

## The Neverending 90s in Serbia: What Came before the Phantasm of Gender

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### Abstract

*Right-wing actors—conservative politicians, public intellectuals, and the Serbian Orthodox Church—have been influential in contemporary Serbia since the early 1990s, playing a formative role in its anti-gender movement. This study advances our understanding of how anti-gender mobilization draws from its local context. Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of gender phantasm and Andrea Pető’s concept of gender as symbolic glue, this analysis examines two documents: the 1992 “Warning” resolution and Patriarch Pavle’s 1995 Christmas message. These texts enable mapping of actors and succinctly encapsulate the ideological imaginaries of the conservative elite who remain active. The ideological imaginary uniquely draws from rhetoric used to justify regional wars, serving as the phantasmic foundation of contemporary anti-gender mobilizations. Since right-wing actors operated within a contested space, the study acknowledges the unwavering feminist and pacifist left-wing opposition.*

**Keywords:** Anti-gender Mobilizations; Abortion; “White Plague”; Phantasm of Gender; Sticky Phantasm; Serbia

### Introduction

Anti-gender mobilization has intensified across the post-Yugoslav region in recent years, as documented in a growing body of academic literature (Kuhar 2017; Zaharijević 2019; Škokić 2019; Zaharijević and Lončarević 2020; Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021; Cvetkovic and Velichkovska 2022; Bobičić and Stojčić 2023). Building on this research, our text aims to go further back into the past, focusing on the 1990s, a decade that was pivotal for our region. The 1990s brought the violent destruction of Yugoslavia’s self-management socialism and initiated a neoliberal transformation that continues to this day. This transformation involves several consistent actors—representatives of the right-wing political establishment, the

clergy, conservative media, public intellectuals, and the capitalist elite. We aim to sketch a mental map of conservative actors in Serbia, who were the backbone of retraditionalization during the 1990s and that have now joined European right-wing movements in attacking gender and achievements in gender equality.

Through mapping, we systematically present the actors who were pioneers of the right-wing approach to gender and sexual (in)equality, and who have subsequently transformed into anti-gender actors. We use mapping as a method because it effectively demonstrates direct connections between present trends and those from three decades ago. Given the analysis's complexity, we conducted the mapping at two levels: the individual level and the organizational level. This approach allows us to document not only specific individuals who have been active for thirty years but also the generational shifts within key organizations/institutions that have taken place in the meantime.

We identify public figures and organizations/institutions that remain active in our public sphere, whose involvement in the 1990s is either forgotten (particularly among younger generations, including ourselves as Millennials) or has been historically "whitewashed." Besides figures and organizations, we map themes such as right-wing fantasies about increasing "ethnically pure" birth rates, which right-wing actors continue to present as a novel problem in public discourse, despite their formulation being inseparable from the nationalist and criminal ideas and practices of the war period.

Furthermore, as a counterpoint to right-wing mobilization against gender, we find it essential to include progressive actors from the 1990s in our mapping. We particularly emphasize feminist organizing, which maintains a three-decade continuity of preserving gender equality and defending gender (while noting some exceptions). Thus, our work serves to recover from erasure both the actors who retain positions of power and to commemorate those who are committed to preserving and expanding gender and other forms of equality.

We complement the mapping of names and organizations/institutions with an analysis of key themes and buzzwords prevalent the 1990s because, in this archival material, we recognized the methods used by today's anti-gender movements. We therefore use contemporary theories that critique anti-gender movements—primarily the concepts of "symbolic glue" (Pető 2015) and "gender phantasm" (Butler 2024)—to analyze key right-wing messages and attacks on gender equality from the 1990s, which we identify as precursors to contemporary anti-gender movements in this region.

Although we explore continuities, which manifest not only through conservative themes and methods but also directly through the actions of the same public figures, we

recognize that contemporary anti-gender movements are a more recent phenomenon with different local and global populist forms of functioning compared to the right-wing movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (to which Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk dedicated a study in 2022). Hence, strictly speaking, we cannot categorize the 1990s discourse as an anti-gender discourse *per se*, but within it, we can find elements for comparison and the roots of what has only more explicitly emerged as an anti-gender movement in the last decade.

Furthermore, we believe that mapping actors from the 1990s can help us understand the local context more deeply and situate anti-gender movements within our experience, which is inseparable from the transformation of Yugoslav socialism into the neoliberal “Western Balkans”—a consequence of the war. Thus, we ask what came before the gender phantasm and link it to the “neverending 90s.”

## Methodology

While drawing on broader post-Yugoslav scholarship, our research examines primary sources from 1990s Serbia to uncover the ideological foundations of conservative opposition to reproductive rights. Rather than analyzing legal documents, as most previous studies have done, we focus on two key texts that capture the core arguments of conservative actors. This approach allows us to trace the early development of right-wing rhetoric and strategies, revealing how gender-based fears first took root in political discourse.

We began our archival research by looking at collections of press releases, messages, demands, and other materials created by women’s groups in the 1990s. These texts helped us both understand the issues women’s groups considered important and map out key actors. Based on this information, we collected archival documents produced by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)—the leading political party at that time—and other conservative actors, including academics, public intellectuals, and influential individuals such as opinion leaders. From these sources, we developed two distinct collections: one drawn from feminist organization archives, and another from conservative sources including right-wing newspapers, state media, church publications, and party documents.

This approach is important for two primary reasons. First, we wanted to take a more holistic look at the 1990s, recognizing that right-wing actors did not act in a vacuum and thus focusing only on their actions would be insufficient. Feminist and pacifist movements have continuously opposed right-wing actors, as noted by Adriana Zaharijević and Zorana

Antonijević (2023). Secondly, while there has been a continuity in the conservative attack on gender equality, there has also been steady left-wing opposition. This methodology inherently reflects activist perspectives while revealing an important historical shift: though feminist movements of the 1990s firmly opposed conservative ideology, some contemporary feminist actors have aligned with “gender-critical” positions that challenge trans rights and gender identity theory under the banner of protecting sex-based rights.

The two collections differ fundamentally in their preservation. The first corpus is housed in state libraries, ensuring official preservation. The second exists more precariously, split between formal institutions and informal archives maintained by civil society organizations. This divide creates two distinct vulnerabilities: feminist historical materials face potential loss through resource limitations and neglect, while conservative historical records, though well-resourced, often remain hidden as contemporary capitalist elites attempt to obscure their connections to the violence of the 1990s.

Our mapping reveals individual actors who have undergone various political “reincarnations” over the past three decades, yet remain steadfast enemies of gender equality and freedom. We also mapped key feminist and right-wing organizations and institutions, aiming to connect different actors and highlight the right-wing’s three-decade development of networks of influence. Additionally, we examine the actions of individuals and organizations currently in power, while documenting positive examples of important feminist work by individuals and organizations.

To define the corpus, we center our analysis on two seminal documents that sparked widespread debate and continue to resonate: the 1992 “Warning” resolution from the Second Congress of the Socialist Party of Serbia and Patriarch Pavle’s 1995 Christmas epistle. These texts were chosen for their ability to both map key actors and crystallize the conservative elite’s ideological worldview—one that many still advance today. We argue that this ideological imaginary serves as the phantasmic foundation of contemporary anti-gender mobilizations.

## Sticky Phantasm

While we were still thinking about how to explain the process that started three decades ago and continue today, Judith Butler published *Who’s Afraid of Gender* (2024). This book provided us with a framework for understanding the roots of tendencies that have since evolved into anti-gender politics. While the past decade has seen a broad body of research on anti-gender movements develop (for example, Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Graff

and Korolczuk 2022), even such vast academic production cannot keep pace with the speed and strength with which anti-gender movements have reached seemingly every corner of the globe. Just when we think we have uncovered their methods or financial flows, they proliferate like the heads of the Lernaean Hydra.

Andrea Pető was one of the first authors to describe and foresee the danger of these movements. She identified the very essence of their adaptability, arguing that gender serves as a “symbolic glue” (Pető 2015, 127). As Pető explains, anti-gender movements are only seemingly focused on gender. In reality, gender is merely a “glue” making the conservative actors’ attack on progressive policies and the broader framework of human rights. Consequently, in different regional or national contexts, anti-gender movements can easily adapt to the needs of conservative elites. In some countries, criticism of gender rests on “preserving tradition,” while in others, gender appears as an “imported” Western means of colonization.

Butler uses psychoanalytic terminology to explain what Pető calls “glue,” writing that gender “has become a phantasm with destructive powers, one way of collecting and escalating multitudes of modern panics” (Butler 2024). Although climate catastrophe, forced migration, war, poverty, racism, and anti-trans/queer discrimination pose legitimate threats, right-wing moral panic obscures these concrete dangers by collapsing them under the single, unrelated label of “gender.” Butler writes: “Gender’ both collects and incites those fears, keeping us from thinking more clearly about what there is to fear, and how the currently imperiled sense of the world came about in the first place” (Butler 2024). They argue that existing structures subjugate people by scaring them with the phantasm of “gender” while simultaneously externalizing their fears at the expense of vulnerable communities. Butler cites Pope Francis’s 2015 speech comparing gender theory to nuclear weapons’ destructiveness.

Beyond the phantasms of “gender”, we derive another important idea from Butler. They propose that advocating for a return to an imagined patriarchal order necessarily entails the targeting of minorities and abolishing their basic rights, protections, and freedoms. This is why anti-gender ideology is inherently fascistic: “As panic builds, full license is given to the state to negate the lives of those who have come to represent, through the syntax of the phantasm, a threat to the nation” (Butler 2024).

The origins of the gender phantasm in the post-Yugoslav region emerged during the 1990s amid Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution, a period in which feminists like Žarana Papić identified fascist elements (1999). During this period, the symbolic “glue” operated through

two distinct concepts: “white plague” (Serbian: *bela kuga*) and abortion. “White plague” is a vivid local term for depopulation. Its racist implications were twofold: “white” referred to the ethnic Serbian population, while “plague” framed demographic decline as a disease threatening national survival. Abortion was often referred to as “infanticide” (Serbian: *čedomorstvo*) rather than by its proper medical term for terminating pregnancy.

While these earlier concepts were narrower in scope than the concept of gender, examining primary texts from the 1990s reveals clear parallels with contemporary uses of gender as a phantasm. The following sections will demonstrate how these historical phantasms laid the groundwork for gender to become what we see today: a “sticky” concept that crystallizes right-wing fears and mobilizes political influence.

## The Ghosts of the 1990s Still Among Us

Recent scholarship from the post-Yugoslav region has documented the emergence and consolidation of local anti-gender movements, with researchers increasingly tracing their roots to events of the 1990s. In particular, recent studies examine how wartime conservatism of the 1990s evolved through the establishment of neoliberal nation-states in the early 21st century, leading to contemporary anti-gender movements in Croatia and Serbia.

Firstly, Jelena Čeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš (2024) show how heteronormative family models and right-wing “protection of the family and children” have been imposed since the 1990s. They further connect these ideas to gender re-traditionalization and militant nationalism during the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, which was built around the themes of “declining birth rates and dying out of the nation” (Čeriman and Vučković Juroš 2024, 663). These discourses later evolved into discourse about the “protection” of future generations from “same-sex parents, sexualization in education, or unwilling mothers-to-be” (Čeriman and Vučković Juroš 2024, 662). In a related study, Tanja Vučković Juroš and Maja Gergorić (2024) further analyze the evolution of “traditional family” ideology by examining how attitudes towards abortion changed in Croatia. They find that despite the conducive environment of retraditionalization and war violence, the Catholic Church’s attempts to abolish abortion rights in the 1990s failed (Vučković Juroš and Gergorić 2024). Zaharijević and Antonijević (2023) make a similar conclusion in the Serbian context with regards to the Serbian Orthodox Church during that time period.

Our research extends these studies by focusing specifically on 1990s materials to map both right-wing and progressive actors (individuals and organizations) and their key themes. First, we trace which of these actors remain active and have now become part of the anti-

gender movement. Second, we show that while the central themes from the 1990s persist, they have been reframed to align with contemporary European and global anti-gender discourse.

The concept of “sticky phantasm” helps explain the thematic and dialogical continuity from the region’s formative period, when power shifted to nationalist, neoliberal elites who have consistently opposed gender equality. Right-wing actors have weaponized feminism and gender equality as threats to distract from institutional destruction, wartime and post-war structural violence, and resource depletion. These actors have maintained their influence for three decades, adapting their forms while preserving their essential character.

### **Anti-Gender Actors: Then and Now**

When mapping right-wing/conservative actors from 1990s Serbia, we draw on typologies established in previous literature. While there are several ways to categorize these actors, we focus on the division proposed by Damjan Denkovski, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz, who categorize actors chronologically into three groups: old (for example, the Catholic Church), new (for example, parental associations), and allies (for example, public intellectuals and politicians). This typology is not rigid, as boundaries between different actors overlap, particularly with political parties. Moreover, allies can emerge from both older and newer groups. Nevertheless, this framework effectively traces the historical development of anti-gender movements over the previous three decades. While certain actors pioneered these ideas and remain central figures, others—including citizens, parents, and the general public—were gradually drawn into this circle of influence. Meanwhile, the original actors have not remained static, instead adapting their tactics throughout three decades of activity.

Conservative forces in anti-gender movements can be conceptualized through a chess metaphor (Edström et al. 2023), with distinct roles represented by different pieces: populist authoritarian leaders as kings and queens; religious fundamentalists as bishops; ethno-nationalists, neo-fascists, and racists as knights; aristocratic and economic elites as rooks; and men’s rights groups and illiberal civil society organizations as pawns. In opposition, progressive actors occupy parallel positions: political champions of socio-economic and democratic values serve as kings and queens; feminist educators, researchers, and journalists as bishops; anti-fascist, humanitarian, and minority rights movements as knights; feminist funders and progressive philanthropists as rooks; and feminist and progressive organizations as pawns.

A comprehensive analysis of gender relations requires examining both conservative and progressive actors, as both have achieved significant victories and suffered losses over three decades, adapting their approaches to regional and global contexts. This chess metaphor not only provides effective symbolism but also emphasizes different social structures, particularly the connections between state power and capitalist, religious, and nationalist forces in anti-gender movements. We demonstrate this convergence of “axis forces” in Serbia during the collapse of Yugoslav self-management.

In sum, drawing on feminist archives and conservative publications, we employ dual analytical frameworks: a chronological typology of actors (old, new, and allies) and a chess metaphor that maps the power dynamics between conservative and progressive forces. Furthermore, like the interdependencies of chess pieces, we expose the complex network of influence and collaboration among mutually supporting conservative actors.

### **The “Warning”: Resolution on Population Renewal**

The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), then led by Slobodan Milošević, passed a resolution focusing on “population renewal” titled “Warning” (Serbian: *Upozorenje*) at its second congress, which took place on October 23rd and 24th of 1992. The SPS maintained its political influence in Serbia even after Milošević’s fall and extradition to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and continues to hold power today, with its current president Ivica Dačić serving as deputy prime minister and minister of internal affairs.

The resolution addresses what it terms “uneven and unbalanced” demographic development across regional, ethnic, and social lines. It notes that among the country's 19 ethnic communities, 16 had experienced population decline since before the industrial revolution. In contrast, the document claims that three ethnic minorities—Albanians, Muslims, and Roma—show high birth rates and “explosive” population growth. However, it characterizes this growth as “irrational and inhumane,” citing these communities’ “poor material and cultural foundations” and their residence in areas with inadequate natural and “work-produced” resources (Socialist Party of Serbia 1992, 4-6). The document expresses alarm that these three ethnic minorities accounted for 40 per cent of overall “population renewal” at the time, projecting an increase to 50 per cent within a decade. Additionally, it notes that women “bear the greatest burden” of population renewal (Socialist Party of Serbia 1992, 5).

The resolution uses accessible language intended for wide circulation, featuring slogans like “without birth, there is no kin; without kin, there is no nation!” (Socialist Party



of Serbia 1992, 5). It explicitly frames the “explosive” birth rates of Albanian, Muslim, and Roma populations as a threat to other ethnic groups’ rights.

This document can be understood through Butler’s concept of phantasmic clustering. The resolution’s racist problematization of minority birth rates emerged alongside ongoing war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina—a rhetorical strategy that preceded and helped justify ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The resolution was signed by leaders from the SPS party, but also representatives of academic institutions, medical bodies, government agencies, and research institutes. The signatories included Miloš Macura, Chairman of the Population Analysis Committee of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts; Bogoljub Stojanović, President of the SPS Family Council; Miroljub Rančić, Head of the Center for Demographic Research; Miloš Baničević, Director of the Institute for Mother and Child Health Care; Milovan Živković, Director of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia; Milomir Bešević, President of the Serbian Medical Society; Dragomir Mladenović, President of the Yugoslav Family Planning Association; and Luka Todorović, Director of the Institute for Social Policy.

This resolution was one of many spanning several decades that addressed decreasing birth rates and depopulation. In 2002, Luka Todorović published a comprehensive book on family planning that compiled these resolutions. The book, which was reviewed by fellow Warning signatory Miloš Baničević, argued that while civil societies recognize families as central to prosperity, some scientists blame modern industrial society’s features—particularly women’s emancipation and workplace participation—for “creating the rising economic crisis, characterized, among other things, by pathological phenomena in the family” (Todorović 2002, 5).

As Wendy Bracewell (1996) writes, right-wing actors placed the blame for the “white plague” on both women and “emasculated” men. Among them Maja Gojković, then vice-president of the Serbian Radical Party and current president of the Vojvodina government. Gojković said that Serbian men had “allowed themselves to be neutered”, stating:

Women in general succeeded in preserving their femininity [under communism], but a significant part of the male population suffered serious injuries in the region of the backbone and the heart. This is one of the causes of the “white plague.” In order to decide to create a new life, a woman needs inspiration. You can't ask a woman to bear children to men who have capitulated in advance to every threat. In order to raise natality we must awaken and develop the spirit of masculine honor and heroism. We must help men to be that which nature and tradition intend them to be. (Duga, 16 August 1992, p. 52 as cited in Bracewell 1996, 27)

Other high-ranking Serbian politicians expressed similar views in the early 1990s. At a 1990 party meeting in Novi Pazar, Kosta Bulatović, founder of the right-wing Kosovo Serb political organization Srpski pokret otpora, called on Serbian women to “propagate and renew the Serbian nation” (as cited in Četković, Jarić and Stojanović 1993, 21). Bulatović remained politically active until his death in 2023.

Using Denkovski, Bernarding and Lunz’s chronological framework reveals how different allies collaborated. Traditional actors—SPS politicians like Gojković and Bulatović—found support from conservative intellectuals (academics and institute researchers) and establishment professionals (doctors and bureaucrats). This interweaving of actors exemplifies what Jerker Edström and colleagues (2023) term “axis-forces,” demonstrating how they collectively advanced the resolution’s fascist agenda.

Feminist organizations actively opposed conservative family planning policies in Serbia that preceded and later culminated in the 1992 Warning resolution. In June 1990, prominent groups, including the Belgrade Women’s Lobby (Serbian: *Beogradski ženski lobi*) and the Association for the Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (UJDI) issued a formal statement condemning the discriminatory nature of proposed conservative family planning policies under consideration at that time. These policies, like the Warning resolution, were described by these groups as racist in nature. They also sought to curtail abortion rights and discriminated against parents who do not have multiple children. The UJDI, founded by left-leaning intellectuals Predrag Matvejević, Bogdan Bogdanović, Vesna Pešić, and Koča Popović, played a key role in organizing this resistance (Četković et al. 1995, 27). In 1990, the Belgrade Women’s Lobby and youth activists gathered 2,000 signatures petitioning against these conservative measures.

In November 1992, shortly after the adoption of the Warning resolution, a panel was organized at the Belgrade Youth Center to discuss discriminatory population policies and critique it. The panel featured prominent feminists Anđelka Milić, Žarana Papić, and Nedeljka (Neda) Božinović. In the 1990s, Božinović was a key member of Women in Black (Serbian: *Žene u crnom*, ŽUC), a feminist anti-militarist group that has consistently fought against restrictions on women’s reproductive rights and opposed right-wing attacks on gender equality. Over three decades, ŽUC has led opposition to SPC conservatism and ethno-nationalistic war crime legacies, as evidence in Ildiko Erdei and Lidija Radulović’s 2020 study on reproductive and worker’s rights of women in Serbia.

However, ŽUC’s progressive stance has become complicated by some members’ self-identification as gender-critical feminists. In 2024, a ŽUC member published *Liberation*

*from Gender* (Serbian: *Oslobođenje od roda*), an anthology of translated texts. Among its editors is Nina Radulović, who belongs to Women's Solidarity (Serbian: *Ženska solidarnost*), an openly trans-exclusionary internet collective.

### **Patriarch Pavle's 1995 Christmas Message**

In his 1995 Christmas message, Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Pavle focused heavily on the “white plague,” warning that Serbs would become a minority in their own country within two decades—a claim he asserted was “mathematically calculated” (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995). According to Pavle, such minority status would strip Serbs of their ability to determine their future. Though he acknowledged mothers grieving sons lost to wars, Pavle identified abortion—which he exclusively termed “infanticide”—as the sole cause of Serbian depopulation. Addressing the mothers' grief, he stated:

Many mothers, who did not want to have more than one child, today tear out their hair and weep bitterly over the onlyborns they have lost in these war conflicts, often cursing God and people, but at the same time forgetting to blame themselves for not giving birth to more children that could bring solace to them now. (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995)

He accused mothers of pursuing pleasure while neglecting childrearing, lamenting that schools “once filled with children's joyful voices” were closing. As he put it, “mothers conceive, because such is done with enjoyment and satisfaction, but they do not want to give birth and raise children, because that is tiring and supposedly endangers their comfort” (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995).

Pavle describes abortion as a “howling sin before God” and makes surprising and seemingly out of place claims about science: “At conception, in the embryo, invisible to the human eye, there is a complete future personality: hair and eye color, figure, stature, character, and all other features” (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995). Science has proven that life begins at conception, not birth, Pavle says. He concludes by saying that it is a sin to deny “your child to see the light of day” and “to be at least kissed by the sun.” He goes on to claim:

When they appear before the all-fair judge, those mothers who did not allow their children to be born, will meet those children up there and they will ask them sadly: why did you kill us, why didn't you give birth to us?” (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995)

The Belgrade Women's Lobby, in a statement signed by feminist activists Nadežda Četković, Jelka Imširović, and Zorica Mršević, staunchly opposed Pavle's message. They argued that it advocated denying women's fundamental rights: the ability to make their own childbirth decisions and “to be masters of their bodies” (Četković et al., 1995, 27). The group

rejected Pavle's equation of abortion with infanticide. They contended that the so-called "white plague" stemmed not from abortions but from a society failing to provide humane living conditions for its citizens. Furthermore, they dismissed Pavle's "math" as merely a facade for "feeding nationalist intolerance and hate." They further elaborate:

The message is that there will be more Albanians than Serbs. It does not matter who there will be more of. What is important is that we all live amicably and in harmony. Trust and friendship cannot be built on these types of jabs. (Ćetković, Imširović and Mršević 1995, 45-46).

The Belgrade Women's Lobby criticized Pavle's use of "reproof and reprimand" toward women they characterized as "responsible" (Ćetković, Imširović and Mršević, 1995, 45)—women who wished to have only the children they could provide with a safe and well-rounded future. They challenged the assumption that women seek abortions because they reject motherhood or childbirth. Instead, they identified several root causes: inadequate sexual education, limited access to contraception, poverty, political instability, and unemployment. The group emphasized that women cannot be reduced solely to their reproductive capacities (Ćetković, Imširović and Mršević, 1995, 45). Notable feminist activists who joined in opposing abortion restrictions included Nadežda Ćetković, Lepa Mladenović, Ljiljana Vuletić, and Svenka Savić.

The Serbian Orthodox Church fired back against the Belgrade Women's Lobby in the January/February issue of its Herald (Serbian: *Glasnik*). An unsigned editorial in the Herald states that Pavle and the Serbian Orthodox Church consider the freedom to choose what to do with one's own body an "inalienable feature" of "man" (Serbian: *čoveka*) while arguing that freedom without spiritual responsibility constitutes a misuse of divine intention and is thus "unworthy of God" (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995a, 19). The piece characterizes abortion as a moral transgression, portraying women who terminate pregnancies as misusing their divinely granted freedom to the detriment of both themselves and society. The piece addresses those "who believe man is just flesh, and not an immortal soul," suggesting that they pursue pleasure while neglecting duty and "the greatness of serving one's neighbors and the sacrifice that springs from the feeling of love for God and one's neighbor" (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995a, 19). The text frames abortion, which it explicitly equates with infanticide, as stemming from irresponsibility, adding that:

The Belgrade Women's Lobby may not care that the Serbs are disappearing, but Serbs cannot be indifferent. The Serbian Orthodox Church cannot be indifferent either and warns them of the danger in a motherly way. (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995a, 20).

In Serbian society, the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church has almost a mythical status, granting him extraordinary influence in shaping phantasms. Pavle's statement demonstrates how he conflated distinct societal concerns, transmuting fears about war into anxieties about the "white plague" and equating wartime loss of children with voluntary termination of pregnancy. It is precisely this mechanism that is deployed in anti-gender mobilizations today.

Examining Patriarch Pavle's activities surrounding the 1995 Christmas message reveals the process of phantasmic clustering—how the "white plague" narrative was constructed and disseminated through specific networks of religious and political power. Three months after publishing his message, Pavle and the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church convened a special session in Bjeljina with Milan Martić, then-president of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, and Radovan Karadžić, then-president of Republika Srpska (both later convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). The session's focus was the "spiritual and biological survival" of the Serbian people (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995b, 42).

The campaign against abortion extended beyond Pavle within church leadership. In 1993, Vasilije Kačavenda, head of the Eparchy of Zvornik and Tuzla, characterized abortion as a "prenatal war more brutal than real war" and urged the Republika Srpska government to implement an abortion ban (Ćetković, Jarić and Stojanović 1993, 137). Though Kačavenda later resigned amid a pedophilia scandal, he retains a degree of public legitimacy. Bishop Jovan of Šumadija recently awarded him the Order of the New Martyrs of Kragujevac following their joint memorial service for students killed by Nazis in Kragujevac in 1941 (Miljković 2024). Importantly, his influence persists through a network of supporters in positions of power.

This historical thread connects to contemporary politics through figures like Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, the current Minister of Family Welfare and Demography and co-founder of the far-right Oathkeepers party. She maintains ties with Dejan Nestorović, a public defender and self-proclaimed relative of Kačavenda (M.Ž. 2024). While Đurđević Stamenkovski has only recently adopted explicit "white plague" terminology, she promotes similar ideological frameworks. As a case in point, she dismissed in a 2024 television interview reports of gynecological violence and poor maternity ward conditions as "part of the global agenda against childbirth in Serbia." She claimed that "for twenty years there has been a campaign against the birth of children in Serbia, and it is part of the global agenda," adding that "that is why obstetric violence, bad conditions in maternity wards, and bad food

are emphasized, and that is why they are persistently insisted on” (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2024).

Pavle’s focus on abortion in his 1995 Christmas message coincided with broader political developments. Although abortion had been legalized in 1952 and enshrined in the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it became a contentious public issue in the mid-1990s when legislation was proposed to restrict access. The Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS)—led then and now by convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj—championed these restrictions. Among the law’s prominent supporters was SRS parliamentarian Jorgovanka Tabaković (Ćetković, Mršević, Stojanović and Vuletić 1995, 40). Tabaković later became governor of the National Bank of Serbia when her current party, the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS), assumed power in 2012. She has served as SNS deputy president since then.

An analysis of Pavle’s Christmas message through the chronological framework reveals complex actor networks. The “old actors” encompass both religious authorities (Pavle and the Holy Synod) and nationalist political-military leaders who were actively committing war crimes in the 1990s. Šešelj, Tabaković, and Košela represent a hybrid category—while fitting the “old actors” classification, their continued influence and activity positions them simultaneously as “old-new actors.” This overlap illustrates how artificial the boundaries between actor categories can be, particularly in the political sphere. Applying the chess analogy provides additional analytical clarity. Politicians function as kings and queens on this ideological chessboard, while Pavle and the synod operate as bishops, leveraging their diagonal movements across institutional boundaries to influence both religious and political spheres.

As we mentioned above, right-wing actors did not act in a vacuum and feminist activists spoke out against the Christmas message and efforts to restrict abortion access. It is important to note that their response found theoretical reinforcement in academic circles, most notably through Žarana Papić’s influential analysis. Writing in 1998, Žarana Papić identified the message as the “most obvious example” of both “silent patriarchy” and what she characterized as the “Serb national program” (Papić 2006, 129). Addressing Pavle’s characterization of abortion as an epidemic, Papić argued:

This ‘disease’, as the patriarch chose to see it, can only be cured in one way, which is by making Serbian women want to bear children, the patriarch advised. And this, he advised, could be achieved if they were told that not doing so constituted a threefold sin: toward themselves, toward the Serbian nation, and, of course, toward God himself. (Papić 2006, 129-130).

In another work, Papić (1999) writes about the church's role in what she called the "fascisation of social life" through fictionalization and displacement of trauma (Papić 1999). This analysis parallels Butler's work and reveals the mechanism deployed in Pavle's ruthless treatment of mothers who had lost children in the wars and the equation of abortion to murder. Fears are appropriated and weaponized for the purpose of strengthening the church's and government's grip on power.

This theoretical work forms an important part of Papić's broader scholarly legacy, which ended with her untimely death in 2002. Her intellectual contributions are preserved at the Center for Women's Studies in Belgrade, where an archive houses her extensive collection of 2,000 books along with other scholarly materials.

## Discussion

The global anti-gender movement today centers primarily on opposition to reproductive rights and resistance to women's and LGBTIQ+ rights. In Serbia, these opposing forces converge around the mythologized concept of the "traditional family" (Bobičić and Stojčić 2023). This contemporary narrative has deep roots in the rhetoric of the 1990s war and post-war period, where the supposed defense of "traditional family values" manifested through anti-abortion campaigns and moral panic about demographic decline, termed the "white plague."

Our analysis reveals the underlying mechanics of today's "traditional family" mythology. Right-wing actors exploit legitimate societal concerns about war, violence, poverty, and corruption by redirecting blame toward reproductive rights. They cast women as failing their maternal duty to produce new Serbs, holding them responsible for the nation's supposed demographic crisis—a narrative particularly evident in Pavle's epistle. The right deploys creates such phantasms as "infanticide" to describe abortion and "white plague" to frame depopulation concerns.

Drawing on Butler's analysis of fascistic tendencies that advocate returning to an idealized patriarchal past by targeting minorities, we see similar patterns in the Warning. It portrays ethnic minorities as culturally inferior while simultaneously burdening women with the role of national preservation through reproduction. This reveals how nationalist and war ideologies in Serbia became inextricably linked with attacks on women's autonomy.

Examining the 1990s serves two crucial purposes: it illuminates the origins of current ideological frameworks and exposes how capitalist elites networked while attempting to

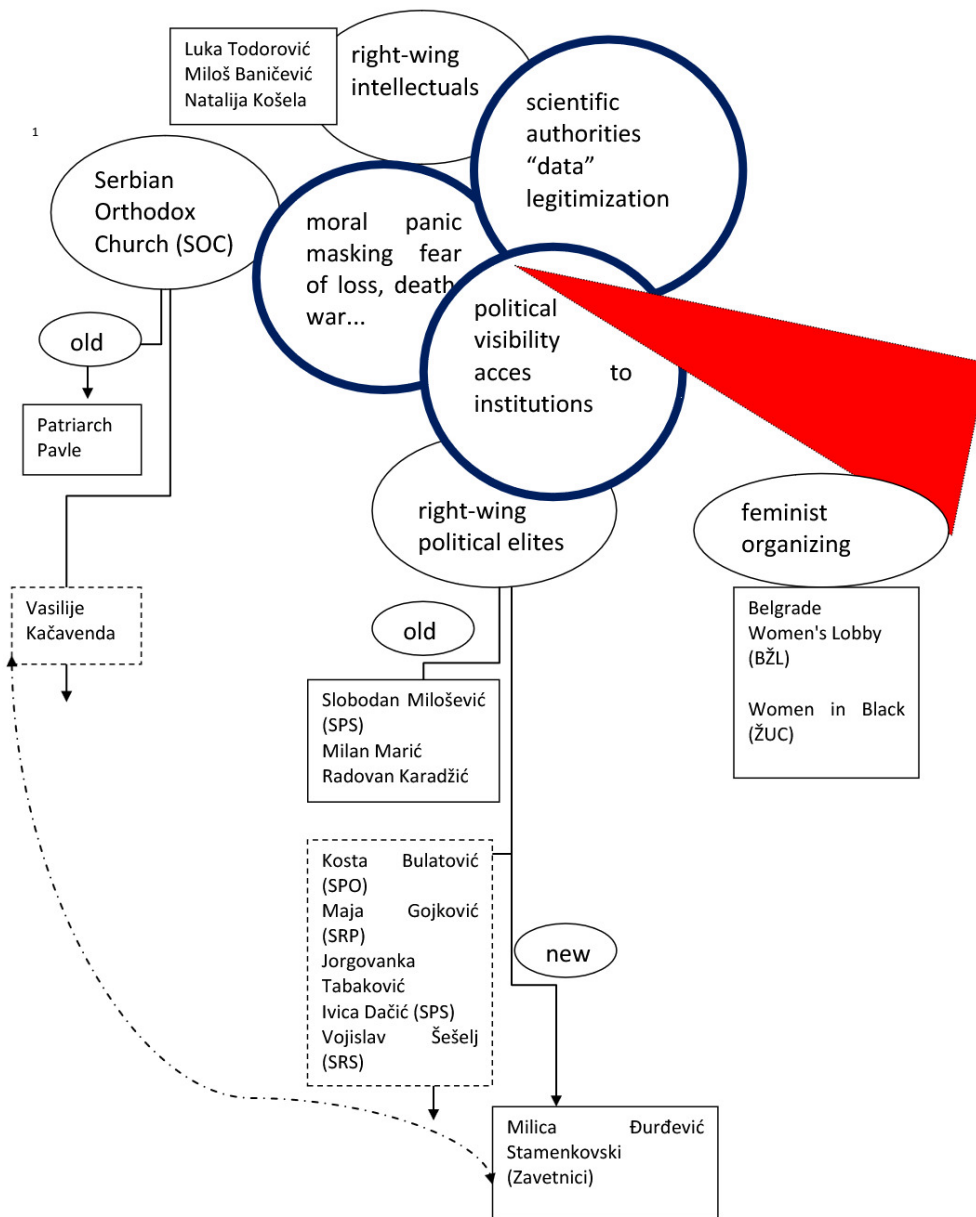
evade responsibility for both wartime violence and the subsequent deterioration of social institutions.

Figure 1 maps key actors identified in our analysis of the Warning resolution and Patriarch Pavle's 1995 Christmas Message, organizing them into three distinct groups. The visualization also illustrates the strategies these groups employed to construct and sustain an enduring ideological phantasm over three decades. This "stickiness" demonstrates how right-wing ideas cohere and reinforce each other, creating an ideological specter that persists in contemporary discourse. While our analysis discusses diverse individual feminist activists, the map highlights feminist resistance through a red triangle piercing the right-wing phantasm, specifically featuring two key feminist organizations as representative examples.

The network analysis illustrated in Figure 1 reveals that despite the right's rhetorical shift from war-centric to neoliberal discourse, key continuities persist through the sustained activity of central organizations and specific individuals. The Serbian Orthodox Church and several political figures maintain their influential positions across this transition. Moreover, the fundamental mechanisms of ideological production remain consistent, enabling the repackaging of historical narratives under contemporary frameworks—particularly evident in how "traditional family" values are conceptualized and deployed. The same strategic approaches used in the 1990s to generate moral panic and legitimize political positions through pseudo-scientific authority continue to shape current anti-gender and nationalist discourse.



Figure 1: Serbian Right-Wing Networks and Feminist Resistance (1995-Present)



<sup>1</sup> This arrow "open" indicates that the actor is still active and influential.

Source: Authors

## Conclusion

In regions characterized by perpetual "transition"—a euphemism for war-torn and plundered societies still ruled by irreplaceable elites—the global anti-gender movement has found a suitable new home and fertile ground. In this text, we contribute to the growing body of work on anti-gender policies in Serbia. We show how the conservative turn of the 1990s, coinciding with the militarized collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, laid the groundwork for contemporary anti-gender mobilization in the region. We supplement existing

scholarship by analyzing key texts that function as manifests to capture the core conservative arguments against reproductive rights and freedoms. We also examine feminist counter-arguments drawn from both institutional and activist archives.

To that end, we mapped right-wing actors: individuals, organizations, and institutions on the one side, and the progressive actors who opposed them on the other. We connected the mapping to previous research through categorization. Our analysis revealed a network of right-wing actors who have maintained presence across in various institutions of the system for three decades.

Meanwhile, feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements have grown stronger over these three decades, mounting resistance to right-wing policy implementation while holding these actors accountable for their past actions and defending hard-won rights. This text thus contributes to feminist resistance against historical erasure, contextualizing contemporary anti-gender mobilization within its historical lineage while deconstructing conservative phantasms of fear.

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