2018, when Lukić publicly shared details and evidence of Jeličić's violent, sexist and misogynist behavior, followed by seven other women who accused him of similar acts, members of the ruling SNS did not do anything to protect these women, nor did they give a public statement where they would condemn such behavior. Only after several months of pressure from the public, Jeličić resigned, although the trial is still ongoing, and the last session is scheduled for June 10, 2020. Since 2018, when the case was initially brought to the court, SNS officials have rarely addressed this issue in public, but when they did, it was to show that SNS, unlike oppositional parties, listens to the voices of women, and tends to "stand by their sides".

Another high-ranked member of the ruling SNS, Siniša Mali, who currently works as the Minister of Finance and used to be the mayor of Belgrade until 2018, was publicly accused of domestic violence and misuse of his position by his ex-wife, Marija Mali.¹⁰⁹ Even after his ex-wife had sued him for physical violence, and publicly addressed many controversial and dubious political affairs that Mali was involved in, the Party continued to protect Mali, and he remained the mayor of the capital city, and later elected as a minister in the government. The public has witnessed humiliating and incredibly sexist comments which came from president Vučić himself, and from Bratislav

¹⁰⁹ Marija Mali o poslovima bivšeg supruga: ofšor, skrivena imovina, Savamala. [Marija Mali about businesses of her ex-husband: offshore, hidden property, Savamala] Krik.rs. February 13, 2017. Available at: <https://www.krik.rs/marija-mali-o-poslovima-bivseg-supruga-ofsor-skrivena-imovina-savamala/> [Accessed May 31, 2020]

Gašić, former Minister of Defense, who currently serves as the head of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA).¹¹⁰ Not only did the party remain silent to all these incidents and failed to condemn and criticize such behavior of their members publicly, but it seems to encourage it, by not only protecting their members but giving them awards and special thank-you notes for their "hard work and dedication". One such case happened in 2019 when Forum of women of SNS in Leskovac gave a special award to the mayor of this town, Goran Cvetanović shortly after a daily newspaper published details about a court ruling in which he was convicted of physically attacking his ex-wife, and even threatening to murder her.¹¹¹ Members of the Forum of women of SNS said that he deserves to receive the award because "he understands women better than they understand each other".¹¹²

In the country where gender-based violence is a serious issue, and where femicide rates are very high each year, the ruling party does not show any real interest in adopting effective measures to tackle this systemic problem but instead uses violence against women as a political tool to discredit its political opponents. Not only does the party show that it is incapable of solving the actual issue, but this also leads to the banalization of experiences of gender-based violence of numerous women around the country. Although the party's officials show sharp criticism of oppositional party's leaders when they attack women, which indeed deserves strong public condemnation, the selective

¹¹⁰ Vučić Turcima u Kraljevu: Vodite računa o našim ženama. [Vucic to Turks in Kraljevo: Take care of our women] N1. October 21, 2018. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Biznis/a429592/Vucic-obisao-radove-na-izgradnji-fabrike-tekstila-u-Kraljevu.html> [Accessed May 31, 2020] ;

Gašić: Volim novinarke koje ovako lako kleknu. [Gasic: I love female journalists who kneel this easily] N1. December 6, 2015. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a115681/Gasic-Volim-novinarke-koje-ovako-lako-kleknu.html> [Accessed May 31, 2020]

¹¹¹ Goran Cvetanović. Istinomer.rs. Available at: <https://www.istinomer.rs/akter/goran-cvetanovic/> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

¹¹² Šesti rođendan Foruma žena SNS-a u Leskovcu proslavljen u znaku humanitarnih akcija. [Sixth birthday of the Forum of Women SNS in Leskovac celebrated with humanitarian actions] Jugmedia.rs. December 10, 2019. Available at: <https://jugmedia.rs/sesti-rodjendan-foruma-zena-sns-a-u-leskovcu-proslavljen-u-znaku-humanitarnih-akcija/> [Accessed May 30, 2020]

nature of the ruling party's engagement related to women's rights can be seen in the fact that they fail to do the same when their fellow party members humiliate, or even brutally assault women. This shows that women's rights and gender equality matters remain just a part of the ruling party's populist discourse which is selectively invoked, especially with the aim of otherizing or ostracizing their political opponents. In contrast, they remain silent and turn a blind eye when one of them humiliates or attacks women.

Conclusion

This thesis and the discussion of the way that the ruling Serbian Progressive Party discursively utilizes issues regarding women's rights reveal that the party instrumentalizes gender equality issues and talks about them selectively in two ways and for two main reasons, both of which reflect the political goals of this party.

In the first part of the analysis, I demonstrated that the SNS' discourse about gender equality and emancipation of women has been utilized as a tool in the Serbian EU accession process to present the country, and the ruling party, as credible partners to the EU and as progressive, liberal and open-minded. Reflecting on the current state of the negotiation process, I showed that closing the Chapter 23 of the *acquis* which deals with fundamental rights and judiciary is seen as the priority of the country and as a necessary step to make progress on the country's EU integration path. Analyzing statements given on the occasion of the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first female prime minister, the delayed adoption of the new Gender Equality Law and the adoption of the amendments of electoral laws which introduce a mandatory quota of 40% of women on electoral lists, I showed that the ruling party's officials perceive all three of these cases as inseparable parts of the country's EU accession path. Moreover, I demonstrated that these three and the party's discourse about them reflect the party's response to the requirements and expectations set by the EU for candidate countries. The fact that each of these three cases is explained to the public in Serbia as necessary for the EU, or as something that will lead the country or improve the country's position with regards to the EU or Chapter 23, shows that improving the position of women in the society is not seen as a goal in itself, but as an instrument for achieving a higher goal, that is "satisfying" the EU.

Likewise, the second part of the analysis demonstrated that officials of the Serbian Progressive Party invoke women's rights in situations when they want to stigmatize or "otherize" political opponents, mainly the oppositional Alliance for Serbia and present them as those who humiliate and attack women, in an attempt to improve their image in front of the domestic electorate. Moreover, the analysis of their rhetoric regarding women's rights revealed that it is part of their comprehensive populist campaign which deploys the antagonistic discourse about the distinction between "us" and "them". The antagonism towards "others" or "them" is created by presenting them as violent and aggressive, in this case towards women, whereas "we" are presented as the only legitimate representative of the pure people, and as peaceful and rational.

The two parts of the analysis and their findings together present a comprehensive image of the way that the ruling party assesses issues related to gender equality and women's rights and two explanations for their increased presence of narratives about women's rights in their discourse. The fact that the party does not usually invoke women's rights in contexts outside of the two presented in this thesis, nor does it reflect on the importance of gender equality in the statute of the party, contributes to the conclusion that women's rights are seen as a mere instrument for the ruling party in reaching its political goals, both domestically and internationally. These findings, therefore, suggest that the party's officials recognize the importance of women's and minority rights and invoke them strategically in those situations when they benefit the party's political agenda.

However, the party fails to react to situations when women's rights are severely violated or when women are victims of various forms of violence if grappling with these incidents publicly would harm the party's reputation or prove that it was one of the party's members that committed women's right violations. The selective nature of the party's treatment of issues related to women's

rights shows that the party does not have a real interest in tackling structural problems like domestic violence or gender inequality in various aspects of the social and political life of the country and that women's rights remain an object in the party's political struggle both for impressing the EU, and for eliminating political competition.

Discussions from this thesis can contribute to the scholarly debate about the instrumentalization of women's rights in contexts outside of Western Europe and can also present a different perspective on EU candidate countries' efforts to adopt the standards and norms set by the EU. Moreover, in times when the "West" applauds the ruling SNS for standing out from the countries in the region and appointing a (gay) woman to a high political position, this research points out to the fact that there is much more to the party's treatment of women's rights. Finally, it contributes to the literature about the Serbian Progressive Party's populist discourse and adds a gender dimension to it, showing that women's rights are an inseparable part of the party's populist strategy.

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