

Feminism and a New Conservatism in the Balkans



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Introduction

Issues of gender inequality and political conservatism in the Balkans have always been treated differently than in the west of the continent. These tendencies are often treated as default cultural features of a geographical area, resistant to political change at least to some degree. The bloody wars during the disintegration of Yugoslavia also contributed greatly to these old prejudices. There is no doubt that the collapse of the socialist project and the growth of nationalisms led to the re-traditionalization of public and social life. These shifts were noticeable even in the late years of socialism. However, progressive responses to these processes have also emerged in a variety of forms. All these complex political dynamics suggest that what we face are not immutable cultural “facts” but the results of ideological conflicts in which we ourselves participate.

In the last six years since Bilten has existed, we have paid considerable attention to these conflicts and sought to intervene in them. Although countries in the Balkans differ in terms of specific histories and institutional contexts, similar trends can be observed. It is crucial to note that the regressive actors that shape these trends draw a considerable amount of inspiration from new actors on the western right. Organizations seeking to undermine women’s bodily autonomy and their right to make decisions about their sexuality are integrated into international networks dominated by conservative groups and think tanks from the West, in this case mostly from the United States. As for revisionist movements, although there is a relevant local tradition, key interpretive and argumentative acrobatics are taken from international debates, especially from Germany. Similar “borrowings” can be noticed when it comes to the rights of LGBTI people. In that case, the cooperation of clerical organizations in the Balkans also flourishes, regardless of confessional differences. The import of fashion from the West for the purpose of political “modernization” is also present among the new right-wing movements that want to present themselves as more modern than the traditional and “boring” extreme right. It most often appears in various forms of appropriation of the rhetoric of the so-called “alt-right”.

Of course, all this does not mean that there are no “authentic” backward policies in the Balkans. We have tried to present a combination of these “authentic” and import policies through a selection of texts over the past five years. In the first part, attention is paid to narrower feminist issues and problems that women face. The articles deal with examples from completely different countries such as Slovenia and Kosovo. The second part focuses on new forms of conservatism that are increasingly shaping political relations in the Balkans. Here, too, the examples are diverse and cover different countries, but the common sources of these phenomena can be noticed, as well as the universal political answers to the challenges they pose to us.

Marko Kostanić
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Feminism

Anej Korsika

No Means No

The recent scandalous verdict of the court in Koper, according to which rape is not raping if the perpetrator found the victim sleeping has greatly disturbed the Slovenian public. As a reaction, a change in the truncated law and systematic protection of victims of gender-based violence are demanded.

Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, best known for her novel “The Handmaid’s Tale”, once asked a friend why men feel threatened among women. “Men are afraid that women will laugh at them”, he answered. Then she asked a group of women why they feel threatened among men. The answer was: “Women are afraid that men will kill them.”

This dichotomy is most dramatically manifested within the boundaries of gender-based violence, where patriarchal machismo, the most toxic element of male vanity, rages wildly over women. That the same logic can reach unprecedented levels within the judicial system as well has been demonstrated by a recent example in Slovenia where a ruling by Koper District Court enraged the public and gave a new, much-needed impetus to discussions and changes within the same field.

Koper’s case

In the early hours of 11 October 2015, the accused was staying in his apartment and entered the children’s room, where a drunken family friend was sleeping. He started raping the victim while she was still asleep. When the victim woke up, the accused continued to do so forcibly until the end. After waking up, the victim began to resist and push the accused away with her hands. But he overpowered her — covering her mouth with his hand — and held her under him with a physical force for as long as it took him to finish the rape.

Still, the Senate of Koper's senior judges ruled that the accused can't be guilty of the criminal offense of rape on the following grounds: "When the perpetrator uses force only after sexual intercourse has already taken place, i.e. only to complete sexual intercourse, as was the question, in this case, the act can't be interpreted as a criminal offense of rape." Thus, the man wasn't charged with rape but with a lesser crime of coercion and was sentenced to one year in prison.

Yes, you read that correctly: since the victim was still asleep at the beginning of the rape and started to show resistance "only" when the crime was already happening — and that's why the perpetrator used force "only" then — from the Koper's judges' point of view it wasn't even rape. What allows such a verdict is a literal interpretation of criminal law — in Slovenian criminal law rape is defined as an act in which the perpetrator forces the victim to have sexual intercourse in one of the two ways: either with the direct threat to the victim's life or body or under the threat of revealing something about her or her relatives that would tarnish her or theirs honor or reputation or that would cause significant material damage to her or her relatives.

Legal Change Initiatives

In short, there is no mention of the possibility of rape when the victim is still asleep at the beginning of the act. And what about, for instance, the case when the victim is in a coma or her disability makes it impossible for her to resist the perpetrator or when the perpetrator stuns her so she can't resist him? We can only hope that the same Koper judges will never get in the situation in which they need to rule on these issues. Of course, with a bit of humanity, a different verdict could be possible — after the disclosure of this case, the March 8 Institute launched a petition to change the criminal law and reminded the public that Slovenia already had ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The Convention states quite clearly that consent to a sexual act must be given "voluntarily as a result of the free will of the person, assessed in the context of the circumstances." The March 8 Institute — after collecting more than 5000 signatures in just a few days — demanded two things.

First of all, the March 8 Institute asked Slovenian judicial authorities to demand responsibility from the members of the High Court in Koper regarding the verdict that indicated the Court's high degree of tolerance towards criminal acts of rape and violence, which is something that can be read from the above-cited reasoning of the verdict. The second demand, even more important, was the Institute's call for a change of the Criminal Code and the introduction of "no means no" and "yes means yes" models so that the use of force — evidenced by shown resistance — could no longer be considered as an indicator of rape. This was then followed by the reaction of The Left Party in the form of the initiative for several changes in the criminal law sent to the government.

Among other things, the initiative consisted of worrying data that shows that every fourth European thinks that sexual intercourse without consent is justified if the victim is drunk, dressed in "provocative" clothes or if the victim doesn't actively resist the perpetrator meaning if the victim doesn't say "no" clearly enough. On the other hand, one in five believes that women often fabricate or exaggerate reports of abuse or rape. International research, at the same time, shows that in the European Union every twentieth woman over the age of 15 experiences rape or, in other words, that rape has experienced about nine million women.

Inefficient system

The initiative also pointed out that people from the legal profession have for several years been criticizing ineffective prevention, detection, and prosecution of perpetrators of such crimes. They have also been saying that one of the most deep-rooted myths is that of the perpetrator as a foreigner who attacks victims on the street, while statistics clearly show that the victims are most often people perpetrators know well, especially family members. Consequently, victims don't even report such situations to the official authorities because of the fear of revictimization and lengthy police and court proceedings.

Likewise, there are still frequent comments in public about how all this is

about female vengeful nature or resentment towards former or current partners. But in reality, it is the victim's fear of revenge that is one of the main reasons why women so rarely decide to go to official authorities. The Left Party, therefore, called the government to modernize the legislation by declaring any sexual intercourse without consent a rape. In Europe, for instance, such regulations are in force in the UK, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

In addition to the already mentioned proposals, the initiative states that the government should make the following changes: to redefine the sexual abuse of disabled people because within the current system disability is even treated as a mitigating circumstance; to terminate the statute of limitations when abused persons are under the age of 15; to adopt a holistic approach and to ensure appropriate treatment and protection of victims of gender-based violence in a way that would encourage victims (and not to discourage) to report the crime; to adopt a solution that will prevent the revictimization of victims and to establish an effective system of prevention and learning that will help eliminate the social acceptability of such crimes. The Left Party also proposed the introduction of records of femicide — the murder of women committed by spouses and partners, which is often the result of gender-based violence against women. Slovenia doesn't keep such records, although they are necessary.

Political responsibility

It is tragic that all of the above is still a social norm and that Slovenian society is still highly tolerant of various types of violence against women. The blame should be put on the political leadership first, which every day sends messages about what is allowed and what is not. For instance, the case against the prime minister Janez Janša has reached its epilogue these days. He was fined 6000 euros because of the insulting tweet in which he called female journalists from RTV Slovenia “worn-out prostitutes”.

Political incontinence of this kind — manifested time and time again in the form of “letting out” such primitive tweets — sends a message to a large por-

tion of society about what the most powerful ones can get away with and makes everybody else ask themselves why they shouldn't do the same thing, too. There have been more and more such statements in recent years. Their primitive tone has only intensified and they represent one of the justifications for unpunished abuse and chauvinistic outbursts. So it is not surprising that SDS has described the Left Party's initiative as sheer populism. And if we take into account the results of recent elections in the USA and Brasil, SDS does not have to fear it will remain lonely in its stance, but rather the opposite could be the case — repatriarchalization seems to be a global trend that is only getting stronger.

So, on the one hand, it is important that victims of gender-based violence, of one kind or another, get all the social support and strength available and that they can talk about the abuse they have experienced and that the perpetrators are held accountable. On the other hand, the real change will only be possible when the focus of the debate shifts, since gender-based violence does not exist without the perpetrators of gender-based violence. In comparison to other crimes, it is indicative that in these cases we often talk about victims of gender-based abuse and not about perpetrators. Imagine, for instance, talking about victims of car accidents and not about ones who cause car accidents, imagine asking victims to explain all the circumstances to us, victims who will be challenged at every turn and whose stories everyone would be skeptical about. Imagine not talking about killers and only about victims. Such conceptual gambit is nicely summed up in this motto: "Let's not teach our daughters about how not to be raped, but instead teach our sons how not to rape."

Translated from Croatian by **Matko Brusac**

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Ana Vasileva

Re-traditionalization of Women's Roles in Macedonia

The systematic re-traditionalization of women's roles in Macedonia began with the coming to power of the conservative government in 2006. What began seemingly benignly - with propaganda posters - resulted in extremely restrictive abortion laws and increasing pressure to return to patriarchal views of the role of women.

In recent years Macedonia has undergone a very subtle, yet dreadfully pervasive deterioration of the situation with women's rights. Mainly unnoticed or overlooked, the government latched on the popular, deeply misogynist sentiment of the suffering mother (a metaphor often used for the country itself) and after the initial surge of promise with the introduction of the gender quotas in 2006 and the adoption of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which paired with the history of equal treatment from the previous system led to even higher percentages in female representation in certain areas compared to the EU average, things started moving downwards steadily, without sufficient public resistance.

It can arguably be claimed that the ploy began with the anti-abortion posters and newspaper ads which started littering the public space out of nowhere circa 2006-2007 without anyone claiming responsibility for them. The ads depicted graphic images of babies, fetuses in-utero, and aborted fetuses making use of the age-long tactic of instilling and heightening the feeling of guilt in women faced with abortion. The condemnation and the several guerilla actions organized by NGOs and informal groups aimed at neutralizing the negative influence of these actions did not manage to eradicate the propaganda which later progressed into different forms, such as the launch of the website "Say no to abortion" or the Government's campaign aimed at raising awareness about the harmful consequences of abortion. Little did we know or suspect at the time that exactly those materials served as an introduction to the additional restrictions on the Law on Abortion adopted in the summer of 2013.

This went hand in hand with the start of the Government's campaign for an increase in the birth rate in 2008 consisting of programs for increased government financial support for a third and a fourth child in a family - a measure which was planned to be offered solely in those regions with lower birth-rates that "accidentally" turned out to be regions populated predominantly with ethnic Macedonians, which is the reason why it was overturned by the Constitutional Court and hence started to apply everywhere in the country. The TV advertisements from this campaign, which runs to date, heavily rely on the traditional patriarchal male and female roles featuring a young unemployed couple in which the woman convinces the seemingly uninterested man to keep the baby because "it is going to be a boy, and he will have your eyes", and, even more prominently, older men, alpha-males, self-assuredly telling the story of their lives against background footage presenting them as wealthy gentlemen and authoritatively claiming that "family is the greatest treasure". One of the ads goes as far as congratulating a father in a hospital for the "murder of a healthy child" which, due to the fierce reaction of the civil society and the public, was censored and at present, the full version is only aired at night. The campaign was also boosted with the broadcasting of a TV show, "It's Time for a Baby", on the publicly-funded broadcasting service, often featuring lower-class, prematurely aged women and men, nearly socially-deprived, who claim that having lots of kids is always a good idea and that they may not have jobs, but they are happy with their children, although in reality most of them resort to having three or four children simply to qualify for the financial assistance because they rarely have access to any other means of survival.

Shaming the women

This anti-female discourse has traditionally found a great supporter in the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Thus, while stating a national television on the occasion of the Easter Holidays, the Metropolitan Petar from the Bitola Diocese reiterated the stance that abortion is unacceptable to the Church, blamed women for the high rate of divorce, and also added that women are the ones to either save or destroy the country, proceeding to quote one of Saint Paul's biblical misogynist quotes. The fierce public reaction by feminist and women's rights organizations prompted an explanation on the part of the

Metropolitan in which he, naturally, further elaborated on the traditional role of the woman as a child-bearer and home-maker who must be subservient to the man, yet somehow, paradoxically, has even greater rights than he does.

What went parallel with all these transgressions was a consistent exercise of the “traditional female obedience” portrayed and explicitly encouraged in all the areas of public life, starting from the female politicians from the ruling party pleading “submissiveness” to the Prime Minister; the increased aspect of the “family comes first” and “how to balance a career and family” in the rhetoric concerning prominent businesswomen; the systematical-ly ignored situation with the seamstresses who are the main breadwinners in some of the eastern parts of the country, yet work in substandard conditions for less than minimum wages and are constantly subject to molestation and harassment; the media, which in the race for increased sales and hits, have resorted to even more blatant sexism and unashamed objectification and exploitation of the female body; slut-shaming on the social media and in the media (the most popular hashtags on twitter usually ridicule, or condemn “excessive” female sexuality or promiscuity - slut is one of the most frequent trending topics, while newspaper articles often muse over the “immorality” of the new generation of young girls who offer sexual services for a simple smart phone, or a dinner out or a few drinks).

Even the Prime Minister himself felt the urge to address the issue in 2012 on VMRO’s Day, urging women to have more children to “save the nation”, qualifying the fight against a low representation of women in business and politics as “...some sort of women’s rights... men’s rights...” - a part of his speech which was not translated in the English version of the address on the official web-portal of the PM.

Fronts of resistance

All of this fits very well with the traditional, patriarchal idea of the “role of a woman” within the Balkan societies and gradually led to the culmination in 2013 when the new restrictions to the law on abortion were published and then expressly adopted without sufficient public debate during the summer

holidays to avoid a fiercer reaction from the public. The restrictions introduced a mandatory written request for an abortion, consultative sessions about the possible advantages of proceeding with the pregnancy, and a waiting period of three working days before the actual intervention is performed. Among the consequences of the measures could be a delay in the procedure, possibly leading to the expiry of the legal deadline for abortion which is 10 gestational weeks, as well as the additional burden on the socially and economically most disadvantaged women, especially those not living in the few towns where the clinical centers offering termination of pregnancies are located, as well as them being exposed to additional travel expenses. The law also stipulated that the woman's partner had to be informed about the termination of the pregnancy - a provision which was severely opposed by the public and the civil sector in the country and consequently withdrawn. The NGOs and informal organizations dealing with women's rights united in a single civil front called Matka - a platform for free access to safe abortion that organized events and published a newspaper and videos to raise awareness about the consequences of the law. Unfortunately, they were not able to stop it from being adopted. What's worse, the bylaws dealing with urgent procedures and atypical cases have not yet been passed, thus putting a strain on the lives of women who require urgent procedures due to intrauterine death or anomalous fetuses. The only bylaws that have been adopted are those concerning the counseling sessions stipulating that before an abortion, a woman is bound to listen to the fetus's heartbeat and have a mandatory ultrasound screening.

At present, the many transgressions against the fundamental human rights of women that triggered gradual, but ever-increasing articulation of anger, have finally resulted in the establishing of the Gender Equality Platform in December 2014, uniting NGOs and informal feminist and leftist organizations. The Gender Equality Platform has already managed to thwart the attempt of the Health Insurance Fund to shift the responsibility for payment of the maternity allowance to the employers (money that the Fund planned to later compensate for). This by no means marks an end of the struggle, and the prospects are not very bright; however, the recent student protests and social unrest in Macedonia leave space for the hope that, if they occur, the long-awaited changes would finally take into consideration the specific situation of women in society and on the labor market.

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Eurisa Rukovci

Living in Fear – The Fear of Being a Woman

The Kosovo public is shocked now and then by cases of brutal violence against women by their partners. Although the reactions still require primarily a faster police response, it is clear that women are the first victims of a deeper crisis in the country.

Only this year, 2018, by August - 751 cases of domestic violence were reported to the Police according to kallxo.com. About two weeks ago, the city of Prishtina was struck in panic by a man who appeared normal, young, and well dressed and was attacking women with strong punches until they fainted. Some say he was mentally unstable, some say he had a grudge against women in general - but one thing was for certain... This was happening in one of Prishtina's busiest streets - often during the daytime in a series of events that looked like they came out of a Law and Order Special Victims episode. It was not until a woman journalist made an announcement about the case and it was shared on various social media channels before there was anything done about it. A woman came forward on a privately owned TV station and explained what had happened to her. She told her story and the most alarming part about it was that no one was intervening to help the victims. A couple of other women shared their stories and they too said that no one was intervening. Call it the bystander effect, call it societal irresponsibility but it was a very anxious situation to be in as a woman in Prishtina, knowing that no one would help you in case you were attacked. The reason why this was so worrisome is the fact that it paints a very ugly picture – victims of domestic violence, in general, are more than often ignored and not stood up for, by their family, friends, and also security institutions – which leads many of them to be murdered.

Paper protection

Earlier this year, the movie ‘Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri’ had in its central theme the use of billboards provoking a novel approach to protesting. The same example was also followed in Kosovo where a group of young women feminists called ‘HaveIt’ created three billboards near Prishtina’s police headquarters. ‘How many more missed calls?’ was the most sensitive one. This was to reference police’s lack of responsibility in domestic violence cases where murder victims called the police many times and they didn’t take their complaints seriously. They also wrote ‘Diana Kastrati’ and ‘Zejnepe Bytyqi’ which were two of the most tragic cases of women that were killed recently. In general, these billboards referred to the violence against women and they helped in sparking a debate about this phenomenon.

Civic action and initiatives are more often very quick to be organized by civil society and activists after women are murdered. Every time a woman has killed women’s civil society organizations demand justice for the victims as well as protest police and justice system irresponsibility. By the constitution, on paper, Kosovo has a very strong law on domestic violence. Through it, numerous steps are described as to how and when victims are protected and what can be done for them by various governmental institutions. Issues of domestic violence are addressed in the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence. According to this law, emergency cases are usually directed to the police. After police are notified, the regional police director has the right to issue emergency protection in which a victim is protected from the violent party. The law forces, the police are to respond to acts or threats of domestic violence. Emergency protection can also be ordered and warrants may be extended by court order after it is addressed to the victim. Whoever violates warrants in whole or in part commits a criminal offense punishable by a fine of two hundred and up to two thousand euros or by imprisonment for six months.

Root causes

The last very public case which made waves in Kosovo’s society was Valbona Marku Ndrecaj (40 years old) and Klara Ndrecaj (9 years old) who were killed

by their husband and father, Pjeter Ndrecaj in August of this year. This murder shocked the country yet again and was thought to be one of the most brutal that had happened – especially since a child was involved. Another tragic domestic killing and another statistic for more than 100 women who have been killed after the war by their closest ones join the statistics of hundreds and thousands of others who are physically and emotionally abused every day.

Despite the media coverage of cases and attempts of women's rights activists to raise public awareness about the abuse that is being committed against Kosovar women, the second 'victimization' is continuing. This victimization is being done by the justice system, community, and sometimes by women's very own families. The brutality and viciousness of these incidents are not isolated. These very many cases where Kosovar women are being raped, abused, tortured, and murdered are now beginning to be seen as 'white noise'.

When will the punishment of these cases begin? What are the reasons behind this phenomenon that is affecting more and more women every day? What can we, as a society do to prevent this from happening in the future...is this a symptom of the transition from a third-world country to a postmodern state? Violence, after all, is a chain reaction. This does not mean that it is excused although to help minimize and win over this inexcusable behavior we must know the reasons behind it. One of the reasons behind it might be that Kosovo has been riddled with major political themes such as border demarcation, possible territorial exchange, visa liberalization, etc. Until these major political problems are finally solved – it is getting to be 'quite hard' for politicians and government institutions to be involved in anything else – even if this means that Kosovo might be entering a dangerous period where women's very lives are in danger.

While there have been numerous efforts not only by civil society, individual activists, victims' families, and women and men that are part of the government and opposition - violence against women remains prevalent in Kosovo. Further improvement is needed not only in the justice sector but also in the health and social service sectors. Women under protection orders need to be effectively protected.

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Paula Zore

The Myth of Conscientious Objection

How is it possible that the alleged act of moral behavior and civilizational values, as the so-called appeal of conscience is presented, can result in the performance of an operation without anesthesia?

Operating on an internal organ without anesthesia looks somewhat like a scene from a horror movie. Still, it seems to be a common occurrence in Croatian hospitals, at least in gynecological departments. The reason for this — as we learned a few months ago during the “Break the Silence” campaign — where the “rules of the profession”, and this time it was the so-called conscientious objection to abortion. In both cases, women (and the public) tried to normalize these procedures and explain that these are complex concepts as well as special skills so everyone is not able to understand them. That’s why the argument goes, it is necessary to unconditionally trust all decisions of medical staff, including decisions to deny care due to personal values.

The belief in the inviolability of the so-called conscientious objection to abortion has recently been shaken. The idea that this is a topic we can and must talk about has made its way through these kinds of mystification. It took the public to hear the story of a woman who had an abortion performed without anesthesia because an anesthesiologist refused to do his job. Someone must have experienced this kind of violence to encourage us as the public to reconsider these myths — most of all the myth of doctors who must have the right to express their views by denying care and that such a decision is some sort of a right that is more important than everything else, including the suffering of the patient or patient’s rights.

An ethical act or abuse of power?

How can one assess the morality of somebody else’s actions? Is an act always ethical, or is it important to take into consideration the context and

consequences of the action? Those who defend the so-called conscientious objection to abortion rely on arguments that take the whole story out of the context, using phrases such as “standard of civilization” etc., deliberately not touching the question of when and where and why this practice occurs and what are the consequences for the patient.

The so-called conscientious objection to abortion is related primarily to the field of gynecology, most often to the abortion procedure, but not exclusively. Part of the medical staff relies on conscientious objection in the cases of some diagnostic procedures (amniocentesis, for instance) and the cases of medically assisted fertilization as well. We have also seen pharmacists relying on conscientious objection when it comes to access to contraception. On the other hand, as stated in the United Nations Declaration “Conscientious Objection to Military Service” from 2012, the idea is historically linked to the resistance of compulsory military service, while the first objectors appeared during World War I. But for the last forty or so years, it has been present in medicine as well.

Is it possible to compare conscientious objection in medicine and the military? Austrian gynecologist Christian Fiala and Canadian Activist Joyce Arthur in a piece called “There Is No Defence for ‘Conscientious objection’ in Reproductive Health Care” argue that is generally wrong to use the term “conscientious objection” in medicine and that the term “denial of care” should be used instead. The reason for that is that “conscientious objection” exists in the context of military service — that is, where there is some sort of coercion — while medicine remains a profession and something that one can freely choose. Also, as it is stated in the same text, in medicine medical staff are free of the consequences of conscientious objection, the consequences are suffered by patients. In the military context, this situation is reversed, since the consequences will be suffered by those who invoke.

Because it is based on personal, unscientific and medically unverified beliefs that are inappropriate and harmful for patients, conscientious objection in medicine, the authors state, is considered an unethical and unprofessional act, as well as a violation of medical ethics and the rights of patients. At the same time, privileging the conscience of medical staff over the conscience

of patients reproduces power relations in medicine in a way that brings into question the foundations of medical ethics and the right to health care.

Is it possible to have a system with the conscientious objection that respects patients' rights?

According to the general provisions of the “Patients’ Rights Act Article 3”, the protection of patients’ rights is based on the principles of humanity and accessibility. Access to abortion in Croatia is difficult precisely because of the so-called conscientious objection. In as many as five hospitals abortions are not performed. In these situations the performance of an abortion is usually outsourced, meaning a doctor who does not work in the hospital will perform abortion and thus be extra paid. What is paid in this case? It is the privilege of medical staff, which in addition to refusing to do their job and in addition to violating patients’ rights, cause additional cost to the system in which the same austerity measures are implemented due to the accumulated debts. Also, the price of abortion at the same time increases every year. It is quite clear from this position that the refusal to perform an abortion is an unethical and unprofessional decision on several levels, while doctors that perform abortion are those who act professionally and ethically, putting the needs and rights of patients before their privilege.

This also raises another question. In whose interest it is that there is a possibility of the so-called conscientious objections in public health. It is certainly not in the interest of the system itself because it increases costs, it is not in the interest of patients since it violates patients’ rights and it is not in the interest of the medical staff who do their job professionally and are stigmatized for performing abortions. So the conclusion is that there is an abuse of power by a privileged minority that uses its position for the attack on the right to choose. This turns the health care system into a site of ideological struggles that are skillfully disguised in the so-called conscientious objection so the fight over the prohibition of abortion is carried out over the back of women. It is also an attack on the idea of public health since abortion is treated as a service that can be additionally charged and that can be refused to be performed.

The support for the so-called conscientious objection destroys the system

from within because it puts the rights of the medical staff at the forefront. It also strikes at the foundations of the idea of public health centered on the patient, it calls into question the rights of the patient and opens the space for abuse and manipulation by some fractions of medical staff. Also, outsourcing and charging for abortion services strengthen the notion of health services as something that has to be paid for. In this sense, the struggle for the right to affordable, safe, and legal abortion in public health which cannot exist without the prohibition of conscientious objections is at the same time the struggle for the idea of public health focused on patient care and respect for patients' rights.

What are the consequences of conscientious objections and how do systems in which there are no conscientious objections work?

As we have seen from the case in Dubrovnik hospital, the consequences of conscientious objection are that patients are exposed to suffering and also to other potential health problems. What consequences can be more severe and endanger not only health but the life of a patient as well was shown in 2015. by the case in Italy. In Italy, just like in Croatia, abortion is legal, but there is a large number of doctors who rely on the so-called conscientious objection to abortion. We are talking about over 70 percent of doctors at the state level and in the south of Italy, the number is even higher (for instance, in Sicily it is 87 percent). In 2015 Valentina Miluzzo was admitted to a hospital in Sicily for miscarriage in the 19th week of pregnancy. And despite the risk of sepsis from the death of one of the fetuses, the doctor refused to perform the procedure since the heart of the other fetus was beating. After 12 hours of agony, Valentina died of sepsis that caused organ failure.

In 2012 in Ireland Savit died of the same cause, as well as Mrs. B in New Zealand in 2004. and Edyta in Poland the same year. These are only the deaths that we know of. There are many more documented cases in which women have suffered consequences for their emotional and physical health and cases in which women have been subjected to unnecessary procedures because of the so-called conscientious objection to abortion. On the other hand, there are also health systems in which the practice of conscientious objection is

outlawed, as in Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. Fiala and Arthur associate this with the high level of gender equality in these countries and name the so-called conscientious objection as a sexist practice. In the education systems of these countries, there is a talk about the right to choose, and future medical staff who might have a different attitude is advised to take up another kind of specialization during their education. It is a solution that prevents the emergence of the practice of denial of care.

The objectifying and dehumanizing attitudes of societies towards women are also confirmed by discourses on abortion which focus on the concepts such as pregnancy, fetus, or life. At the same time, they exclude the questions of women and their rights and thus create a space for inhumane and violent treatment of women in health care. One portion of such actions lies in the so-called conscientious objection and it is no coincidence that in medicine this practice most often occurs in the field of women's reproductive health. It is part of the broader discriminatory discourse that reduces women to their reproductive role, whether it is focused on biological or social aspects of that role. The affirmation of the so-called conscientious objection is part of a broader attack on women's rights and it also creates a dangerous base for an attack on human rights and health care in general.

Translated from Croatian by **Matko Brusac**

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New Conservatism

Arlind Qori

The Rise of Religious Fanaticism in Albania

Although religion has largely played no important political role in Albania for several historical and political reasons, in recent years the ideology of anti-communism and the disintegration of the social instruments of the secular state have allowed not only political religiosity but also religious fundamentalism to grow. The popularity of “radicalism” among the most socially marginalized sections of the population testifies to the fact that its attractiveness stems in large part from disappointment with the results of the transition.

In the first days of May, a tribunal in Tirana condemned nine persons from seven to seventeen years of prison for supporting terrorism, meaning that the defendants were part of a mosque-based organization that helped to send people to fight for ISIS and other fundamentalist organizations in Syria. The severe condemnations have raised concerns in some human rights circles.

From 2012 more than 100 Albanians have taken part in fights in Syria. In 2014, the Albanian parliament has updated the Penal Code by adding several articles which comprised very harsh sentences (up to 15 years of prison) for persons, who engage in foreign wars, help and organize sending people in those wars, and, even more problematically, use the social networks for this end. Some of them have come back, and are closely watched by the secret services because they are considered prone to acts of terrorism.

But how come that a country like Albania, which in 1967 was the first and only one in the world to legally ban religious activities without any form of collective protest, has in the recent years become troubled with religious fanaticism, not only of the Islamic brand? To understand the growing political religiosity in Albania, one should take an analytical view of the social and historical context of religions in Albania. Albania is a country whose population is comprised of several religious communities, whose majority (59%

according to the 2011 population census) are Muslims (Sunni and the Bek-tashi branch of Sufism), while 10% and 7% belong respectively to the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, with other religious minorities. On the other hand, Albania has been widely praised for the religious tolerance and cohabitation of people of different religions. The reasons for this should not be searched in some mystical core of Albanianness, as the current hegemonic ideology puts it, but in the overlapping of several social and historical factors. One of them is that despite declaring themselves as religious, the majority of the Albanians are non-practicing believers. Even historically, the monotheist religions have embodied a lot of pre-monotheistic beliefs, closely connected to the small, closed, and partly tribal peasant communities which have dominated the history of Albania before socialism. Being from the same village or the same large family was more important than sharing the same religious belief. On the other hand, the intellectual and political roots of Albanian nationalism have contributed to building a hegemonic “imaginary community” where nationality is considered above religious identity. But the most radical effort to placate potential religious animosities happened during the forced partial modernization of the socialist Stalinist regime, which not only fought politically clericalism but also ideologically the religious worldview.

Political return of religion

So in the early nineties, despite the legalization of religious activities and the expansion of organized religions, Albania could still boast itself for having a strong laic civil society and state bureaucracy. In the first years after socialism, the clergy of the different religions were on the same front of ideological battle condemning socialism not only in terms of the religions’ ban but also in more political and cultural aspects. But as the years went by, animosities began to emerge especially between religious intellectuals. Firstly, there was a nationalist race where especially Catholics boasted themselves as being the most fervent nationalist religious community and spreading the view that to be a proper Albanian one had to be Catholic, or at least be converted to the “original” religion – the one which presumably dominated before the massive religious conversion in Islam during the seventeenth and eighteenth-century under Ottoman rule. Despite being a religious minority, based especially in

north-western Albania, the Catholic clergy and intellectuals have managed to build a cultural hegemony by linking themselves to the ideological nodal point: Europe. To be fully European and become part of the superior civilization, one had to share the Catholic religious and political point of view. This hegemony was based also on their more fervent anti-communism, because during the Stalinist regime the Catholic clergy was the most persecuted, being suspected collectively as agents of the Vatican and Western imperialism.

The Muslim intelligentsia, not only imams, have constructed an alternative nationalist worldview considering Islam as the religious backbone of the Albanian nationalism. Conversion to Islam during the Ottoman rule was interpreted as a bulwark against ethnic assimilation by the Orthodox Serbs and Greeks.

The Muslim community in Albania has been living in a particular social position. Despite being the overwhelming majority, they have not managed to build a cultural hegemony and are always viewed as a marginalized community. There are reasons for it. One is traditional. The majority of those who declare themselves Muslims may be just agnostics or people having a very shallow religious identity. For them being a Muslim means just coming from a family whose ancestors used to go to the mosque on Fridays. On the other hand, the last decades have contributed to the direct and indirect subalternation of Islam. In Orientalist terms, Islam was considered an archaic religion at best. At worst, it is viewed as the kindergarten of terrorism, fanaticism, persecution of women, and, more generally, anti-Westernism. This ideological pressure has produced a very interesting religious self-definition of Islam in Albania.

Religious “radicalism”

Especially the official imams and some of the Muslim intelligentsia have contributed to the construction of a definition of Albanian Islam as peculiar - a tolerant and democratic Islam, with no connection with the vast Muslim communities in the world. Cut like an island from the majority-based Muslim communities of Turkey and the Middle East, and being part of the Western sphere of influence before 1944 and a socialist atheist country from 1944 to 1991, it has been easier to construct the image of a Westerner form of Islam.

Nonetheless, despite the tolerant approach of the Muslim religious leaders, a growing component of radical Islamists has been emerging for years now. They have built “illegal” mosques, ones unrecognized by the bureaucracy of the Albanian Muslim Community. Their popularity is particularly strong among the most impoverished regions of Albania. In towns like Kavaja or Përrenjas, where some of the ISIS organizers or fighters come from, the effects of neoliberal deindustrialization and economic and social devastation are felt more deeply.

Enormous unemployment and the risk of social anomy have lead a lot of youngsters to join the sermons of the radical imams, who despite absorbing covert financial support from abroad, live an austere life, looking and sounding like religious Jacobins. In contrast to the clergy who chairs the Albanian Muslim Community, which is viewed not only as corrupt in the administration of important religious properties and large financial aids from abroad, but also as servile to the political authorities and foreign representatives like the US embassy, the fanatical imams make way for their fundamentalist agenda by claiming betrayal and constructing ideologically a future utopia of austere religiosity and social solidarity.

What does all this mean politically? One can call for help to the famous and overused definition of fascism by Walter Benjamin: “Every fascism is an index of a failed revolution.” In a country where the radical left is weak and concentrated mostly in Tirana, the poor and the marginalized see no other alternative to their social discontent than engaging in religious politics, as a kind of perverted social protest. But what we can add to Benjamin dictum is that in not using the social radical potential for emancipatory politics, the radical left contributes unintentionally to the suppression of intra-religious currents with emancipatory potentials. Standing like the Beautiful Souls who contempt religion per se might be the melodramatic gesture of bourgeois pseudo radicalism, but is unproductive politically. The left should help trigger ideological contradiction inside the religious community so that the critique of the corrupted religious leaders won’t be the monopoly of fundamentalist imams or other quasi-fascist religious militants. Those who engage in religious fundamentalism might be a lost cause, but there’s a large pool of poor and genuine believers and potential religious activists that can share views of emancipatory politics and socialist economic critique. The ideological class

struggle should be waged inside the religious communities. A religious emancipatory current can be the only alternative between the corrupted “liberal” leaders and their fundamentalist “fascist” contesters.

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Florin Poenaru

Friends and Foes: Traditional and Alt-right in Romania

In the almost consensual agreement of the Romanian parliamentary parties that marriage is a union of a man and a woman worth confirming by the Constitution and a referendum, isolated voices who think the opposite are increasingly difficult to hear. The answer to the question of why this so requires an understanding of the local context.

The proposal for a referendum to amend the constitution to inscribe the definition of family as the union between a woman and a man is dividing opinion in Romania and it represents a platform for the affirmation of a Romanian version of Trumpism and alt-right. It also offers, inadvertently, the occasion of unlikely conjunction. The following details might seem too arcane for a foreign public but they are worth the patience to grasp the larger picture. The point is significant because it shows the impossible mission the left faces.

The initiative to amend the constitution was promoted by conservative new protestant groups with a strong social basis in Transylvania, especially among the urban middle classes, but with a significant reach in the rural and less affluent constituencies. Publicly this is known as the Coalition for Family (CFF) and it involves a host of groups and initiatives, from parishes to NGOs. The neoprotestant connection ensured significant American backing, especially in terms of funds, ideological material, and mobilization techniques. Locally, the neoprotestant networks are firmly embedded in the National Liberal Party, the second largest and now in opposition. Many leaders of the liberals come from neoprotestant strongholds and supported the CFF initiative. The Liberal party is thus in name only. A few years ago, it abandoned the liberal group in the European Parliament and switched to the conservative in an attempt to get closer to the Christian Democrats. Now, under the neoprotestant pressure, the party resembles more the traditional conservatism of the American Republicans before Trump.

Cost-benefit analysis of a National March

When the CFF began collecting signatures for the referendum the Romanian Orthodox Church felt obliged to join in. Partly, this was an outcome of the competition between the Orthodox and the neoprotestants, especially in Transylvania, so the Orthodox Church tried to put its stamp on the initiative. A series of “normality marches” led by orthodox priests were organized in the biggest cities. At the same time, this represented a good opportunity for the Romanian Orthodox Church to get involved in an issue that seems largely popular to boost its standing. Rocked by several scandals in the past few years, from corruption to sexual ones, including gay sex, affirming the traditional family values, and becoming militant on the issue offered a good occasion to conduct some PR business. But this maneuver, however, opened the door for the more conservative and right-wing elements within and around the Church to have a louder voice and come out publicly more prominently. The Orthodox Church’s involvement was crucial to spreading out nationally a movement that initially was fairly geographically confined. Also, it diversified the social base of the initiative, reaching deep into small poor cities in Moldova and rural areas in the south, already socially conservative. It also helped logistically because of its institutional reach thus more than 3 million signatures were collected and sent to the Parliament. Earlier this year the Parliament approved the conditions for the referendum.

However, without the strong support of the Social Democrats, now in power and the biggest party in Romania, this initiative would have never reached the point of calling a referendum. Paradoxically, the Social Democrats are now even to the right of the National Liberals, especially with regards to social issues. The leader of the party, Liviu Dragnea, tries to style himself in the Trump mold – he paid to be a guest at the American presidential inauguration – and is frequently espousing the same conservative views that are part of today’s American right repertoire. He declared himself an orthodox fundamentalist, rejects mandatory vaccination, and has his war with George Soros. The entire party, especially after coming to power, exacerbated the conservative agenda by proposing a sui generis mixture of Ceausescu-style folkloric nationalism and American-derived rhetoric of making Romania great again against foreign interference and conspiracy through their local agents. He always points

to occult foreign forces that prevent the party to govern and, pretty much Trump-style, promises to strike back with vengeance against them. The Social Democrats' support for the referendum was the cornerstone since they have the majority in the parliament. With few exceptions, all Social Democrat MPs voted for the referendum. Dragnea publicly defended the referendum and he vowed to go ahead with it despite being aware, he claimed, of the many enemies he will gain in Europe.

Given the support the party enjoys countrywide and across social classes and the fact that the threshold for validating the referendum was lowered from 50% plus 1 to 30% there are strong chances that the referendum will pass if the Social Democrats mobilize for it. Most likely, they will since such a stance would reap important political benefits: it will take the steam out of the liberal's agenda and thus confine them to irrelevance; it will reinforce the electoral base of the party by reaffirming traditional and conservative values, and the referendum will function as a good distraction from the botched governing. This, of course, will only strengthen the conservative and traditionalist vibe and will force political competitors to adopt an even more extreme position towards the right to differentiate one from another.

Alternative right-wingers

Another group of people that supports in no equivocal terms the referendum and the ban on gay marriages is what can be called for lack of a better term the Romanian alt-right. The term is not entirely unsuitable. This is a loose network, active mostly on social media, of intellectuals, academics, priests, journalists, and like-minded professions. They are not formally organized, albeit some of them were previously part or closely affiliated with the neoliberal and neoconservative party of former president Basescu. They might even diverge on several important issues. But they do share a core set of ideas, most importantly anti-communism and anti-leftism, anti-Russianism, anti-political correctness, anti-gay, minority rights and feminism, and like-minded approaches. Trump's victory and the ascension of the alt-right in the US offered a huge boost to these groups and networks and they explicitly take inspiration from what is happening in the US in terms of ideology,

rhetoric, and tactics. One prominent figure of this orientation even wrote a book-length eulogy to Trump after he won the presidency, after which he was invited to join the Liberal party, thus suggesting a possible alt-right switch of the liberal party itself under the twin pressure of its internal neoprotestant networks and external competition from the Social Democrats.

The recent revival of such groups was indeed magnified by Trump's election but also by the right-wing success elsewhere in Europe. Anti-Muslim and anti-migration tropes are part of the rhetoric of the Romanian alt-right, even though these are completely removed from local realities. Recently, the specter of Sexo-Marxism, imported from the global alt-right, was invoked in Romania too. But these local groups and ideas did not come from anywhere. The ground was set by the previous generation of conservative anti-communist intellectuals who already, as early as the mid-90s, professed some of the key elements of today's discourse. For example, the denunciation of political correctness as a new form of Stalinism was *de rigueur* among public intellectuals of the transition, together with the condemnation of feminism, leftism, and other elements that might smack of progressivism and thus communism. Therefore, Trumpism and alt-right rhetoric, themselves infused by neoconservative influences, found fertile ground in the Romanian right, prepared by a quarter-century of unchallenged hegemonic anti-communism.

More than a conservative turn

Two things have changed, however. First, the proponents of the contemporary alt-right are openly more aggressive than their predecessors and have a sense of entitlement and victory about themselves. Secondly, in contrast to the previous generation, they are ready to talk more openly about their masculinity with pride and also affirm a white-race superiority. These, of course, are mostly American imports but they do articulate with a wider Eurocentrism and a duty to protect the European civilization perceived to be under attack. What has remained taboo, however, is the debate around abortion, even though the drive to control women and women's bodies is still there. Since in communist Romania abortions were illegal and came at a cost of huge suffering this legacy prevents an open endorsement of the practice.

These groups of people, its strength and reach is hard to quantify given its presence mainly online, is also heavily supporting the referendum. Some are directly linked with the neoprotestant networks mentioned above, others simply out of conviction and anti-LGBT politics. But they do, by and large, hate the Social Democrats, considered to be offspring of the Communist party. Anti-communism plays its part here too, preventing an alliance between the party and these loose networks, even though their positions are putatively identical.

Friends and foes alike support the referendum which might not be such a big issue in and of itself but it does bespeak a wider conservative and alt-right turn which is impossible to ignore. So far, whatever is still left of the left has been fairly paralyzed by the entire situation. It supported the mobilization of the LGBT community, naturally, but this mobilization was not itself void of controversy and contradictions. To increase numbers, central-liberalist arguments were invoked, concerned with rights and liberties. Worst still, the resistance movement enlisted the help of the old neoliberal civil society elites of the 1990s and 2000s, which were in utter connivance with the anti-communist and conservative forces, supporting the referendum. Therefore, while the conservative camp is growing and encompassing ever-larger segments of the population, the resistance movement is weak, fragmented, and fairly disarticulated so far. Certainly, in case of a referendum, its impact will be negligible and perhaps confined to the two or three bigger cities.

The legacy of the Ceaușescu

Beyond this contemporary local-global conjunction I believe that there is a wider historical legacy that explains the current solidification of conservative and alt-right elements in the Romanian society of which the struggles around the referendum are only symptoms. Again, Ceausescu's legacy is crucial here. As it is widely known Ceausescu's regime, especially after the mid-1970s veered toward an aggressive form of nationalism that was uncharacteristic for the rest of the socialist countries. But it did more than that. It, more or less officially, abandoned the enlightenment drive, which represented one of

the pillars of communist ideology. The reason, science, secularism were all part of the common communist core of principles, irrespective of the particular political formations in respective countries. These core elements became increasingly absent in the last decade of Romanian communism and were replaced by more conservative elements. The pedagogic drive of communism also lost its power. History was mythologized, religion came back in, the social sciences were dismantled in the early 1970s, Marxism was marginalized in the 1960s and the natural sciences were defunded by the austerity programs of the 1980s. In Romania, communism was now a blend of mythological thinking, a cult of personality, and abandoning of reason as a central element of politics and society. Moreover, the opposition to the region took increasingly irrational, mythical, and spiritual aspects. The late 1970s and 1980s represent the gold era of yoga, oriental spiritualism, return to nature, and Orthodoxy. Such practices will explode even more during the transition years, when the censorship of the party, lax as it was, became defunct and when the uncertainties of the era bred even more escapist ideologies.

To put it differently, what is characteristic of the Romanian situation today is the complete exhaustion of the communist enlightenment project. Even faint memories of it are gone. People between 25 and 50 today, that is the bulk of the active population was either formed in the context of Ceausescu's nationalism or missed communism altogether. In any case, they were never exposed to the rational core of early communism. In conjunction with other causes, this legacy offers a fertile ground for the blossoming of more and more conservative attitudes. And it is not strictly connected to the issues discussed above. In a country that took pride in its professional engineers and mathematicians, there are more and more people who claim that the earth is flat, that modern medicines (vaccines in particular) are a sham and that reason and science are somehow a leftist plot. This points to something more ominous than a simple referendum or a wider conservative turn.

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Jana Tsoneva

Contradictions of Historical Revisionism: Dispatches from Bulgaria

After a series about “rescued” Bulgarian Jews during World War II was made a few years ago, a film has now been announced that will present Bulgarian collaborationist Tsar Boris III as a brave statesman who opposed the Nazis. These productions are only part of an increasingly aggressive attempt to present Bulgarian historical fascism as a “golden age” to which it should return after the “communist trauma”.

Conservative historical revisionism which whitewashed the pre-1944 regime is quite intensive in contemporary Bulgaria. It manifests itself in historical commemorative drives, monument construction, and history textbook editions alike. There are even legislative “fixes” to the perceived socialist nostalgia such as the proposal to criminalize “communist symbols” (which can be anything from Che Guevara t-shirts to socialist-era prefab apartment blocks). However, the recent intensification of the drive to purge the country from the last remnants of Communism, even at the cost of rehabilitating interwar fascists and their fellow-travelers, should not mislead us that it is only a new form of an ill-conceived attempt to deal with the contradictions of capitalist development, although it certainly fulfills this function. Rather, historical revisionism has accompanied the restoration of capitalism in Bulgaria since the latter’s beginning in 1989, and its condition of possibility.

Exemplary in this regard is the pioneering article entitled “Has there ever been fascism in Bulgaria?” – obviously answered in the negative – that appeared already in 1990 which is the first year in the publication of the oppositional newspaper *Demokratsia* (“Democracy”). In it, the author Milcho Spasov defines fascism as a one-party dictatorship that has as much of an anti-communist edge as an anti-democratic one. Further, the fascist leader doubles as a political theorist (the example for “theory” provided is “Mein Kampf”...)

How many works of theory had Bulgaria's last czar Boris III produced?, Spasov asks rhetorically. Moreover, he claims that even after the military coup d'état of 1934 and the concomitant dissolution of Parliament, political opposition in the country was not stifled, and neither was press freedom, therefore the new regime had little in common with fascism. He refrains from offering an unequivocal definition, claiming instead that it was "something else". The emphasis on the lingering freedoms after the coup, however, betrays an understanding of a benign constitutional monarchy with well-protected rights. This claim can only be made at the cost of great historical repression of the consolidation of the regime via crushing the Communist party, the banning of trade unionism, and all political parties in the aftermath of the coup. Further, Spasov claims that the nationalism and antisemitism that define the historical fascist regimes were almost absent in Bulgaria, which, in contrast to Nazi Germany, should be commended upon for saving its 50,000 Jews. In making this claim, Spasov completely overlooks the Bulgarian input in the Holocaust through the shipment of over 11,000 Jews from the Occupied territories in Greece and Macedonia straight to Nazi extermination camps.

Having explained fascism, Spasov proceeds to refute the pretensions of the Bulgarian Communist Party that it was fighting it. Thus posed and answered, the question led to the obvious revision: BCP's assumption of power on anti-fascist grounds had been utterly illegitimate.

Not only the interwar period is presented as a time of blossoming democracy (which is a common trope in the recurring urge to "return to Europe" from which the coup of 1944 had supposedly diverted us), but the king himself is depicted as a "model for democratic leadership" by a certain Galabova in a later issue of the same newspaper. This is the same king who in 1935 jacked up the 1934 suspension of the trappings of parliamentary democracy, and removing the coup leaders from power, embarked in what went down in history as his "personal rule". To the author's credit, it should be noted that no self-respecting liberal-right commentator would celebrate anyone's popularity with the people. By contrast, in the increasingly anti-democratic atmosphere of today, the very popularity of a politician marks him suspicious and liable for the charge of "populism".

Restoration period

That a few decades later an authoritarian monarch can be recast as a democratic leader, and interwar fascism – as a period of liberal democracy, testifies to the nature of anticommunism as political magic that grinds together incompatible political regimes and philosophies, enchanting in the process the contemporary political conjuncture wherein it occurs and converting it into a self-evident teleology temporarily suspended by anomalous Communism. In other words, for revisionists, Bulgaria had been a “European democracy” before 1944, but because of historical exceptions, such as Communism, it was diverted from its natural geopolitical belonging and now it needs to “return to Europe”. The idea of “return” converts an original lack into a loss, namely, into something present but lost (due to Communism). Loss does not preclude the possibility to retrieve the object. In effect, it nurtures it. In that respect, historical revisionism is not the whimsical penchant of a few eccentric anti-communist intellectuals, but structurally necessary for the new regime premised on a “return to Europe”. A return to something horrible and undemocratic for the sake of democracy would not be politically plausible therefore history has to be rewritten.

For example, a civic initiative, whose express aim is “to promote dealing with the communist past in Bulgaria using methods of historical dialogue and civic education” recently published a series of video lessons and a textbook about Bulgarian Communism, funded by a US foundation in Sofia. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with all gross misrepresentations of life under socialism (although they certainly deserve a careful examination in their own right) and the outright lies – such as the claim that the Communists have murdered king Boris III after 1944, while a heart attack carried him already in 1943, not to mention and their hopelessly outdated totalitarianism framework. Suffice it to quote one example, from the textbook, of how historical revisionism converts the pre-1944 period of dictatorial excess into a harmonious, violence-free society ready to assume the role of the prehistory of contemporary liberal democracy: The phrase “defeat of the bourgeois class” with which the period of socialism is associated means the destruction of the historically established hierarchy in society, meaning positions and relations between social groups that are naturally formed over time and with

the development of Bulgarian society. The Communist regime, in the face of the BCP, breaks down the previously existing social unity and rapport. Such a view cannot accommodate events like the coups of 1923 and 1934. Still less the Bulgarian participation in the Holocaust and the other horrors in the Occupied territories. Only a perverted mind can call the scores of repressions, torture, and disappearances domestically an instance of “social rapport”.

However, the founding of liberal democracy on an ideology of “restoration” and, what amounts to the same thing, of an imagined *longue duree* of a liberal democratic tradition supposedly trumped by Communism, generates a plethora of embarrassing situations for its pundits. The most recent case is the demolition of the “1300 years of Bulgaria” monument – an example of late socialist modernist sculpture in the center of Sofia. Citing the supposed irreparability of the long-neglected monument, the municipality ignored protests convened in the defense of the artwork and tore it down. Yet everyone knows it rushed the demolition because of the nearing term of the Bulgarian presidency of the EU which will happen in the vicinity of the monument. Prompted by a civic initiative, endorsed by a score of Right-wing public figures and intellectuals, the municipality pledged to erect in its place a replica of a 1934 military monument, finished in the neo-classical style right after the coup of the same year, and dedicated to soldiers from two Sofia divisions who perished in WWI and the Balkan wars:

Giving up on democracy

That monument had been damaged by the American carpet bombing of Sofia during WWII. The only surviving element of the old monument is a lion whose paw rests on a shield with an engraved map of Bulgaria. The municipality wants to put the lion back to its original location to beautify the spot for the European delegates, but there is a slight problem: the map under the paw represents so-called “natural” Bulgarian ethnic lands, defined over and beyond any juridical international treaty: It just so happens that the contemporary Republic of Macedonia, parts of Greece, Romania, and Serbia are within the confines of the lion’s “Greater Bulgaria” but who cares about such minor details when the efforts to return Bulgaria to Europe have finally been

successful. That the official ideology of the EU is premised upon “peace” and a firm rejection of irredentism, territorial revisionism, and expansionary nationalism should not be allowed to dampen the enthusiasm and embellishment efforts for the upcoming Bulgarian presidency over the most prestigious club of First world nations!

This is not the first monumental (in both senses of the word) step towards rehabilitation of interwar and Nazi-allied military and political figures. As the anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee shows, the monument of the victims of Communism, erected in 1999, rehabilitated quite a few Bulgarian cabinet members and war generals who were either directly responsible for the destruction of the Macedonian and Greek Jewry in Nazi camps (i.e. the minister of interior Petar Gabrovski) or professed openly their Nazi views (such as gen. Hristo Lukov). All this is part of the post-2008 drive across the EU to institute one correct memory of Communism, embodied in initiatives such as the Prague declaration. Ghodsee notes the overlap in the timing of the declaration with the global financial meltdown and argues that it is not coincidental. In times of crisis, anticommunism intensifies to prevent the spread of legitimate social opposition to capitalism.

In addition to this, local forces behind the ramping up of acerbic revisionism are also at play. The ‘original’ anti-communist opposition has suffered a catastrophic decline in recent years which it blames on a popular mentality infected by irrational ideologies such as “populism” and “communist nostalgia” (the Right-winger PM Borissov is habitually vilified as a “Communist”). As the so-called “authentic” Right which ushered in the new democratic era in 1989 succumbs to hysterical denunciations of the supposed immaturity and populism of the demos, alternating bitter ruminations about the missed chance for a violent revolution to get rid of Communism once and for all, Communism is again haunting the Right as a specter to be exorcised. However, in contrast to the empirically existing Socialist regime fought by the early “democratic forces” in the name of a peaceful transition to “democracy”, today’s spectral Communism demands relentless opposition that won’t stop even at the prospect of jettisoning democracy and dealing further damage to historical truth.

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Vuk Vuković

Against the Modern World

Creationism, the anti-vaccination movement, anti-evolutionism, the promotion of the flat earth idea, bizarre conspiracy theories - all these phenomena have become indispensable parts of social daily routines throughout the modern world. These trends have not bypassed Serbia either. What is their relationship to each other, where is their social source, and what makes them sustainable?

According to the 2018 data from the Belgrade Institute for Public Health Batut, 2,035 people have contracted smallpox in Serbia since the beginning of October 2017, and three people have died from complications caused by this once eradicated disease. These are the first deaths in Serbia caused by the disease in the last two decades. Out of the total number of patients, 94% are unvaccinated, incompletely vaccinated, or their vaccination status is unknown. The domestic public immediately started a debate about whether the “anti-vaxxers” are to blame for this development, which has been getting louder lately, especially after gaining the support of some public figures.

There is certainly a basis for attributing responsibility to the ‘anti-vaccine movement’: the decline in the level of immunization in Serbia coincides in time with the emergence and growing influence of this movement. According to the data from 2016, the level of immunization in Serbia was 81%, which is significantly below the 95% necessary for collective immunity. In Belgrade only, 65% of children were vaccinated during the second year of their life. But this is only part of a broader European trend: in Romania, a recent smallpox epidemic has claimed more than 40 lives; in Italy, where Beppe Grillo used to say that “vaccines kill”, the incidence of the disease has increased sixfold. In 2016, while in Germany, that growth was fivefold.

Financial background of “anti-vaxxers”

What is, or who is behind such “successes” of the anti-vaccine movement? Their presence, persistence, and even relative numbers cannot be attributed only to the growing distrust of modern medicine and the distorted and abused reflex about the excessive influence of large pharmaceutical companies. If something is not just a fad, there is usually tangible material interest. Frequent connections and intertwining compulsory vaccination opponents and advocates of “alternative medicine”, homeopathy, “Russian medicines” and other forms of quackery whose effectiveness has not been successfully confirmed in medical research suggest, although not with complete certainty, that these groups are what anti-vaccination the reflex owes its relative durability.

Ultimately, these are both ideological and financial competitors to official medicine. Thus, for example, homeopaths challenged the H1N1 vaccine as dangerous; in Britain, one survey found that more than half of homeopaths were against the MMR vaccine (vaccine against measles, mumps, and rubella); and in our language area, it is easy to search the Internet for sites that advise how to prevent the “harmful effects of vaccines” with homeopathy or why you should not be vaccinated at all, and how vaccination is contrary to the basic principles of homeopathy. Also, homeopathic vaccines are offered as an alternative to “official vaccines”. Finally, Andrew Wakefield, the author of the infamous research on the connection between vaccines and autism that has since been fully disputed is a frequent guest of homeopathic conferences and associations, although he was left without a license to work due to fake research.

On the other hand, not all failures in immunization should be attributed exclusively to anti-vaccines – a good part of them have to do with privatization and neoliberal reforms in the health sector, which could be seen in the example of the Immunology Institute in Zagreb. In that sense, in Serbia, the anti-vaccine reflex is partly a response to the decline in the quality of vaccines and the weakening of domestic immune capacities – which are “trusted” – and their compensation by importing vaccines, which causes mistrust. The high mortality rate of the last epidemic in Romania has a lot to do with the problems of the Romanian health system.

Methods of promoting “the truth”

It is still very difficult to draw any more systematic conclusions about the social characteristics of those who reject compulsory vaccination because no serious studies have been conducted with this research question. However, a survey of almost 5.400 people from 24 countries found that demographic characteristics – age, gender, education, and political affiliation – did not have a significant impact on attitudes towards vaccination, while the likelihood of a negative attitude towards vaccination was higher if there was a tendency towards belief in other “conspiracy theories”. This is, in fact, obvious in our country as well. In the last few years, together with the “anti-vaccine movement”, the number of people who declare themselves as supporters of other, equally unfounded theories is growing, from creative and rejecting evolution to a serious belief that the Earth is flat. Indeed, most portals and sites that advocate the abolition of compulsory vaccination often abound with texts about other conspiracy theories.

These phenomena, although in many ways related and similar, are still different - while the emergence of anti-vaccines has to do with distrust of modern medicine and the general crisis of the modernist paradigm of rationality and science as a basis for moral life in the community, but also with the emergence of “alternative medicine”. Material competitor, the emergence of anti-evolutionary initiatives and public figures who claim that the Earth is not round is much more a political phenomenon associated with the strengthening of the right, authoritarianism and, at least in the case of Serbia, systemic production of social paranoia and fear. Proponents of creationism in Serbia have been active for several decades, and as a rule, come from circles close to the Serbian Orthodox Church and conservative associations.

Thus, for example, Archpriest Lazar Milin, from the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade, wrote the apologetic work “Scientific Justification of Religion” in 1984, in which he tried to base creationism on “scientific” grounds. On the other hand, the proponents of the Earth as a board thesis are a pure product of the Internet that cannot be cleaner – it seems as if the whole thing was transplanted from the United States, where such associations have existed for some time. Ten years ago, the idea of “Flat Earth Society” was exclusively the

subject of ridicule - today it is very likely that everyone received at least some “material” on this topic by e-mail.

All this is reinforced by the important role of social networks in information, whereby all media sources on these networks are internally evaluated the same. In endless Facebook scrolling, we see posts by serious media houses (suppose for a moment that they usually adhere to the principle of quality journalism) followed by who knows what kinds of web outlets that claim complete fabrications. Who can, in that situation, without being particularly versed in the dynamics of digital media, easily assess what is a credible source? An attempt to distinguish the problems of recognizing legitimate source from unsubstantiated claims usually ends with a reference to “different facts”, not only in the original direction of Trump’s advisor Kelien Conway but also, for example, Dr. Jovana Stojkovic, president of the Civic Initiative for Optional Vaccination which uses that phrase in dealing with hard scientific facts.

Creators and “created”

Also, bizarre phenomena like Jelena Mačić who claims that the Earth is a flat plate – or Miroljub-talk-to-my-sword-Petrović – who fights not only against vaccines but also against the modern world as a whole, would not have been noticed if it were not for social networks that, in addition to operating on the principles of sensationalism, also increase tenfold the voices of people who have no other social contribution than advocating extreme nonsense.

Such trends “from below” are followed by the media strategy “from above”, so in Serbia the largest, pro-regime tabloids regularly have “knowledge” about “dark centers of power” that intend to somehow deceive Serbs are often published on the same pages where Russian doctors are advertised. Similar posts also include “Russian medicines” from the domain of alternative medicine, and only two or three posts lower are texts about the well-meaning WW2 collaborationist Milan Nedić or experiments on Goli Otok. Apart from the biggest tabloids, more serious right-wing media outlets such as “Večernje novosti” is also one of the leading media who promote that kind of “alternative facts”. Its editor-in-chief is recently Milorad Vučelić, who used to be an editor

of the Serbian Public Broadcasting Service during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. It should not be forgotten that the biggest Serbian media (Blic, Kurir, Telegraf, Alo) only a few years ago were the main instigators of hysteria about HAARP – for readers who are not familiar with this hysteria or have forgotten it, it was the alleged existence of the American time management system explaining deviations from normal meteorological conditions in Serbia.

It is difficult to separate the causes and effects of all these phenomena – whether it is, on the one hand, a right-wing media agenda that constantly casts doubt on everything from the intentions of other nations to climate change, or some kind of indigenous reaction to the modern world or the political order established in the twentieth century with its failures and unfulfilled promises? All the bizarre theories of this type undermine the principles on which previous social practices at least sought to rest such as transparency of relations between people and things, rationality, and science as a postulate that what we perceive and find in the real world can be measured, remeasured, checked and double-checked, but also reproduced in the same method with the same results. These previous social practices also professed a notion that people are capable to collectively manage their destiny. In doing so, they inevitably reveal the true face of social practices: the non-transparent social relations, the irrationality of capitalism that destroys the planet, and the inability to decide on one's own life. We need to separate those who only express such attitudes and the creators of public opinion who “package” such attitudes into bizarre theories. The former can still be won over to a truly rational world – socialism – while the latter are irrevocably heralds of barbarism.

Translated from Croatian by **Andrea Milat**

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