CHAPTER 1

“You’ve Gotta Walk Through the City”:
Religious Nationalism and LGBT Pride Parades in Serbia

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Over the past 15 years, the rights of LGBT persons have been a contentious public issue in Serbia. Stigmatizing and discriminatory attitudes toward LGBT people are frequently expressed in public discourse and through social practices (Greenberg 2006, Kahlina 2014, Mikuš 2011, Nielsen 2013, Stakić 2011). Struggles over the attempts to hold an annual LGBT Pride Parade in Belgrade have become a symbolic focus of the LGBT controversy. In 2010, the first Pride with a full security backing from the state was held, but threats, riots and other forms of violence overshadowed the apparent success. The Ministry of the Interior subsequently banned the Prides scheduled to be held in 2011–2013. The next Pride took place in 2014.

Numerous public actors argued that Pride was unacceptable for the Serbian nation because it contravened Serbian Orthodoxy. The concept of religious nationalism has been used to analyze such articulations of the idioms of religion and nation around the world (e.g. Barr 2010, Brubaker 2012, Grigoriadis 2013, Van der Veer 1994, Juergensmeyer 1993, 2006, 2008), including Serbia and other post-Yugoslav states (Drezgić 2010, Perica 2002). In this chapter, I build on my ethnographic fieldwork to examine how nationalist NGOs and movements, or the “patriotic bloc” as they sometimes call themselves, used religious nationalist discourse in their struggle against Pride. In the first part of the chapter, I offer a brief account of their history, organizational practices and external relationships. I show how these organizations and their supporters, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, fought against an alliance of the state, LGBT NGOs and a broader liberal civil society over which issues and norms had a legitimate presence in the public sphere. I illustrate this further with the example of the anti-Pride “Family Walks” in the second section. In the third part, I focus on the historical roots, social ideology and current uses of religious nationalist discourse. Finally, I highlight the nationalists’ populist presentation of their anti-Pride campaign as a defense of the collective rights of the Serbian nation, and consider the audience and achievements of this strategy.
Patriotic Bloc

Nationalist NGOs and movements started to emerge in the late 1990s. At the time, they criticized the regime of Slobodan Milošević for being insufficiently nationalist and traditionalist while, ironically, the liberal and “pro-European” opposition found it to be intolerably so. However, their number and level of activity have been growing much faster since 2000. In this period, Serbia’s political, economic and cultural globalization advanced while nationalism in institutional politics was progressively marginalized. This has led the nationalists to adopt an increasingly oppositional and even insurgent posture. In recent years, they became highly visible in the media and urban landscapes, and domestic public figures have expressed concerns over their radical ideology, propensity to violence and constituency among youth, including football hooligans (Kostovicova 2006, Nielsen 2013).

Nationalist organizations could be described as a specific type of NGO, although some have gradually become political movements with parliamentary ambitions. Many registered with state authorities as “associations of citizens,” just like most other NGOs. They usually possessed, at least nominally, decision-making structures typical for NGOs, such as management boards. Although many of these groups call themselves “movements,” their members often referred to them as “associations” or “organizations” (but never as “NGOs”) during public speeches and interviews they gave me.1 The core group of activists of these organizations tends to be relatively small, as was obvious from the modest turnout at the meetings that I attended. In interviews and meetings, the leaders complained that often only a fraction of Facebook “attendees” actually came to a rally. Large crowds were more likely to attend protests that addressed burning issues of the day, and the participants at these often do not consider themselves members or supporters of any particular nationalist organization.

Nationalist organizations focus on doing politics—by means of protesting, organizing talks and discussions (tribine), and spreading what they call propaganda through posters, stickers, graffiti, banners, fanzines, magazines and the Internet. All major organizations regularly update their websites, and many run email newsletters and busy Facebook accounts. They use these channels

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1 I interviewed high-ranking members of the 1389 Serbian National Movement, the Dveri (“Doors of the Iconostasis”) Serbian Assembly, the Naši (“Ours”) Serbian National Movement, the Nomokanon (“Nomocanon”) Association of the Students of the Faculty of Law, and the Obraz (“Honor”) Fatherland Movement. I refer to these organizations, in keeping with the convention in Serbia, by the non-generic part of their names, e.g. Dveri.