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Marching with enthusiasm, politicizing with fear: the case of Belgrade 2001 pride parade in the context of early stage democratic transition

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In June 2001, Serbian LGBTQIA+ civil society organizations endeavored to organize the first Pride parade in Belgrade, marking the second such event in post-communist countries in the aftermath of 1989. Despite drawing around 100 participants to Belgrade's central square, the parade culminated in violence, with 40 LGBTQIA+ activists sustaining injuries from a group of 1,000–2000 hooligans and football fans. Existing literature often portrays the 2001 Pride event as a violent episode, focusing on a narrative of victimization that has shaped LGBTQIA+ activism in Serbia for the past two decades. However, this narrative tends to overlook or insufficiently address the political dynamics that fueled the violence. This study seeks to explore the repercussions of the limited socio-political engagement of LGBTQIA+ groups, highlighting their challenges in mobilizing broad-based, multi-sectoral support by failing to connect LGBTQIA+ rights with broader societal issues such as gender equality and minority rights. Through interviews with the 2001 parade activists, LGBTQIA+ rights experts, and political representatives this research aims to bridge the knowledge gap concerning the complex political landscape and ongoing democratic blockages faced by these groups. The authors contend that the LGBTQIA+ community's pursuit of autonomy and professionalization, amidst a transformed post-revolution political climate, left them vulnerable to violent backlash from ultra-nationalistic factions.

KEYWORDS

democratization, hate victimization, hate violence, LGBTQI activism, Serbia, transition

1 Introduction

The last days of June 2001 painted a vivid picture of the quality of democratic transition in Serbia. This was marked by three separate events, seemingly unconnected, but that can be perceived as an analytical cluster that foreshadowed the nature of Serbian transition. Less than a year from the democratic October 5th revolution in Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, the former Yugoslav president, was extradited to The Hague on June 28th, where he was to face charges for the war crimes in former Yugoslavia wars in the 1990s. The next morning, a fundraising conference convened in Brussels, where Serbia raised 1.2 billion dollars as a financial injection for its public finances. These developments signaled a positive step toward restructuring a significant portion of its old debt with the Paris and London Club of creditors, supporting broader structural reforms and transitional endeavors (Huliaras, 2011). The triad of events

ended with the attempt of LGBT¹ civil society organizations to organize the first Pride parade in the former Yugoslavia region. The parade, that took place at Belgrade's central square (Trg Republike) ended with "stampede" violence (Kajinić, 2019) with about 40 LGBT activists being injured by the group of 1,000–2,000 hooligans and football fans (Bilić and Stubbs, 2015). The violence is infamously labeled by the activists as "the Red Pride" (*Krvavi Prajd*). Although the police were on the scene, their presence, as one of the participants noted, was only to estimate the point when beatings had gone too far (Tešanović, 2001).

These occurrences form a focal point for analyzing the repercussions of contentious politics post large-scale uprisings on democratic gains for governmental entities (Rennick et al., 2024). They are categorized as either vertically (the extradition of Milošević and the International conference) or horizontally driven (the Pride). While the vertically driven events initially contributed more significantly to democratic gains during the early stages of Serbia's transition, horizontal ones ultimately resulted in a long-term setback for democracy, revealing deficiencies in the Serbian government's adherence to the rule of law and its commitment to safeguarding fundamental human rights. These systemic weaknesses in Serbian democracy persist to this day, as highlighted in the most recent report on Serbia by the EU Parliament (2025) and consistently noted in Freedom House country assessments (Vranić and Jevtić, 2025). Therefore, analyzing a brief socio-political episode of democratic blockage (like the 2001 Pride parade) may offer more valuable insights into the state of democracy than larger, premeditated political endeavors. This paper argues that the "Red Pride" was Serbia's first major democratic setback in the field of human rights and transitional social justice. In this sense, the violence at the June 30th Pride queered the Serbian path to democracy in the following decade.

It took 9 years following the "Red Pride" for the first Pride parade to be organized in Serbia. The 2010 event represented a clear political decision by the government, aimed strategically at fulfilling requirements for European Union accession. That year, President Boris Tadić met with LGBT civil society organizations and described the Pride as "a civilizing step" (Krstić et al., 2020, p. 5). Although the 2010 parade was held at Manjež Park in central Belgrade, it was marred by violence. Significant police presence was required to safeguard approximately 1,000 LGBT participants against several hundred hooligans who caused disruption throughout the city center.

Within the distinctive legal, ideological, and artistic context of socialist Yugoslavia, the persistence and complexity of violence against the LGBT community present a significant conundrum. This is especially true given that Yugoslav socialism was comparatively receptive to feminism and related movements. From a legal

perspective, as early as the 1950s, debates emerged regarding the potential decriminalization of same-sex relations to align with "new socialist moral values" (Erent-Sunko and Dragičević Pretenjača, 2024, p. 277). This discussion gained momentum following the 1974 constitution, which introduced increased decentralization and enabled individual republics to pass specific legislation on decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1977, homosexuality was decriminalized in Slovenia, Croatia and Vojvodina (the autonomous province of Serbia), while in the remaining republics it remained a criminal offense (Dota, 2017, p. 313).

The first feminist movement in Yugoslavia was founded in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1985, with its inaugural meeting held at the alternative club K4, where discussions on women's sexualities culminated in an event attended by over 250 participants (Oblak and Pan, 2019, p. 28). While the scope of the feminist movement extended beyond queer politics, it nevertheless facilitated the emergence of the LGBT movement, particularly several years later in Belgrade. As this paper will demonstrate, feminism and queer feminism were crucial for promoting LGBT rights in Serbia in the early post-revolutionary years. Finally, Yugoslav cinema is regarded as progressive with respect to queer representation. Notably, the first gay and lesbian film festival, "Magnus," took place in Ljubljana in 1984 (Kajinić, 2016, p. 65). The organization of the film festival evolved into a social movement itself, which subsequently encountered prohibitions and negative public perceptions, often needing to change format or intersect with other socio-political engagements, such as student activism. Despite these challenges, various forms of media remained significant in the positive cultural representation of homosexuality in certain regions of the socialist Yugoslavia (Dota, 2017, p. 31).

Nonetheless, in the broader post-communist context, one could argue that it was still early for Eastern Europe as a political space to adopt values such as rights to sexuality. The first post-communist Pride was organized in 1999 in Minsk, just 2 years before Belgrade Pride; in Romania, being LGBT was still a criminal offense as late as 2001; in Poland, gay and lesbian activism was allowed only if it remained local and within private networks. Indeed, the only country that was open to LGBTQ and rights to sexuality activism was the Czech Republic (O'Dwyer, 2018). As for Serbia, the country decriminalized homosexuality in 1994, after which first LGBT civil society organizations were founded: Labris in 1995, Gay-Serbia Internet community in 1998, Queeria in 2000, etc (Bilić, 2016b). Though these organizations were still weak and exclusive, they nonetheless self-identified as feminist, anti-war, and pro-democratic movements. When Serbia adopted a trajectory of European values after 2000 elections, human rights and LGBT organizations were further incorporated "into the newly emerging liberal democratic imaginary" (Kahlina, 2015, p. 76).

The mainstream queer literature on LGBT rights recounts the 2001 Pride event in Serbia as violent, mapping testimonies of the 2001 Prides victims and capturing a victimization discourse that has dominated the narratives of LGBT Serbian politics over the last 20 years (Lončarević, 2014; Sloodmaeckers, 2017; Kajinić, 2019). This literature, however, bypasses the political processes that were behind the violence. There exists a knowledge gap of the underlying political currents within which the Pride parade was conceived and organized. Three of these currents can be *prima facie* postulated. First was an initiative made by the Social Democratic Union Party (SDU, in its Serbian acronym) to push same sex marriage into legislative

1 At the time, only lesbian and gay sexual identities were promoted as those fighting for rights to sexuality in Serbia. From a legal perspective, only gay identities were recognized, while lesbians, bisexual, transgender and other identities remained invisible. Consequently, the 2001 Pride was not only a fight for the legal rights of the LGBT community in Serbia but also a struggle for the visibility of lesbian and other identities. For historical accuracy, the LGBT abbreviation is used in the remainder of the paper when explicitly referring to the period related to the 2001 Pride parade in Belgrade. For the general context, the full acronym 'LGBTQIA+' is used.

procedures as early as January 2001. The second was the lack of wider support from civil society for the idea of LGBT civil rights in the pre-Pride period. Lastly, the government's silence categorizing the 2001 Pride event as insignificant resulted in violent street clashes orchestrated by hooligan factions. The policy of silence allowed the far-right organizations to start a transition from nationalistic territorial politics that were dominant in the 1990s to a more modern identity politics that are more in line with the currents in West European far-right tides.

The knowledge gap in the case of the 2001 Pride in Serbia opens a new perspective for exploring blockages to democracy in the early stages of democratic transition. In a broader political image, this bridging the gap is finding and fitting a missing puzzle of the origins of the structural blockages of democracy in Serbia post October 5th revolution. Considering the specific context of relative weakness of LGBT civil society and the presence of anti-gay violent groups, the paper seeks to identify the political conditions that made the Pride 2001 became a snowball democratic blockage that would label Serbia's relation toward minority rights in the next decades.

The paper is structured into three main sections. The initial section offers an overview of the October 5th revolution and the rise of grassroots organizations spanning civic and far-right ideological spectrums. We review existing literature concerning power dynamics among diverse societal factions and the government's ability to address their evolving demands within democratic decision-making frameworks. The subsequent section outlines our methodological approach, detailing the qualitative research methods employed and providing insight into the metadata. Lastly, the discussion segment conducts an institutional analysis derived from Rennick et al. (2024) and cross-compared with the data we obtained in semi-structured interviews, pinpointing institutional factors (such as policies, advocacy initiatives, media representations, gender disparities, etc.) that may have influenced the outcome of the 2001 Pride event and subsequent human rights violations against marginalized groups in Serbia.

2 The politics of identity in the early transition in Serbia: *Volksgeist* in vs. coming out

The regime in Serbia during the 1990s can be categorized as an instance of old competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Levitsky and Way, 2020; Spasojević and Lončar, 2023; Atlagić and Vučićević, 2019), evolving in its later phases into a neo-patrimonial rule, which ultimately led to the regime's demise (Vladislavljević, 2016, pp. 44–47). The events of October 5th, 2000 in Serbia have been subject to various interpretations by different authors, ranging from terms such as “revolution,” “peaceful revolution,” “removal of elite,” “civil revolt,” “moral revolt” (Savić, 2001, p. 12) and even “unfinished revolution” (Spasojević and Lončar, 2020, pp. 101–104). Some scholars consider it part of the series of regime changes in post-communist societies at the beginning of the 21st century, akin to the “colored revolutions” elsewhere in post-Soviet space (Gordy, 2000; Spasojević, 2010, pp. 53–54; Khodunov, 2022). The nation emerged from a decade-long period of international isolation, facing profound crises in multiple domains including a fragile economy, neglected infrastructure, a financially strained population, the unresolved status of Kosovo, and strained relations with former Yugoslav republics

(Vladislavljević, 2019, p. 15). Internal challenges included conflicts between ruling parties and issues with legacy (parallel) structures. Despite these obstacles, the foundation of a semi-consolidated democracy that has persisted for over a decade was established (ibid).

Civic resistance to authoritarianism and engagement through protests and civil disobedience followed political struggles for democracy. The primary strategy of the opposition involved mass mobilization in the form of non-violent demonstrations (Khodunov, 2022, p. 454). Much of the literature underscores that it was only when opposition parties aligned themselves with civil organizations like “Otpor” for voter mobilization and the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) for election monitoring that significant progress was made (Filin et al., 2022; Spasojević, 2010, pp. 55–56; Bieber, 2003, pp. 84–85). In the context of mass mobilization during the 1990s, marked by the performance of presence and civil disobedience, the LGBT community was also seeking its civic and political place. As Krstić et al. (2020, p. 4) argue “Pride organizers clearly connect the right to walk the streets and to celebrate the presence of sexual minorities with a declaration of political agency and urban belonging”.

This period also saw the emergence of the “new right-wing” movements that would serve as significant challengers to the emerging LGBT movement. In the comprehensive study on post-communist openings toward LGBT community, O'Dwyer (2018, p. 53) places Serbia (circa 2000) as “the type of closure characteristic of postcommunism, that is, secular-leaning societies in which survival values strongly predominate over those of self-expression”. In addition, Serbia was also dealing with radical nationalistic groups, organized as football fans that displayed their terror in the form of hooliganism (Pavasovic Trost and Kovacevic, 2013; Đorđević, 2014). These groups had a strong anti-LGBT orientation, although, before Pride 2001, there were no examples of organized violence against LGBT persons.

The early years of the Serbian transition were thus marked by new polarization (Russell-Omaljev, 2016) and by change in the behavior patterns of both the LGBT community and far-right groups. During the 1990s, the Serbian intelligence agency (Državna bezbednost – DB) shadowed most of the far-right groups and actively channeled their energy to regional violence (Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo). This type of political behavior was one of the trademarks of Milošević's populism and militant nationalism (Mikucka-Wójtowicz, 2019, pp. 465–467). With the breakdown of the authoritarian system after October 5th, far-right groups became more autonomous and more “modern”: their violence was directed to various identities that do not correspond to the Serbian patriarchal norms. As a traditional, nativist and nuclear-family oriented society, Serbia was a fertile social soil for transforming into a queer dystopia. In given context of parochial culture, with LGBT community having no legislative rights to marriage or any type of partnership, single gay and lesbian individuals are often portrayed in stereotypes of promiscuity and STDs, and “may threaten dominant heteronormative assumptions and evoke sentiments of fear, disgust or threat” (Everitt and Horvath, 2021, p. 2). These sentiments are not simply notions, “but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). The “fear of queer” (Ibid., 63) becomes a new cultural delineation between “us” who represent the body of the nation, and “them” who in their enthusiasm are trying to (even biologically) danger the *Volksgeist*.

Looked from the Europeanization side, the Belgrade 2001 Pride was the first such event after the EU commission adopted The Charter

of Fundamental Rights and the Employment Directive in 2000, which gave a three-year window to its member states and candidates to harmonize national laws with the directive: “While the newly created Article 13 of the EC Treaty has no direct effect on candidate member states, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights does not create new competences for the EU, both documents are important with regard to the impact of the enlargement process on LGBT rights, as their explicit reference to sexual orientation strengthens the idea that discrimination against LGBT people is not in accordance with ‘European values’” (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016, p. 22). The protection of rights to sexuality became the mirror of transitional outcomes in protecting minority rights, and one of the pillars of democratic society (Bilić, 2016a).

At the same time, though, the Belgrade 2001 Pride was also a first major display of the far-right groups, that were using a “protection of the Serbian national identity” as an excuse for persecuting those who were different and in a minority. In the background of the violence was a predominantly anti-EU narrative clustered in Kosovo and ICTY grievances that shaped the Serbian political scene for over 12 year (Slootmaeckers, 2017). The organization that stood out was *Obraz* (Vreme, 2001a), a neo-fascist group that was founded as an intellectual circle during the 1990s but became an active organization just months before the Pride. They used internet forums to actively call for violence if Pride was to be held. This seeming paradox is in fact accounted for across the transitional, which reveals that once the power of the authoritarian state dissolves, the democratic current enables the emergence of suppressed identities (Gourevitch, 1979; Kecmanović, 2010). Once the Pride was officially announced as an event, *Obraz* (with other far-right organizations) organized a countermarch at the same time and place where Pride was scheduled. The police were not prepared for both events to take place at the same time, which led to riots and sprawling violence. Later, the Belgrade chief police made a statement that: “As a society, we are not mature enough to accept such demonstrations of perversity” (Simo, 2001).

3 LGBT rights in the context of post-socialist Serbia

The LGBT community and the far-right groups had history before the Red Pride. The community in Serbia played a discreet yet significant role in anti-war resistance during the 1990s. Operating covertly, the community engaged in activities aligned with feminist, environmentalist, and anti-war movements (Mladenović, 2001). They actively participated in the fight against Milošević’s war crimes targeting women in the former Yugoslavia, often collaborating with the anti-war movement Women in Black (*Žene u crnom*) and Autonomous Women’s Center (*Autonomni ženski centar*). The feminist community played a key role in the female voter mobilization campaign (*Glas razlike*) in Serbian rural areas in the summer of 2000, prior to the presidential election in September 2000 (McLeod, 2016). While *Otpor* stood out as the most prominent civic organization during the October 5th revolution, the feminist organization undertook background mobilization efforts that contributed to the high voter turnout.

The right to sexuality as a social movement cause emerged immediately after the October 5th revolution. The first significant structural change came as an initiative from the branch of young SDU

party members, gathered in a collective named Queeria (who officially started their activities in November 2000), with a principal request to legalize same sex marriages. Since homosexuality was decriminalized in 1994, and since the constitution banned all types of discrimination, Queeria advocated that all conditions for legalization had effectively been met. This overarching objective was a component of a broader strategic approach. Dušan Maljković, a notable Serbian figure in queer studies and the creator of the Gay-Serbia internet portal (established in 1998), stated in an interview that while the legalization of same-sex marriages may not occur, public advocacy efforts could potentially result in democratic advancements, such as the implementation of anti-discriminatory legislation within the labor market (Vreme, 2001c). In the same article, Dušan Maljković, explicitly calls for legalization of same sex marriages, claiming that, “Without solving that problem, there will be no entry into Europe, that is, no economic progress that Serbia is now striving for” (Vreme, 2001c). The question of LGBT rights early on was shifted into political contests by LGBT activists.

The right to sexuality and social visibility of LGBT persons in Serbia were pursued by two civil society organizations that organized the event, i.e., *Labris* and *Gayten*. In a statement issued the day after the Pride parade, after the horrid violence and the lack of adequate reaction from the government and the police, these organizations declared that “Human rights are political - and that is why we expect the government authorities and political parties to take a stand regarding the protection of lesbian and gay rights. If the government wants to take Serbia to Europe, it has taken the wrong path” (B92, 2001b).

By making the 2001 Pride a political question and marking it as a milestone on the EU trajectory and democratization, *Labris* and *Gayten* bypassed the possibility of rights to sexuality to be a grassroots social movement. Put differently, the politization of rights to sexuality by professional civil society organizations colonized the public space that should have been used as a grassroots arena for a democratic opening. It also crippled the coalition potential for multisectoral mobilization between LGBT civil society and other actors that were opening arenas of rights-claiming. Consequently, the visible LGBT community in Serbia has remained a cluster of professional organizations, the kind that were typical for early days of post-communist transition (Dolenec et al., 2017).

Indeed, in comparison to other contexts, we can draw parallels between Serbia’s situation and existing literature on LGBT rights promotion during democratization. Notably, Serbia can be seen as a case of what the literature refers to as homonationalism, that is, introducing a set of “judicial, social, and political instruments” as a means to achieve socio-political agendas that are not of primary benefit to LGBTQI+ community (Ammaturo, 2015; Ammaturo and Slootmaeckers, 2025). The Serbian political elite strategically coopted LGBT civil society as a “civilisation step,” mirroring the “constitution” and “state legislation” to promote EU values as a national interest, while at the same time ignoring or discriminating real life experiences of LGBT community. The first peaceful parade occurred in 2014 under Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić’s administration, composed of a coalition around the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), an ex-far-right Serbian Radical Party faction, and the SPS. Prime Minister Vučić stated that Belgrade Pride was organized “not because it was a condition for EU accession, but because of the Constitution, state legislation, and the equal rights of all people” (RTCG, 2014). When

this inaugural “non-violent” Pride parade took place, every political party in the Serbian parliament expressed pro-EU sentiments, indicating a unified national consensus on EU membership. However, this cooptation was subsequently revealed to be a facade for the transformation of Serbia into a dystopian society for the LGBT community. Subsequently, Pride became a routinised annual event each September; however, aside from providing a few hundred meters of public space once a year, little progress was made to advance basic human or civic rights for the LGBT community.

The status quo between the SNS government and LGBT civic organizations was challenged by two significant events: the official ban on organizing EuroPride 2022 in Belgrade (Danas, 2022) and Vučić’s refusal to enact same-sex partnership legislation in 2023 (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023). According to Bojan Lazić, an LGBT activist interviewed by N1 TV, the year 2023 marked both a turning point and the most challenging period for the community, with 85 recorded incidents, including 19 violent acts (N1, 2024). In 2023, an incident involving police violence and alleged sexual harassment against a young gay man in private premises was reported in Belgrade (Nova.rs, 2024). To date, no criminal charges or internal investigations have been initiated regarding the actions of the officers involved. Paradoxically, despite relatively free Pride parades, the rights of the LGBT community are gradually diminishing. The shift in Serbian political inclination to advocate for fundamental LGBT rights has coincided with democratic backsliding since 2019. With the absence of substantial legislative progress, violent incidents, and widespread anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes, Serbia currently ranks 27th on the ILGA map, with a score of 35% (Rainbow Map, 2025). The LGBT community in Serbia enjoys advantages such as equality and non-discrimination (64.17%) and a robust civil society space (83.33%). However, legal gender recognition (19.43%) and hate crime and speech (34.76%) negatively impact the score, placing Serbia second-last among all former Yugoslav states, following North Macedonia.

4 Epistemic framework and methodology

The purpose of this study, which was carried out under the framework of the broader EU Horizon Europe project EMBRACE² is to explore contentious politics post-popular uprisings (Rennick et al., 2025) and to assess the relationship between mass uprisings and small-scale, incremental democratization. Research design emphasized data collecting from bottom-up actors, political elites, and experts, respectively, to assess how and under what conditions social movement actors can secure democratic gains during post-uprising political transitions. These groups were identified as key stakeholders for analyzing the patterns of democratic change in the period following the popular uprising (*Ibid.*, 5).

To comprehend the interplay between “revolution, social movements, and democratization” (*Ibid.* 4), a deeper examination beyond immediate revolutionary actions is necessary. It is crucial to investigate how contentious politics either open avenues for

democratic openings or closes them as setbacks. In essence, when a mass popular uprising occurs with actors advocating a fair distribution of power among diverse interest groups in society, why do some emerge as transitional victors while others as transitional losers? To address this overarching query, Rennick et al. (*Ibid.* 7) posit that “small-scale democratic gains made by bottom-up actors engaged in contentious politics in post-uprising periods result from the re-shaped institutional, relational, and discursive conditions that moments of mass mobilization and transition produce – regardless of overall outcome of a popular uprising.” The analysis of the data that we collected in interviews focuses primarily on the case of democratic blockage (the 2001 Pride parade).

Empirical materials were originally gathered by the authors of this paper, through field work conducting semi-structured interviews carried out between February 2023 and July, 2025.³ A total of nine participants were interviewed: three individuals involved in the Red Pride, three experts in feminist and LGBT+ policies, one media representative, and two political elite representatives.⁴ In addition, multiple triangulation (Denzin, 2017) was implemented in the selected case study by systematically cross-referencing original data gathered from semi-structured interviews with grassroots actors, experts, journalists, and political elites with publicly available information from media sources, official documents, and policy papers.

We cross-reference the data that we collected with Vreme, an independent media based in Serbia, to comprehend the context of the events. The Vreme weekly archive was utilized for both desk-based and archival research, employing content analysis for fact checking and to reconstruct the chronology of events that contributed to the perception that the timing was appropriate for Serbia’s first Pride parade. There are three primary reasons for our selection of Vreme weekly. First, Vreme upholds pro-democratic values and was one of the few free and independent press during the period of Slobodan Milošević repression. However, the articles in Vreme were not ideologically colored and offered a critical analysis of democratic opposition and later, democratic government led by Zoran Djindjić. Secondly, Vreme supports the LGBT community, while consistently adhering to high standards of professional and objective journalism, with both sides of the conflict represented or given the chance to elaborate their political standpoints. Thirdly, its entire archive is openly accessible, aligning with best practices outlined by the FAIR principle. Cross-referencing was particularly valuable for assessing the biases of individuals involved in the 2001 Pride event. It enabled comparisons between personal recollections and both temporal and situational facts, while also facilitating analysis of the interplay between heroic narratives and victimization discourse that tend to emerge as part of the retention process over a span of 24 years. We

² Embracing change: Overcoming obstacles and advancing democracy in the European Neighborhood (<http://embrace-democracy.eu>).

³ The interviews were conducted in Serbian, recorded and transcribed. The recordings were subsequently destroyed. Translations provided in the paper were made by the authors without any interference to the content or grammar.

⁴ Despite initial plans for more interviews, some participants declined due to the event’s age of 25 years, leading to memory lapses, while others declined due to lingering trauma from the event. All interviews were conducted in Serbian, and all translations were performed by the authors of this paper.

TABLE 1 The context of the 2001 Belgrade pride.

Date	Description	Mechanism
January 21–23, 2000	Scientific conference on same sex marriages in Novi Sad (“Živi I pusti druge da žive”)	The quality of coalition among bottom-up actors
October 2000	Labris organizes The Second Lesbian Week in Sombor	The degree of capital of bottom-up actors
November 2000	SDU youth fraction <i>Queeria</i> founded. Predrag Azdejković publicly advocates for same sex marriages.	The existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decision-makers
November 2000	<i>Obraz</i> starts its public engagement (the incident in <i>Klub književnika</i> dining place)	The quality of coalition among bottom-up actors
January 2001	Official SDU youth statement for legalization of same sex marriages	The existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decision-makers
February 2001	Front page article in <i>Vreme</i> on same sex marriages	The degree of capital of bottom-up actors
March 2001	SDU offices demolished, and activist attacked by the group of skinheads	The quality of coalition among bottom-up actors
March 2001	First major demonstrations against newly formed prodemocratic government	The quality of coalition among bottom-up actors / the existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decision-makers
May 2001	Gayten organization founded	The degree of civil society autonomy
June 27th, 2001	Celebration of world LGBT Day (“Živi I pusti druge da žive”)	The degree of civil society autonomy
June 28th, 2001	Extradition of Slobodan Milošević to ICTY (The Hauge)	The existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decision-makers
June 30th – July 4th 2001	Civil society giving public support to LGBT community	The quality of coalition among bottom-up actors
July 1st, 2001	Djindjić condemns the violence but relativizes the outcome	The existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decision-makers

framed the following timeline with relevant events and mechanisms in the context of 2001 Pride organization (Table 1).

The analysis of the 2001 Belgrade Pride was theoretically deduced and focused on a paradigmatic case within the broader longitudinal examination of LGBT rights in Serbia, where the dependent variable was defined as a democratic blockage. The analysis of the data that we gathered from the interviews was driven by theoretical framework set by the EMBRACE project, in which case-oriented comparative analysis (Della Porta, 2008; Ragin, 2000) of 21 small-scale episodes of contentious politics in post-revolutionary periods across nine countries were conducted. This comparative analysis was conducted by Rennick et al. (2025) to reveal “six common mechanisms underlying the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains via contentious politics.” Given that the 2001 Pride serves as an example of democratic blockade, we sought to identify the reasons these mechanisms could not be established during the initial phase of Serbia’s democratization. Out of six mechanisms, we identified four⁵ to be present in the data we gathered from the interviews, meaning that we opted for concept constructing during the research (Della Porta, 2008, 208) and heuristically refine (Vennesson, 2008) existing hypothesis on democratic gains/blockages.

⁵ The remaining two mechanism are: (1) the technical alignment of bottom-up and top-down actors on democratic choice points; (2) the constellation of actors in power. Although we find these mechanisms important for the overall transitional efforts, we did not find anything relevant in the interviews to substantiate the presence or lack of them. Some of the remaining 20 small scale episodes within the overall research better delineate these specific mechanisms.

This approach was utilized to address the issue of temporality and “microperception” (Massumi, 2015), aiming to analytically differentiate between the affects actors recalled experiencing during the episode and the conscious reasoning developed subsequently. These mechanisms are:

- (1) The degree of capital of bottom-up actors – To what extent can LGBT civil society organizations act as intermediaries between the community and democratic authorities?
- (2) The existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decision-makers – did LGBT civil society actors possess formal capacities (policymaking, negotiation skills, etc.) to influence democratic authorities?
- (3) The quality of coalition among bottom-up actors – to what extend were LGBT organizations able to generate mobilization among democratic actors?
- (4) The degree of civil society autonomy – to what extend the LGBT organizations could distance themselves from democratic authorities in pursuing their own gains.

5 The analysis: identifying processes that lead to major democratic blockage of LGBT rights in Serbia

5.1 What social factors contributed to the low representation of LGBT actors in the early 2000s?

If there is one prevailing feeling that transcends all the interviews, it is “Enthusiasm.” Following closely is the sentiment of “Illusion,”

which ultimately led to disappointment. Every activist or expert we interviewed recalled a significant enthusiasm within the LGBT community for the Pride 2001 event, with a hopeful outlook that the democratic revolution would also signify a democratic opening for diverse identities to carve out their social and political spaces. The Red Pride incident, viewed through an emotional and ethical lens, serves as a microcosm of post-communist democratic transition. These sentiments are encapsulated in the following lines of Jelena Vasiljević, that for a time worked in Labris:

... I think my first association when I hear about that Pride in 2001, is what we internally call it, the “Red Pride” because of the amount of violence that happened then in Republic Square and that, I mean the first Pride was somehow an illusion of the LGBT community that democratic changes had occurred and that Serbia had actually emerged, stepped somehow toward a conditionally democratic society, which was shown to us the very moment we arrived at that Republic Square then that it wasn’t quite true.⁶

For Lepa Mladjenović, the prominent LGBT activist, the sentiments were politically driven: “You know, the source of enthusiasm for us who had walked so much, protested, and removed Milošević finally, and on the other hand, to be honest, Zoran Djindjić also brought a lot of enthusiasm, his speeches were truly enthusiastic.”⁷ The “walks” are related to early anti-war protests in 1990s, where LGBT and feminist communities had significant roles. The first LGBT organization in, Arkadija, emerged right after the dissolution of the Yugoslav communist party and the first pluralistic election in 1990 (Veličković, 2014). However, Arkadia was not legally registered CSO, more like a safe space gathering for actively engaged members of the community. Ivana Spasić argues that a decade long social capital did bring some advantages, although in such a time span the outcome was limited.

What I found from my previous life is from the early 90s when Arkadija was just founded, they sent a letter to the then registered political parties asking for their opinions on, and whether they would potentially advocate for the decriminalization, so, at that time it was still relevant, of homosexuality, and no one responded.⁸

The presence of the letter indicates that the community was politically active early on. The integration with the anti-war movement and the prevalent anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes in a predominantly authoritarian political culture (Golubović, 2004), led to the solidification of stereotypical narratives among right-leaning citizens, especially those who are politically active. As one of the typical examples we find in the statements that hooligans gave to the reporters, the dominant type was that “a faggot cannot be Serb” (Vreme, 2001b).

This structural and cultural positioning had three significant effects on the (lack of) social capital of LGBT actors during the 1990s

and in the eve of the first Pride. Firstly, the community set aside their identity struggles and dedicated themselves to anti-Milošević activism primarily by engaging in the anti-war movement. Secondly, there was a reluctance within the community to engage in horizontal networking, both internally and with other civic stakeholders. Lastly, as indicated by the words of one of the Arkadia founders, Lepa Mladjenović, from the outset of the formal LGBT struggle for basic rights, a profound gender gap existed within the community.

...I was first active in Arkadija with Dejan Nebrigić, and then we realized that we... could not do anything, so we engaged in anti-war activism. during the war in Yugoslavia in the ‘90s, very few men were activists, I mean, there were hardly any, because activism implied horizontal networking for which they simply were not ready, and somehow, we all (women – B. V., N. I), more or less, actually connected through women’s groups and feminism, lesbians and feminists, and we already knew what to do when we gathered and how to organize a meeting and how to organize a workshop.⁹

Why was the social capital of LGBT activists limited? Even following the formal registration of organizations after 1995, LGBT activists tended to remain exclusive in their advocacy efforts and pursuit of democratic reforms. For example, according to an interview with Predrag Azdejković, Labris maintained a statutory ban on employing men until quite recently, reflecting how some organizations were closed off even to collaboration within the community itself. It could be argued that a decade of dedicated opposition to Milošević through anti-war activism might have fostered social capital; however, analysis of interviews suggests otherwise for two main reasons. First, as indicated by Lepa Mladjenović, LGBT activists were predominantly focused on opposing gender-based war crimes and did not effectively leverage their activism when LGBT rights issues later emerged. Put differently, the activist believed (hence the enthusiasm), but had no firm connections that they could capitalize. Second, Azdejković notes that significant anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes persisted within the anti-war movement: “One of the major, while I was somewhat disappointed, prejudices we have about the peace movement is that it is very open and progressive and accepts LGBT rights. That is not true. There is a lot of homophobias in Women in Black, especially during that period, because it all comes down to the individual.”¹⁰ Consequently, intersectoral cooperation in the pro-democratic civil society of the 1990s rarely translated into meaningful recognition or support for the LGBT community.

5.2 How the maximalist strategy of same-sex marriages led to democratic blockade?

The initial notable endeavor toward a substantial policy shift occurred in January 2001, following the parliamentary elections on December 23, 2000, where Milošević’s Socialist party (SPS) was

⁶ Interview with Jelena Vasiljević, Rainbow Ignite, 19 February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

⁷ Interview with Lepa Mladjenović, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

⁸ Interview with Ivana Spasić, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy, 5 February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

⁹ Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

¹⁰ Interview with Predrag Azdejković, Optimist Magazine Editor-in-Chief, 9. July, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

stripped of all formal authority. This opened the space for the first formal bridges between LGBT actors and the new democratic authorities to be erected. The youth LGBT faction of the SDU, Queeria, initiated a public campaign advocating for the legalization of same-sex marriages. Predrag Azdejković, the founder of Queeria articulated the rationale behind his belief in the necessity of transitioning the LGBT community's activism from civil and anti-war spheres to the realm of political parties.

And activism, LGBT activism, started within a political party, which was unthinkable at that time. So yes, in the Social Democratic Union, their youth was very progressive, even earlier, it's not like I came and everything changed, no, I joined an already established environment. They already had LGBT rights in their manifesto and were the only ones at that time. That's why I joined, and that's a way to change the world because you go where someone has political power and the first thing we did was to send that famous statement demanding the legalization of same-sex marriages, at that time we called them gay marriages, it was the beginning of 2001, some January, winter, and it made waves in the media.¹¹

The strategic action taken by Queeria and SDU opened the window for media attention. Prior to October 5th, coverage of the LGBT community was predominantly relegated to crime reportage. Following the announcement, there was a shift in media coverage. Tamara Skrozza, a young journalist at the opposition-focused Vreme weekly at the time, penned a front-page article on gay marriages titled "Wedding without the bride" (Vreme, 2001c). She recalls how the informal advocacy by the LGBT community altered the perception from a stereotypical underground subculture to individuals within our social circles who seek equal rights akin to heterosexual individuals.

For example, Queeria had a project, or I do not know, their program, but it was coffee meetings with female journalists, and then they organized these coffees in Belgrade cafes where we received, I do not know, cups and they sat with us, talked to us about their experiences, shared contacts for interviews, and so on, and suddenly they, coming from a world unknown to us that operates in some hidden clubs, became a world sitting with us for coffee, and that had its effect.¹²

Predrag Azdejković also highlights that the first live TV debate on LGBT rights was broadcast on the influential Studio B. He underscored that this debate was arranged through personal connections, leading to significant controversy: "It was a half-hour show, and there were Lepa, me, and someone else, and people kept calling Studio B. Yugoslav (editor – B. V., N. I.) then said to rerun that show, and the show was aired three times a day because it had a reaction, and they thought it was great."¹³ However, the media attention had adverse consequences

as well. On March 9th, a faction of skinheads forcefully entered the premises of the SDU youth office in Belgrade city center. Azdejković recalls that all activities ceased following this incident before the Pride event itself:

All of that ended on March 9 when a group of skinheads broke into the premises of the SDU and beat up everyone gathered, causing significant material damage, and after that, it was no longer talked about. (.) but what was interesting to me, I gave statements about what happened, and then Žarko Korać (SDU president and vice-president of Serbian government – B. V., N. I.) banned me. Because I stated that they broke in because of our initiative for gay marriages, he stated that they broke in because at that time... they took something from someone, oil, abolished some monopoly... it was a political spin on how to silence that story because that story bothered him a lot from the very beginning because they called him gay.¹⁴

This violent episode marked the beginning of a trend that the Serbian government of that era would adopt in its approach to the LGBT community: ignore, postpone, act when necessary. Concurrent with the skinhead attacks, the newly formed Djindjić government was endeavoring to pass a stringent annual budget for 2001. The resulting budget cuts triggered widespread protests within the public sector, primarily among education workers (Vreme, 2001a). Faced with the looming threat of a general strike, the government sought to appease tensions and disregarded the attack as sporadic violence. The interviews reveal that despite media coverage, there was a lack of favorable reception from democratic political leaders or established connections to LGBT rights. Goran Svilanović, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2000–2001) infers that the "incidents" related to LGBT population were a part of a broader anti-democratic picture:

In that sense, I have to admit that probably it was not a big topic, I'm talking about the period just before or shortly after the 5th of October... it was not a big topic until the moment when Pride happened and everything that followed. At that moment, I encounter that some things have not changed at all and serve as a platform, actually, for settling scores with the Government... and behind that is the cooperation with The Hague, "you betrayed Kosovo," etc. Everything else can be hidden behind that and it can be just a trigger.¹⁵

Prior to the Red Pride event, political elites regarded LGBT concerns as peripheral and subcultural in comparison to the pressing economic, political, and broader social justice transition challenges. Biljana Stankov, former personal secretary of Prime Minister Djindjić, asserts that based on the daily agendas she maintained, there were no documented official meetings with LGBT organizations: "I'm thinking now whether this could have reached, um, Mr. Djindjić in a different way so that it could be discussed at some level, but not at all, that topic, because there were many burning issues and they were daily very urgent

11 Interview with Predrag Azdejković, Optimist Magazine Editor-in-Chief, 9. July, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

12 Interview with Tamara Skrozza, Fonet News Agency Deputy Editor-in-Chief, 5. March, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

13 Interview with Predrag Azdejković, Optimist Magazine Editor-in-Chief, 9. July, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

14 Interview with Predrag Azdejković, Optimist Magazine Editor-in-Chief, 9. July, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

15 Interview with Goran Svilanović, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 13. June, 2025, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

and pressing.”¹⁶ She further emphasizes that the LGBT issue gained prominence for the first time following the attack on March 9th, when Žarko Korać entered the Prime Minister’s office in a highly agitated state.: “Imagine Biljana’ like ‘did the Prime Minister come? I have to tell him what happened’ and whether they left any leaflets or I do not know what, that he is a member of that population (LGBT – B. V., N. I.) and that’s why these premises were so destroyed.”¹⁷ Political elites were informed of the issues of violence faced by the LGBT community; however, they perceived these issues as minor concerns, or as Goran Svilanović in the interview refers to as “incidents.”

The primary distinction we observed regarding the rise of public acts of violence against the LGBT community was linked to their visibility. Their presence in mainstream media, specialized forums, LGBT chat rooms, and public campaigns for same-sex rights incited anti-LGBT sentiments that the political elite struggled to mitigate or rearticulate. This public visibility was aligned with an anti-nationalistic faction, often referred to as “the second Serbia” (Russell-Omaljev, 2016). This faction espoused civic values, liberal ideologies, pro-EU stances, advocated for reconciliation, and urged Serbia to acknowledge its war crimes. Despite being an influential group of intellectuals and civil society organizations established since 1986 and associated with the controversial Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, they never achieved significant electoral success and were consistently used as a political bogeyman to sway traditionally minded voters. Considering the limited popularity of the affiliates of the second Serbia, it becomes evident why the democratic opposition refrained from openly supporting LGBT rights advocacy. This context sheds new light on Zoran Djindjić’s press statement (B92, 2001a) following the Red Pride event, although it does not offer justification for violence and the absence of rule of law on the day of the Pride:

“I think it’s too early for a country that has been isolated for so long and under a patriarchal repressive culture to withstand the test of tolerance. I am, of course, a supporter of tolerance in every respect, and everyone has the right to express their differences, as long as they do not endanger others, and certainly do not endanger others by having different affinities regarding genders. That is the highest level of tolerance, and I fear that it will take us some time to reach it”.

The absence of a strategic approach and the pursuit of a maximalist goal to legalize same-sex marriage ultimately resulted in even supportive political elites distancing themselves from LGBT activism. As indicated by Goran Svilanović’s interview, although anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes was prevalent within the ruling democratic coalition, greater coordination and negotiation could have secured certain political and legal gains. Government authorities instead opposed the same-sex marriage initiative, failed to offer sufficient protection to activists who sought assurance of their democratic rights, and inadvertently contributed to conditions that enabled violence. This ultimately resulted in significant democratic blockages to LGBT rights in Serbia.

5.3 The absence of horizontal coordination between the LGBT actors

Looking from a perspective of a coalition building, the LGBT community struggled to convey that human rights and fundamental safety were integral components of the broader transitional justice discourse. Their response was marked by fear, gradually transforming into isolated actions, exemplified by the organization of the Pride event. The research revealed a noticeable gender disparity within the LGBT community during the early 2000s political struggle. On one hand, there was a trajectory of influence primarily associated with men and gay activists. This form of influence can be characterized as soft power, where they recognized that gaining media support and cultivating political alliances in strategic positions could create incremental opportunities that would collectively benefit the LGBT community. Conversely, female activists focused more on participating in marches, receiving trauma management training, and leveraging past connections from the 1990s. As pointed out by Mladjenović:

...we activists and feminists, we had already learned to live with that fear from before, and we, like, lesbian feminists in Labris, in a way transformed our fear into activism, you know, it’s a transformation of fear into language and action. We called it our political war. (...) you know, we worked so much from the 90s to the 2000s that I cannot even describe it. We produced at least three to four books annually. We translated so much, printed, worked, not just printing but workshops. We worked with women war victims from morning till night, so there was a lot of work.”¹⁸

The research we conducted aligns with the established literature (Kojadinović, 2001) indicating that in the 1990s and early 2000s, the LGBT community forged partnerships with academia and civil society organizations oriented against Milošević. According to the literature, backing from academia was evident through the Institute of Social Sciences, which hosted Queer Studies Program (Istopolne studije) sessions in 2000 and 2001. A legal scholar who participated in these sessions attests to the atmosphere during those months:

But I have not forgotten that there were occasionally 90 people in that room... and I never believed that so many people could fit in that room (.) So, and at that time... social networks were not such a developed area of communication. So, literally, they did not even have the money to do any marketing. Literally, Maljković and Kojadinović printed a notice on a regular A4 paper and went to the faculties, and, um, tried to make sure that some cleaning staff did not tear them down immediately, to succeed in putting them somewhere in a corner for the students to see.”¹⁹

Ivana Spasić, a lecturer at the Queer Studies Program at the time, contends that most participants were indeed activists: “But it wasn’t a classic, academically classical course, it was immersed in activist waters. So I assume that recruitment mainly went through activist

¹⁶ Interview with Biljana Stankov, former personal secretary to Zoran Djindjić, 22. April, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

¹⁷ Interview with Biljana Stankov, former personal secretary to Zoran Djindjić, 22. April, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

¹⁸ Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

¹⁹ Interview with the anonymous legal scientists, 14. February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

channels.”²⁰ This aligns with the historical context of communist Yugoslavia, where academia provided havens for critical discourse, such as the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory and the Institute for Social Sciences (both located in Belgrade), as well as the Korčula Summer School of Critical Thought (on Korčula island in Croatia). Even under the Milošević regime, these critical spaces in Belgrade retained most of their autonomy. Nevertheless, they were characterized by the regime as ideological, pro-EU, and anti-Serb, suggesting that individuals associated with critical academia were part of the same anti-national category. This situation should have been a significant factor for the LGBT community to garner support from the political opposition in Serbia; however, our research findings indicate that this was not the case.

The other overt collaboration was established with anti-war and anti-Milošević civil society organizations. Throughout the 1990s, Labris actively engaged with the anti-war movement *Žene u crnom* (Women in Black). Lepa Mladjenović recollects their joint action of standing silently for an hour every Wednesday at Trg Republike, attired in black, to denounce war crimes. She notes that despite the lack of media coverage of the performance, apart from occasional insults from passersby, there were no instances of violence.²¹

Our study indicates that the absence of physical violence allowed activists post-October 5th to speculate that if Milošević disregarded them, the democratic administration and the societal transformations following the revolution would either embrace them or once more overlook their presence.

*...I remember that October 5th, three lesbians from other cities stayed overnight at my place because they had nowhere to go, we spent the whole night wandering around the city, enjoying, celebrating a bit, and so on. And then, after that October 5th, we later started thinking about celebrating June 27th, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Day, as it was called back then, on the streets, because we somehow thought that democracy had arrived and that it was now possible.*²²

The anticipation of a political obligation owed by the political opposition to the LGBT community stemmed from feminist involvement in mobilizing female voters for the September 2000 elections. Katarina Lončarević, a professor at Belgrade University and gender studies expert, contends that “Glas razlike,” a professional feminist organization that staunchly advocated for LGBT rights, “they actively participated in mobilizing, primarily women, to participate in elections, to go out and vote, and they especially worked among feminist organizations, both in and outside of Belgrade, and so on...”²³ Lepa Mladjenović vividly describes the impact that Glas razlike made: “they went to small towns and held meetings with women to raise their political awareness, so that was the best thing that happened to us women back then, I mean the whole program. (.) They remained completely invisible, I mean you are right about how

many women they visited there. Oh no, not just 500 (activists that participated – B. V., N. I.)! It's much more.”²⁴

Despite its success, we emphasize that this campaign went unnoticed by political leaders. It was viewed as a “get the vote out campaign” designed for the election season. Additionally, the absence of political acumen and the failure to articulate policy requests during the campaign, despite its political leverage, left the LGBT community without tangible outcomes.

The evidence collected from interviews indicates that, even when coalitions were formed between LGBT organizations and other CSO allies, the cooperation often remained LGBT exclusive. While alliances with academia represented a significant development, they were still perceived as practicing liberties in a limited or concealed manner. Internal tensions, including those related to gender, posed substantial challenges to securing strategic partners. Although there were connections with mainstream media, these relationships relied primarily on personal contacts rather than a comprehensive media communication strategy. Similarly, capacity-building trainings tended to focus on a single segment of the community - portraying members predominantly as traumatized victims - which further restricted the pool of potential coalition allies due to this limited narrative.

5.4 How the resources used by the LGBT community contributed to a negative image in public?

To access the degree of autonomy of LGBT actors, we investigated into the resources utilized in organizing the first Pride and the financial aspects of the early LGBT advocacy efforts, including local and international partnerships, research funding, and support for activism. However, the data we gathered yielded limited insights. The passage of over 25 years has obscured much of this information. Interviewees generally concurred that financial resources were scarce, with endeavors primarily fueled by enthusiasm, occasionally supplemented by grants that circumvented the authoritarian regime. Yet, upon examining the activities undertaken, such as publishing books, creating stickers and posters for modest pro-LGBT campaigns, conducting trauma management workshops, and delivering lectures, the aforementioned accounts appear more akin to idealized recollections rather than an accurate reflection of the circumstances.

We were able to delineate a resource framework based on the data we amassed. Insights from expert interviews indicate that resources in the 1990s predominantly originated from feminist organizations in Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. For instance, the printing of the Queer Studies Program textbook, stemming from lectures at the Institute of Social Studies, was funded by the Dutch embassy, with the program's organization supported by the Swiss embassy (Kojadinović, 2001, p. 218).

Lepa Mladjenović remembers that domestic partners from Serbia, such as The Open Society Foundation also delivered some grants for feminist and subsequently LGBT activism. Other organizations

20 Interview with Ivana Spasić, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy, 5 February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

21 Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

22 Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

23 Interview with Katarina Lončarević, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science, 15. February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

24 Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

delivered more logistical support than financial. Jelena Vasiljević, founder of Memory Ignite virtual museum and digitalization project of preserving LGBT history in Serbia, argues that national CSOs helped feminist and LGBT activists to become politically aware and provided necessary trainings:

So there were always organizations like the Youth Initiative, Civil Initiatives, Miljenko Dereta, there was Borka Pavićević who was actually the first to allow things to happen in the theater, there were Women in Black who supported, the Autonomous Women's Center, there were many allies at that time, but I think the alliance at those moments actually came most, well, from the feminist movement, because somehow women were the first ones to raise awareness of the needs of other women, and then from there somehow the penetration of the LGBT movement into civil society began.²⁵

Illustrating a successful utilization of acquired resources, we identified a pop-up event held in Knez Mihajlova Street, the lively pedestrian zone in Belgrade, with the objective of promoting the Pride event and encouraging public participation. While our interviewees were unable to recall the specific organization responsible for the event (the responses we got were contradictory), they unanimously acknowledged that it marked the inaugural instance of LGBT activists taking to the streets of Belgrade to engage with the public, a component of the training they received. A human rights legal expert from Belgrade recollects the sentiments following the event: “and they encountered a very good reception because there was no organized resistance at that time... So they, people approached them, asked them what it meant, who they were, and so a simple, polite civic, interactive dialog developed, and based on that they believed that it was a reflection, what's it called, of public opinion in general.”²⁶

Lepa Mladjenović noted her non-participation in the specific event, although she recalls it vividly. She emphasizes a crucial distinction between organized violence and individual opinions regarding the LGBT issue: “So you could hand out flyers with whatever you wanted, one in five might curse at you, but this was organized (the violence at the Red Pride – B. V., N. I) and completely different, and cannot be compared to a spontaneous reaction of people.”²⁷

Upon cross-referencing these statements, it becomes evident that the professional LGBT community underwent extensive activism training, possessed the skills to engage with individuals, and demonstrated political acumen. However, they ultimately overlooked the emerging threat of organized violence from hooligans that the state no longer effectively managed. Strategies for managing hooligans, collaborating with local law enforcement, and engaging in re-education efforts were developed subsequently. Predrag Azdejković highlights that it was only following the Red Pride event that substantial grants became available. However, he observes that these newfound resources

disrupted the grassroots activism and transformed the LGBT movement in Serbia into a mere civic activism business endeavor.

And then there was that Pride where it all went goodbye, farewell. Because that was the moment when the whole world knew about Belgrade, the Pride, the violence. Documentaries were filmed, we walked around international seminars, complained, cried about how hard it was for us, they all hugged us, hugged us, and everyone was reaching for that small checkbook: “how much money do you need for activism?” That's when new organizations emerged, some got their own premises for the first time, and fancy ones in the city center, the Open Society Fund from petty coins now gives the most money for LGBT causes. The Pride organizers received, I do not know, some huge awards for even having the courage to organize the Pride. So that contributed to a better financial situation for LGBT organizations....²⁸

In examining the level of autonomy among LGBT actors, it is evident that the violence during the 2001 Pride event significantly influenced the narrative surrounding LGBT identity in Serbia. Prior to the 2001 Pride, funding supported activities such as exhibitions, the publication of pamphlets and materials, and books related to feminism and queer studies. However, following the violence at 2001 Pride, donor support shifted predominantly toward projects focusing on trauma and trauma recovery. This development further distanced the community from democratic authorities, who were perceived as responsible for failing to prevent the attack by hooligans. Rather than fostering cooperation and reconciliation, this created a divide that blocked the legalization of LGBT rights in Serbia. Furthermore, this was not solely a result of internal tensions, but was also shaped by the interests of foreign stakeholders in promoting a victimization discourse.

6 Concluding remarks

The study of the 2001 Pride episode illustrated that during the initial months of the democratic transition, matters like human rights, transitional political justice, and power distribution from dominant majority to marginalized groups can backslide in the absence of proper scrutiny. After the dissolution of authoritarian power, new social imaginaries emerged. However, not all imaginaries are mutually compatible. In a society that is highly patriarchal, politically conservative and looks to new identities with suspicion, additional care from the new democratic government, civil society actors and international human rights actors is necessary for the quality of democratic transition.

Our research fills the knowledge gap that we identified in three following aspects. Firstly, we restructured the political genesis of the LGBT struggle in the early period of democratic transition. Despite that the literature underscores the victimization discourse related to the identity struggles, we also found that there were a significant political activity and an ideological framing of the LGBT community

²⁵ Interview with Jelena Vasiljević, Rainbow Ignite, 19 February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

²⁶ Interview with the anonymous legal scientists, 14. February, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

²⁷ Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic, 24 April, 2024, online live interview.

²⁸ Interview with Predrag Azdejković, Optimist Magazine Editor-in-Chief, 9. July, 2024, Belgrade, face-to-face interview.

as the part of “the second Serbia.” Our analysis demonstrated that characterizing the LGBT community as simultaneously pro-democratic and anti-national limited the potential for democratic authorities to collaborate effectively with LGBT actors. Additionally, the study revealed internal struggles within the LGBT community, such as gender disparities, strong anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes, and a donor-driven focus on victimization within dominant discourse. By critically comparing ideological and identity representations, it becomes apparent that prejudices affecting Serbian society were not solely cultural or patriarchal in nature, but also had significant political dimensions.

Secondly, the research demonstrated that the enemies of the LGBT community perceived the Pride event as the way to take down the new democratic government, restoring the old patrimonial regime. Finally, our analysis shows that there was a significant change of political experience among LGBT activist that they failed to recognize. During the 1990s, the community was invisible to the authoritarian government, considering the concentrated power in one party and one ideological current. As the interviews explicated, the activists believed that it cannot get worse than the 1990s, and that the enthusiasm and bravery are the only two virtues that were needed for the LGBT community to politically come-out. This misjudgment derived from false experience of political circumstances and, instead of democratic gain, it blocked the pro-LGBT struggle for another decade.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Anja Osei, FU Berlin Anke Höffler, University of Konstanz Prof. Svend-Erik Skanning, Aarhus University Members of the external steering committee of the Embrace project (Horizon id: 101060809; topic - HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01-04). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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