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UNVEILING HOMOPHOBIA: A STUDY OF ATTITUDES IN SERBIAN SOCIETY

Razotkrivanje homofobije: Studija stavova u društvu Srbije

ABSTRACT: *The main goal of this study is to analyse attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Serbia, as well as across the broader region and Europe. Conclusions regarding homophobia are drawn from data gathered through several empirical studies, namely: the ninth and tenth rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted in 2018 and 2021, and three surveys conducted by the Institute for Sociological Research in 2003, 2012, and 2018. Comprehensive research material allows for the tracking of changes in attitudes within Serbia over the past two decades (2003–2021). In the first part, we address contextual factors related to the legal and social position of the LGBTIQ population in Serbia. This part also includes various measurement instruments and definitions used in studies since the 1980s, concerning different types of negative attitudes (prejudices) towards lesbians and gay men. In the second part, we present data for Serbia as well as comparative data on homophobia across the region and Europe. As hypothesised, research results show that significant levels of homophobia persist over time, with no considerable changes in two decades. We believe that this paper will make a meaningful contribution to research on attitudes towards LGBTIQ in Serbia and the region by offering a comparative perspective, thus addressing a gap in the study of homophobia in post-socialist countries.*

KEY WORDS: *LGBTIQ, prejudices, attitudes, homophobia, European Social Survey.*

APSTRAKT: *Osnovni cilj rada predstavlja analiza stavova prema gejevima i lezbejkama u Srbiji, ali i u regionu i Evropi. Zaključci o homofobiji izvode se*

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na osnovu podataka nekoliko empirijskih istraživanja, i to: devete i desete runde Evropskog društvenog istraživanja (ESS), koje je sprovedeno 2018. i 2021. godine i tri istraživanja Instituta za sociološka istraživanja, realizovana 2003, 2012, i 2018. godine. Na ovaj način bilo je moguće pratiti promene u Srbiji tokom poslednje dve decenije (2003–2021). U prvom delu bavimo se kontekstualnom analizom koja se odnose na pravni i društveni položaj LGBTIQ populacije u Srbiji. Ovaj deo takođe uključuje različite instrumente za merenje i definicije koje su korišćene u studijama od 1980-ih, a koje se odnose na različite vrste negativnih stavova (predrasuda) prema lezbejkama i gej muškarcima. U drugom delu prikazujemo podatke za Srbiju, kao i uporedne podatke o homofobiji u regionu i Evropi. Kao što je pretpostavljeno, rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da homofobija opstaje tokom vremena, bez značajnih promena u poslednje dve decenije. Verujemo da će ovaj rad pružiti značajan doprinos istraživanju stavova prema LGBTIQ osobama u Srbiji i regionu nudeći uporednu perspektivu u istraživanju homofobije u post-socijalističkim zemljama.

KLJUČNE REČI: *LGBTIQ, predrasude, stavovi, homofobija, Evropsko društveno istraživanje.*

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, in many democratic societies, there has been progress in terms of laws and legal protection regarding LGBTIQ rights, but this still doesn't mean that the reality and attitudes of the majority are supportive or that they represent this situation. In the contemporary world, the issue of rights and status for the LGBTIQ is a complex theme reflected in a wide spectrum of debates, attitudes, and practices towards this group³. This process is historically recent, and key changes that have influenced perceptions and understanding of homosexuality have not occurred so long ago.

The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II) in 1973, marking a historic moment in recognising homosexuality as not a disorder from a scientific perspective. This was further confirmed internationally when the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) on 17 May 1990. Consequently, »anti-homosexual« debates gradually shifted away from the realms of medicine and psychiatry to those of morality and politics (Drescher, 2015). Also, research on homophobia significantly expanded in the 1980s and the focus among researchers changed from attempting to alter the sexual orientation of gays and lesbians to investigating negative reactions towards them (Wright et al., 1999).

3 In this paper, when discussing a population that differs from the heteronormative perception, we will use terms such as *LGBTIQ* and *nonheterosexuals*. When referring to specific research, we will use the term used in that study (in this case, it primarily involves *gays and lesbians*, as our research, as most others mentioned, focused on this segment of the population, while transgender individuals were not directly the subject of our study).

The Serbian Medical Society officially confirmed its alignment with the World Health Organization's stance that homosexuality is not a disease only in 2008.

A few decades after these events, with the rise of organizations advocating for LGBTIQ rights and the regular holding of Pride Parades in the country since 2014, the question arises – Does this mean that today we have a more accepting view of LGBTIQ individuals in Serbian society? In this paper, we provide an analysis of societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Serbia and beyond. The study focuses on the period from 2003 to 2021 based on the results of two comparative attitude surveys within the European Social Survey (ESS) for 2018 and 2021. However, it also encompasses earlier periods, providing insight into changes in these attitudes based on available datasets over the past two decades. This study is significant because it provides a unique comparative analysis of attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Serbia and the broader region, based on nationally representative samples. Until now, we have lacked studies featuring this type of analysis, particularly in post-socialist countries, making this research important for understanding long-term trends and persistent levels of homophobia in the region.

1.1. Attitudes Toward the LGBTIQ Population

Since the term homophobia first appeared in literature, various terms and measurement scales have been used to conceptualise it. Initially, in 1972, George Weinberg defined homophobia as *the dread of being close to homosexuals—and in the case of homosexuals themselves, self-aversion* (according to Herek, 2004). This definition focuses on the phobic reaction towards individuals of homosexual orientation and homosexuality in general. Some authors emphasise that viewing homophobia as a form of phobia can, in a sense, legitimise individuals with negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians, thereby absolving them of *social responsibility* for their actions (De Silva et al., 2019). Consequently, different authors have proposed more inclusive concepts covering a wide range of negative feelings, beliefs, and behaviours directed towards LGBTIQ individuals. Some authors suggested using terms such as heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobic, anti-homosexuality, homonegativity, homosexual prejudice, anti-gay bias, lesbophobia, biphobia, transphobia, sexual stigma, erotic stigma, and sexual prejudice (Wright, et al, 1999; Herek, 2004; Haney, 2016; Costa et al., 2013). The proliferation of these terms indicates that the phenomenon of negative attitudes towards the non-heterosexual population has been extensively studied since the 1980s. Also, academic papers increasingly adopted the term homophobia *within studies of prejudice and discrimination* (Costa et al., 2013).

In this paper, we will interchangeably use terms from several studies because we believe they refer to the same phenomenon: we will use the term *homophobia* (Wright, Adams & Bernat, 1999), *attitudes toward gays and lesbians* (Herek, 1988) and *sexual prejudice* (Herek, 2004).

Sexual prejudice or “negative attitudes based on sexual orientation”, exhibits three main characteristics: It constitutes a judgment; it targets a particular social group and its individuals; and it carries a negative connotation, involving

aversion or hostility (Herek, 2000). One of the important characteristics of prejudice, including sexual prejudice, is that once formed, it can influence an individual's future actions (Herek, 2004). Prejudices are a type of attitude related to psychological constructs, and in that sense, we cannot directly analyse them until they manifest through some form of behaviour. This behaviour can also be the expression of attitude in the form of opinions or beliefs (Herek, 2004) in a survey, during research, in an interview, and so on. The relationship between attitudes and behaviour has been explored in the literature and indicates that attitudes can impact behaviour in two primary ways: directly, through the conscious and deliberate use of attitudes to guide actions, and indirectly, through unconscious processes that shape an individual's perception and interpretation of a given situation (Herek, 2004).

In this context, analysing attitudes, particularly negative ones towards gays and lesbians, also sheds light on the behaviours individuals are willing to engage in when there is institutional support and cultural validation. Studying behaviour can help identify the root causes of sexual prejudice and methods to address it. This also means that a scientific understanding of behaviour can assist us in preventing the manifestation of sexual prejudice, including violence, discrimination, and stereotypes against LGBTIQ individuals (Herek, 2000).

Upon reviewing the literature concerning homophobia, it becomes apparent that there is a *divergence* in the theoretical understanding of the term (Costa et al, 2013). According to some authors from the field of psychology, homophobia is characterised by three interconnected components: negative perceptions of homosexuality, avoidance behaviours in reaction to homosexuality, and aggressive actions directed towards nonheterosexuals (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999; Lewis & White, 2009). *The Homophobia Scale* was created for the evaluation of homophobia. This scale consists of 25 items measured on a 5-point scale designed to measure three aspects of homophobia: cognitive (thoughts), affective (negative emotions) and behavioural aspects toward gays and lesbians (Wright et al, 1999). This scale is important because, compared to previous studies, it adds a behavioural component to the evaluation of homophobia. The objective of this scale is to establish whether individuals who acknowledge negative thoughts and/or feelings towards gays and lesbians also acknowledge engaging in negative behaviours, such as avoidance and aggression (Wright et al, 1999). According to this research, it seems that homophobia extends beyond personal feelings, and includes behavioural manifestations such as avoidance or aggression towards gays and lesbians, possibly influenced by the circumstances and characteristics of the situation. In our study, three items from the ESS questionnaire can be characterised to relate to three components of homophobia: cognitive, affective, and behavioural, although the data are not directly comparable to *The Homophobia scale* used by Wright and the authors (Wright et al, 1999).

Another psychologist significant for understanding homophobia and the relationship between context and attitudes is Gregory Herek. He proposed a typology to understand the phenomenon of negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals and its manifestations (Herek, 2004). Instead of the term

homophobia, he suggests three concepts: *sexual stigma*, *heterosexism* and *sexual prejudice*. Attitudes operate on three levels. First, it manifests in societal norms that diminish non-heterosexual identities and behaviours – homosexuality is perceived as inferior compared to heterosexuality. This »shared knowledge« or »cultural ideology« in a society (Herek describes American society) constitutes what we recognise as »sexual stigma«, meaning that gays and lesbians are reduced to a specific attribute, sexual orientation, negatively. Some of those meanings include the perception of LGBTIQ individuals as deviant, sinful, and inferior compared to heterosexuals. At the next level, negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians are manifested through what Herek calls »heterosexism« – permeating institutional structures, perpetuating systemic discrimination against the LGBTIQ community. Heterosexism means that sexual stigma manifests itself in different ways and has concrete structural and institutional consequences, which are related to power dynamics (for example, denying the marriage or adoption rights of LGBTIQ, in vitro fertilization and so on). Finally, ideological negative meanings towards gays and lesbians are manifested at the individual level, as sexual prejudices. Sexual prejudices represent »negative attitudes of individuals based on their sexual orientation« (Herek, 2004). At the individual level, sexual prejudices can manifest as expressions of negative attitudes and actions towards gays and lesbians, bisexual and heterosexual persons, and can be addressed to anyone based on sexual orientation. In this paper, however, we focus on the negative attitudes of heterosexual people towards gays and lesbians. The ESS research survey does not provide the questionnaire option to identify based on their sexual orientation. So, we operate under the assumption that the majority of attitudes belong to heterosexual individuals. Prejudices can also be internalised by LGBTIQ individuals themselves, leading to the phenomenon of »internalised homophobia,« where negative attitudes are adopted by those affected by sexual stigma or homophobia.

Internalised homophobia is not directly the focus of this paper, but it is important to note that this phenomenon is defined as when an individual belonging to sexual minorities have negative feelings and homophobic attitudes towards themselves and others who are part of sexual minorities, as a product of social bias (Shildo, 1994; Puckett et al., 2016). This phenomenon often appears when talking about mental health and minority stress to which LGBTIQ people are exposed in society. One of the items that appears in the questionnaires examining the experience of internalised homophobia, includes a feeling of shame (items such as *Sometimes I feel ashamed of my sexual orientation*), as well as emotions of guilt, discomfort and concern about coming out. Some studies focus on the phenomenon of shame in the gay population (Ramirez-Valles, Kuhns, Campbell, & Diaz, 2010; Hequembourg & Dearing, 2013). However, for this research, the feeling of shame is important to understand because it appears when the family feels ashamed of the sexual orientation of their member, that is, when the experience of the stigma that includes embarrassment appears in agreement with the attitude *If a close family member was a gay man or a lesbian, I would feel ashamed*. The sensation of shame has been described as an internal, distressing feeling characterised by a sense of inadequacy and unworthiness

(Mereish et al., 2020; Hequembourg & Dearing, 2013). Natural inclinations associated with shame include the desire to hide, escape, or avoid (Hequembourg & Dearing, 2013). These feelings are often avoided because they are linked with negative self-beliefs.⁴

This theoretical framework underscores the importance of understanding homophobia at societal, institutional, and individual levels. If we want to completely grasp anti-gay hostility, as noted by Herek, *it requires analysis of its roots in culture and social interactions, as well as in individual thought processes* (Herek, 2004). Our research primarily focuses on attitudes manifested towards lesbians and gay men at the individual level, operating under the assumption that these attitudes provide us with a more complete picture of the state and position of the LGBTIQ population in our society. Although we analyse attitudes in the study, we do not lose sight of the fact that they are deeply interconnected with the cultural background and institutional framework.

At this point, it is also important to note that negative attitudes and instruments measuring homophobia depend on the context (Da Silva et al., 2019). Different factors influence attitudes towards LGBTIQ persons, such as institutional context and the level of democracy in the country, traditionalism rooted in gender norms and culture, religiosity, education, socioeconomic status, and contact with the LGBTIQ population. Early research in American society on attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (ATLG Scale) reveals specific patterns, such as – individuals with negative attitudes tend to have restrictive gender-role beliefs; they are more likely to have higher levels of authoritarianism; they are less likely to have had direct personal interactions with gay men or lesbians; and are more inclined to conservative religious beliefs (Herek, 1988).

Some research makes a distinction between two types of prejudices against LGBTIQ: *traditional homonegativity* and *modern homonegativity*. In their work, Morrison and Morrison (2003) introduced the concept of »modern homonegativity,« which negatively evaluates lesbians and gays, but within new discourses distinct from *old-fashioned homonegativity*. While traditional homonegativity is often framed within religious and moral values, modern discourses, which are also highly discriminatory, are against lesbians and gays in different ways (using some *abstract concerns*). Modern homonegativity includes the belief that gays and lesbians are making *illegitimate or unnecessary* requests for changes (like same-sex marriage); the belief that discrimination against gays and lesbians is outdated; and the notion that gay men and lesbians

4 In cases where a family experiences shame regarding the sexuality of one of its members, it is also presumed that those experiencing shame may consider homosexuality as something to be avoided, rejected, and associated with negative connotations. Research among sexual minority adolescents indicates a connection between family rejection and heightened feelings of shame and guilt, which were in turn associated with increased depressive symptoms (Mereish et al., 2020). Specifically, family rejection intensifies preexisting sensations of shame, such as feeling embarrassed or inadequate for not meeting parental or family expectations regarding heterosexuality, as well as guilt stemming from coming out and being openly expressive of one's identity, which may contradict family values or dynamics (Mereish et al., 2020).

overemphasise the significance of their sexual orientation, thereby hindering their integration into mainstream culture (Morrison and Morrison, 2003). It is important to recognise that the shift in discourse regarding negative attitudes does not mean that homophobia has disappeared, but rather that there has been a transformation from the traditional to the modern concept of homonegativity (Morrison and Morrison, 2003).

Modern homonegativity in Serbian society can also be noted when claims are made that gays and lesbians are excessively protected, they demand some special privileges for themselves, imposing their sexuality/culture/lifestyle on others, as well as in opposition to the ideas of same-sex marriage and adoption. This should also include the viewpoint that the Pride event is imposed from the West or that lesbian or gay men have a hidden political agenda that threatens the traditional Serbian family (Radoman, 2023). Additionally, the Pride event is often delegitimised by the claim that LGBTIQ individuals have nothing to be proud of, viewing the event as flaunting. All of these are contemporary forms of homophobic attitudes and behaviours. In this manner, to measure contemporary forms of homophobia or negative attitudes, the Modern Homonegativity Scale (MHS) has been developed (Morrison and Morrison, 2003). Considering that in Serbia the majority of attitudes measured tend to reflect traditional rather than modern prejudices, it would be beneficial to apply the MHS and see how this scale is utilised in the local context. In Serbia, we currently have both types of negative attitudes, and as we will demonstrate in the results, attitudes range from those that are extremely negative to traditionally negative and those belonging to modern forms of prejudice, particularly concerning the topic of adoption by gays and lesbians.

1.2. Understanding the Legal and Political Context for LGBTIQ in Serbia

The legal and institutional framework along with the political context, play a crucial role for the LGBTIQ population. It is not only about regulations and technical aspects of societal significance, but it also sends a clear message to all citizens about the importance of respecting their rights and recognising their equality as members of society. The Anti-Discrimination Law enacted in 2009 made an important shift in the battle against discrimination based on sexual orientation, despite facing opposition from right-wing factions within the country. Parallel with the adoption of this law was the attempt to organise the Pride March in Belgrade in 2009 (Radoman, 2016). During this period, it was clear that state authorities effectively banned the holding of the Pride March, relocating the event outside the city centre (the organisers of the Pride event said that the relocation was unacceptable to them). The Pride Parade eventually took place in 2010 and participants once again met with fierce violence from extreme right-wing organisations and fan groups, resulting in numerous clashes with police in the city centre⁵. Against this backdrop of political tension, this period

5 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/10/11/serbia-riots-leave-scores-injured>

represented an advancement in the fight for LGBTIQ rights, because it was nearly a decade after the initial attempt to organise the first parade in Belgrade in 2001 (Bilić and Kajinić, 2016). Following another three years of prohibition, Pride once again took place in 2014 and has been held every year since then.

The connection between political factors and the legal framework is important because it highlights the social and political atmosphere of this period: an increase in visibility for the rights of the LGBTIQ community, despite numerous and strong opposition. The situation in Serbia is perhaps unique within the region, particularly compared to countries like Croatia with the Pride March tradition which has been held since 2002, and Slovenia, which organised its first Pride Parade in 2001 and has seen the emergence of the LGBTIQ movement since the 1980s. There is a large LGBTIQ community in Serbia, especially in the capital city of Belgrade, but there is no adequate protection for their rights. It seems that Serbia, in terms of law still lags behind Croatia, Slovenia, and even Montenegro.

In Serbia, two key laws related to the LGBTIQ community are currently missing. There is no Gender Identity Law in Serbia, which would regulate the status of transgender, intersex, and gender variant individuals, which leaves this population legally unrecognised. Also, lobbying and discussions regarding the adoption of the Law on Registered Same-Sex Partnerships have been going on for over a decade without reaching a final decision. Moreover, there is no legal framework recognising and protecting same-sex families with children. Despite ongoing uncertainty regarding LGBTIQ rights, many individuals choose parenthood, yet same-sex families remain legally unrecognised and consequently lack adequate protection. The slow progress in adopting this law also suggests political resistance from authorities and compromises made with the conservative electoral.

It is clear that Serbia faces a structural problem with no political will to improve the situation for same-sex couples and transgender individuals. This undoubtedly leads to an increase in homophobic and transphobic attitudes and the tolerance of violence and discrimination against the LGBTIQ population. At the announcement of the EuroPride event in Belgrade (EuroPride 2022), such threats primarily come from the conservative faction of the Serbian Orthodox Church. During the Pride event, nonheterosexuals are still subject to numerous public condemnations and physical assaults, creating an atmosphere of fear for many queer individuals. According to some reports, in Serbia, on average, at least one homo/transphobia-motivated incident occurs every 4 days.⁶

Despite some positive developments and some segments of society showing increased affirmative attitudes towards this group, there remains a significant

6 According to their data from July 2020 to August 2023, 233 acts of violence or incidents against LGBTQ individuals were recorded, yet only 71 cases, or 31%, were reported. The systematic denial and ignorance of homo/transphobic incidents are further illustrated by the fact that on the day of the EuroPride event in 2022, out of 14 attacks on LGBT people, predominantly by right-wing groups and hooligans, not a single case was prosecuted (Da se zna, 2024).

percentage of the population who continue to manifest discrimination and violence towards them. Various surveys and public opinion polls in the last decades indicate a slow change in values and prejudices, with approximately 50% of citizens still considering homosexuality to be an illness⁷. The persistence of a consistent percentage of homophobic attitudes can also be attributed to the stagnation in evident legal or institutional progress in recent years. Moreover, the increased visibility for many, especially transgender individuals, brings new problems and increases transphobia in society (Milanović, 2022). At the time of writing this paper, we are witnessing drastic violations of the rights of LGBTIQ community members, especially by the police⁸. All of this is happening in a country facing numerous challenges, including the slowdown in the European Union accession process, low socioeconomic conditions, deteriorating health and education systems, and widespread crime and corruption, which impact even the highest levels of authority.

1.3. Hypotheses

1. We assume that while attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals have improved compared to a decade or fifteen years ago, a significant portion of the population still holds negative views and offers limited support to the LGBTIQ community. Author Herek believed that despite the progress, the public's unwillingness to treat homosexuality equally with heterosexuality remains (Herek, 2000). This represents *limited recognition*, as there is often resistance to giving full rights to lesbians and gay men (attitudes towards marriage or adoption by same-sex couples often face opposition)
2. This difference in attitudes will also be reflected in the results of this study, revealing varying levels of acceptance. The first statement represents a form of declarative support, which may not necessarily translate into full rights, whereas the subsequent two statements are met with less agreement. One of these statements involves familial connection with individuals who are lesbian or gay, while the other is about adopting rights. These three statements are presented in the questionnaire in sequential order, implying that each subsequent statement requires participants to consider and respond to more specific rights and a higher level of support (or opposition) for gays and lesbians.
3. When considering the influence of socio-demographic characteristics, we expect men will hold more negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians compared to women, followed by older individuals compared to younger ones, individuals with lower levels of education, and rural residents compared to urban ones. This hypothesis is based on numerous studies of attitudes towards LGBTIQ individuals, which indicate that

7 <https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/sr/objavljen-godišnji-izveštaj-poverenik/>; CESID, 2010; Civil Rights Defenders, 2021.

8 <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-lgbt-protest-police-brutality/32851329.html>

women show a higher level of acceptance towards gay men and lesbians, as do individuals with higher levels of education, urban residents, non-religious individuals, and younger people.

4. Political orientation will influence attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, with those leaning more towards the left end of the political spectrum holding more affirmative views, while those identifying more with the right end expressing more prejudice. This question pertains to the subjective assessment of respondents on a left-right political spectrum scale, and in this study, we will not delve into whether that scale is an objective indicator of right-wing or left-wing political options and parties. Instead, we focus on examining how self-assessment and self-identification on that scale are related to attitudes towards marginalised social groups. We expect that religiosity and authoritarianism will also affect attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, so that more religious and more authoritarian respondents have more negative attitudes towards them.
5. When considering differences across the former Yugoslav states regarding attitudes towards gay men and lesbians within the countries participating in the ESS study, Serbia will fall into the category of countries lacking legal frameworks about the basic civil rights of same-sex partners. North Macedonia falls into this group as well, while the other countries (Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia) have better legal recognition and frameworks concerning the LGBTIQ population. Therefore, we expect more negative attitudes towards the LGBTIQ population in countries lacking legal frameworks that protect the rights of same-sex couples and transgender individuals.
6. In comparison to the European context, we anticipate more positive attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, particularly in Western Europe, including Scandinavian countries known for their favourable legal frameworks for the LGBTIQ population. Conversely, we expect more negative attitudes in Central and Eastern European countries, including Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Lithuania, as well as countries that have enacted some of the most restrictive laws concerning LGBTIQ individuals, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland. This division is likely to manifest as polarisation across European countries, as indicated by previous research and data (Digoix, 2020; Bodor et al, 2023) (Bodor et al, 2023; ILGA, 2024).

2. Method

The paper presents data from two rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted in 2018/2019 and 2020/2021 (the ninth and tenth rounds of the survey). The data obtained in three research projects of the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade are also used: the

first was the *South-East European Social Survey Project*, carried out in 2003, the second was *Changes in the Basic Structures of Serbian Society* completed in 2012, and third, *Everyday of Households and Individuals under the Conditions of Social Change in Contemporary Serbia*, conducted in 2018. Results of attitudes towards gays and lesbians are provided based on several statements in those research years: 1. *Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish*, 2. *If a close family member was a gay man or a lesbian, I would feel ashamed*, 3. *Gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples* 4. *Homosexuals are no better than criminals and should be punished in the extreme*. As will be seen below, data are not available for all attitudes in all years.

3. Results and discussion

The following section presents the results of the descriptive analysis of attitudes towards gays and lesbians. As can be seen, data are not available for all analysed attitudes measuring homophobia for all years.

Table 1. *Attitudes Towards Homophobia in Serbia (in %)*

	Gays and lesbians free to live life as they wish				Ashamed if a close family member is gay or lesbian		Gay and lesbian couples' right to adopt children		Homosexuals are no better than criminals and should be punished in the extreme		
	2003	2012	2018	2021	2018	2021	2018	2021	2003	2012	2018
Agree strongly	10.8	15.8	9.1	10.3	23.9	13.2	3.1	5.7	12.8	15.6	21.5
Agree	32.0	35.1	28.9	30.3	26.1	16.1	8.6	10.1	18.8	13.1	6.2
Neither agree nor disagree	19.3	21.4	21.8	32.2	17.6	34.6	13.5	19.5	16.5	21.2	13.9
Disagree	23.8	15.3	17.6	13.1	21.6	21.3	29.2	27.4	36.8	31.5	8.0
Disagree strongly	14.1	12.4	22.6	14.1	10.9	14.9	45.7	37.2	15.2	18.5	50.4

The findings of the descriptive analysis indicate a slight decrease in the degree of homophobia, revealing different trends across different dimensions. The analysis of attitudes towards the statement 'Gays and lesbians are free to live life as they wish' reveals that there were no significant changes over the past two decades, indicating a shift towards greater acceptance of non-homophobic attitudes. This trend becomes particularly evident when we analyse the data from 2003 and 2021. Over this period, the percentage of disagreement with this attitude decreased by 10%.

The changes regarding the acceptance of LGBTIQ rights did not unfold linearly. Between 2003 and 2012, there was an approximately 10% increase in support for these rights, suggesting a potential advancement in the fight for LGBTIQ equality, which especially intensified from 2009 with the passing of anti-discrimination laws and the preparation for holding the Pride Parade. That period was also marked by the media's increased visibility of LGBTIQ persons, which could have an impact on citizens' attitudes. Furthermore, this

era was characterised by prominent attacks from conservative factions, including politicians, religious institutions, supporters, and far-right organisations. We suppose that the pronounced polarisation of the image of the LGBTIQ community in the public sphere may have contributed to more articulated attitudes and increased support for the belief that marginalised groups should be protected from violence, thus affirming their right to live their lives freely.

However, from 2012 to 2018, we observed a decline in agreement with this attitude, accompanied by a significant increase in the share of disagreements (by as much as 10%), and a few years later, in 2021, agreement with this attitude had returned to the level recorded in 2003 (about 40%). The decline in support for this statement coincides with the change in the political parties in power. Since 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been in power and continues to be the dominant political force. This party is known for its authoritarian style of governance.

Contrary to expectations, the decrease in negative attitudes towards the LGBTIQ population was not accompanied by a rise in agreement with these attitudes, but rather by a notable increase in the proportion of undecided individuals. This proportion increased from one-fifth to one-third between 2003 and 2021, with the increase particularly evident from 2018 to 2021. In summarising the results regarding this statement, it can be observed that the changes occurring from 2012 to the present period (until 2021) can be characterised as stagnation. There has been no significant increase in affirmative attitudes towards the LGBTIQ population, not even in a declarative sense.

A similar trend is observed in the case of other attitudes. As we can see, regarding the statement 'Ashamed if a close family member is gay or lesbian,' a notable decrease in acceptance is evident from 2018 to 2021 in both categories of agreement (a 10% drop was recorded in both categories of agreement). It's not entirely clear why the percentage of support for this attitude decreased by about 20% from 2018 to 2021, but the 2018 figure indeed highlights a significant issue regarding the acceptance of nonheterosexual orientation within families. One possible explanation could be a contextual factor, such as the strengthening of family bonds during the pandemic during 2020/2021. This is a period when many people returned to their homes, including numerous LGBTQ individuals. During the pandemic, there were generally increased fears, uncertainties, and a sense that we need to take care of ourselves and our families. According to some researchers throughout the pandemic, there should be a greater emphasis on supporting family members and effective and open family communication is essential for navigating the uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gayatri & Puspitasari, 2022). The extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic could have influenced acceptance relationships within families remains somewhat of an open question.

Similar to the first attitude, the decrease in the level of agreement did not coincide with a decrease in the level of disagreement. Instead, it was characterised by a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who were undecided,

more than doubling from 17.6% to 34.6%. Regarding the first dimension of homophobic orientation, we observe a slightly higher degree of homophobia.

The attitude used to measure the attitude towards the right of same-sex couples to adopt children was accepted to the lowest extent, in both observed years: according to the latest available data, 16% of respondents support the right of same-sex couples to adopt children, one-fifth neither agree nor disagree, while almost 2/3 of respondents reject this attitude (almost 40% of respondents show an extremely critical attitude towards this statement). This finding is largely expected, given that it refers to the legal recognition of the right of same-sex couples to adopt children. At the same time, the data show slight changes in the direction of a lower level of homophobia.

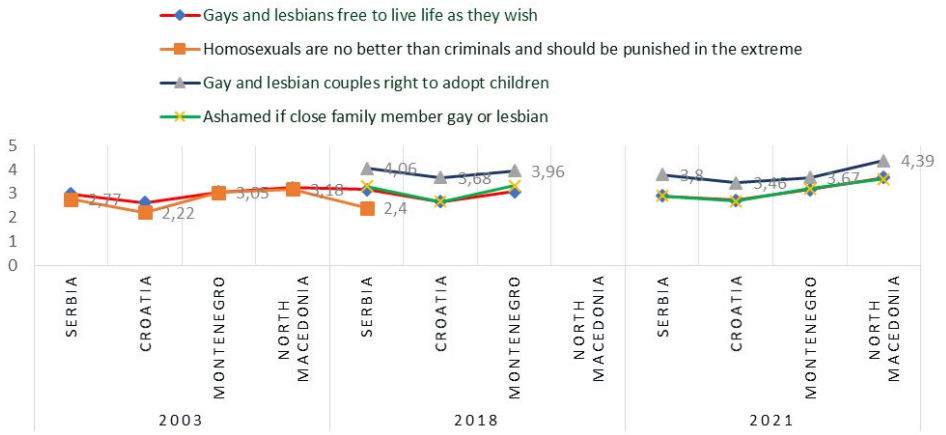
The results related to the attitude 'Homosexuals are no better than criminals and should be punished in the extreme' also provide several important insights. Firstly, in the case of this statement, the lowest degree of agreement is recorded, which is expected due to its overly strong formulation. Despite a decline in acceptance from 2003 to 2018, a significant percentage of respondents still support this attitude (27,7% in 2018). Nevertheless, it is an important finding that more than a quarter of respondents still support this traditionalist and extreme prejudice. A valuable finding emerges when comparing data from the previous two years: in 2021, 50% of respondents indicated they do not fully agree with this attitude, compared to 18,5 % that was recorded in 2018. The same trend is observed in the category of strong agreement.

The analysed attitudes measure different dimensions of homophobia: some of the statements refer to expressing a certain attitude (cognitive dimension), while other statements include affective and behavioural dimensions. The results show that the respondents have the most positive attitudes in terms of declarative support, when they only have to declare whether they support a certain attitude, while when we move towards the emotional dimension (for example, the attitude *If a close family member was a gay man or a lesbian, I would feel ashamed*) that support decreases. Attitudes are most negative when they pertain to the approval of specific types of support, such as particular rights, like the possibility of lesbians and gay men adopting children. We believe that this statement is closest to behaviour, as it measures concrete rather than just declarative support. This behavioural dimension is best observed when respondents must declare whether they are in favour of lesbians and gay men being fully equal to heterosexuals through the recognition of full marital and family rights. Traditional and modern homonegativity overlap here, as resistance to the issue of child adoption, is often framed by moral reasons and the need to protect traditional gender roles of men and women. It should be noted that these findings are consistent with earlier studies, as data from 15 years ago show that in 2010, almost 80 per cent of respondents were against marriage and adoption by the LGBTIQ population (CESID, 2010). In this way, we can observe a strong resistance to LGBTIQ rights that, unfortunately, persists over the decades in this region.

3.1. Serbia in Regional and European Contexts

In this section of the paper, we explore the findings regarding attitudes towards LGBTIQ individuals within specific countries in the region, namely Montenegro, Macedonia, and Croatia (Graph 1 and Table 1 in Annex). After that, we will present the results for all countries that participated in the 10 rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS).

Graph 1. Attitudes Toward Homophobia in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, mean (1–5)⁹



A comparison of Serbia with countries in the region brings significant observations. Croatia consistently shows the lowest level of homophobia across all analysed attitudes. Although in Croatia in all observed years the lowest level of homophobia is recorded, a critical attitude towards the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children is evident. The average score on this statement in 2018 and 2021 exceeds the theoretical limit of 3, with values of 3.68 and 3.46, respectively (Table 1. in Annex). In contrast, average values below 3 are recorded on other statements in all observed years. Similarly to Serbia, the data show a higher degree of agreement regarding the declarative rights of gays and lesbians, while statements concerning legally regulated rights show lower agreement levels. Over the analysed period from 2003 to 2021, there's a slight increase in disagreement with the attitude that gays and lesbians have the right to live their lives as they want (increase from 2.62 to 2.72). Conversely, there's a slight increase in agreement with the attitude supporting the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children, observed in the period from 2018 to 2021.

While a lower level of homophobia is recorded in Croatia than in Serbia, the results for Montenegro and Macedonia show a significantly higher level of homophobia. The average values of all observed statements for all years exceed the value of 3. However, a slightly higher level of homophobia is noted in North

⁹ Higher values indicate a higher degree of homophobia

Macedonia, which coincides with the results of previous research (Dimitrov and Blazheva 2023).

Similar to the patterns observed in Croatia and Serbia, the highest degree of homophobia is recorded in the statement Gay and lesbian couples' right to adopt children (in North Macedonia in 2021, an average value of as much as 4.39 was recorded, which is also the highest recorded value) followed by the statement *Ashamed if close family member gay or lesbian*, while the greatest support is given to the attitude that *Gays and lesbians free to live life as they wish*. However, when it comes to the last attitude, as in Serbia in the period from 2003 to 2021, there is a slight increase in negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians, while in the case of the remaining two attitudes in Montenegro, there is a slight decrease (for North Macedonia, results available only for 2021).

Regarding other countries of the post-Yugoslav space, Serbia, in terms of legal protection of LGBTIQ, lags behind Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. Slovenia passed a law on same-sex marriage as well as the adoption rights for same-sex couples in 2022, making it the first former communist country to do so. Croatia legalised same-sex partnerships in 2014 and also confirmed the right to adoption for same-sex couples (2022). Same-sex couples in that country, have the opportunity to apply for adoption and their sexual orientation cannot be a reason for discrimination and rejection. Montenegro passed the Law on Life Partnership, in 2020, without adoption options. We hypothesised that countries with a better legal framework will have more progressive attitudes towards gays and lesbians. This is confirmed in the case of Croatia and Slovenia (Table 2), while in the case of Montenegro, the rate of homophobia appears to be higher than in Serbia. One explanation could be the relatively high degree of traditionalism observed in previous surveys in Montenegro (Petrović, 2018).

To compare Serbia with the countries that participated in the European Social Survey (ESS) in the 10th round, a homophobia scale was created. This scale was formed using the previous three statements (*Gay and lesbian couples' right to adopt children*, *Ashamed if a close family member is gay or lesbian*, *Gays and lesbians free to live life as they wish*). The value of Krombach's alpha coefficient indicates that it is a reliable scale (Cronbach's Alpha=0,824; See *Inter-Item Correlation Matrix* in Table 2 in Annex). Scores on the scale range from 3 to 15, with higher values indicating a higher degree of homophobia.

One-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows a statistically significant difference between the analysed countries. Tukey's test indicates that 22 countries are grouped into 13 subgroups. The lowest degree of homophobia was recorded in Iceland, with an average value of 3.9 (this country is statistically significantly different from other countries). Countries that also have a low level of homophobia are the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden, where average values are below 5. This is supported by findings from other research that deal with the legal framework in European countries (Badgett et al., 2019; Waaldijk, 2020).

If we analyse the countries in the region, we can see that in almost all countries the average value on the homophobia scale is above 9. As expected, the

hierarchy of countries remains consistent, with Croatia demonstrating the lowest level of homophobia. Following Croatia, Serbia is grouped with Bulgaria and Lithuania, showing a relatively high level of homophobia. On the other hand, Montenegro and North Macedonia show the highest degree of homophobia (the average value is above 10).

Table 2. Average score on the homophobia scale
– Results of One-Way Analysis of Variance¹⁰

Country	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05												
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Iceland	892	3.9196												
Netherlands	1459		4.4001											
Norway	1383		4.6375	4.6375										
Spain	2246			4.7667	4.7667									
Sweden	2266			4.9155	4.9155									
France	1899				5.0898									
Finland	1550					5.5215								
Germany	8506					5.7329								
Austria	1966					5.7477								
Switzerland	1473					5.8593								
Portugal	1738						6.2464							
Italy	2452							7.3558						
Slovenia	1183							7.5404						
Poland	2026								8.0237					
Czechia	2200								8.0513					
Estonia	1523								8.0638					
Hungary	1564									8.5826				
Greece	2544									8.6660				
Croatia	1487									8.8275				
Slovakia	1200										9.2178			
Lithuania	1528										9.5089	9.5089		
Serbia	1499											9.6144		
Bulgaria	2498											9.6525		
Montenegro	1190												10.0676	
North Macedonia	1253													11.7077
Sig.		1.000	.688	.351	.107	.066	1.000	.965	1.000	.626	.259	.999	1.000	1.000

3.2. Predictors of Homophobia in Serbia

The multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the individual effects of independent variables that we assumed to be significant. In the initial model, the influence of socio-demographic variables was examined. The results of the regression analysis indicate that all socio-demographic predictors show a statistically significant impact (Table 3, Model 1).

¹⁰ Brown-Forsythe =1033.943, sig=0,000

Table 3. Basic statistical indicators for the linear regression model¹¹

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	10.044	.410		24.509	.000
	Male – ref. female	.983	.184	.170	5.331	.000
	Urban areas – ref. country village	-.635	.216	-.096	-2.940	.003
	Household's total net income, all sources	-.143	.034	-.143	-4.248	.000
	Age of respondent, calculated	.024	.006	.135	4.240	.000
	Years of full-time education completed	-.050	.023	-.073	-2.148	.032
2	(Constant)	8.857	.579		15.299	.000
	Male – ref. female	.764	.176	.132	4.333	.000
	Urban areas – ref. country village	-.478	.206	-.073	-2.321	.020
	Household's total net income, all sources	-.096	.032	-.096	-2.969	.003
	Age of respondent, calculated	.022	.005	.128	4.167	.000
	Years of full-time education completed	.004	.023	.005	.159	.874
	How religious are you ¹²	.190	.031	.196	6.149	.000
	Obedience and respect for authority most important virtues children should learn ¹³	-.480	.088	-.200	-5.480	.000
Country needs most loyalty towards its leaders ¹⁴	.003	.086	.001	.030	.976	
Placement on left-right scale ¹⁵	.080	.033	.075	2.395	.017	

Analysing the impact of individual factors, we first observed that gender represents the most significant predictor. The positive value of the standardised coefficient indicates that men are more homophobic than women. This is expected given prior research indicating that gender differences are stable over time – that men exhibit higher levels of homophobia than women (Raja & Stokes, 1998; Wright et al., 1999; Herek, 2002; Kite et al., 2021). Research indicates that when studying attitudes toward gays and lesbians separately among men and women, significant personal discomfort regarding the same sex concerning homosexuality is evident. This underscores the need to analyse attitudes toward gays and lesbians separately to achieve a comprehensive understanding and more accurate results.

11 The first model explains 9,4 % variance, while the second model explains 19,1 %.

12 Values range from 0 to 10, where 10 indicates the highest degree of religiosity.

13 Values range from 1 to 5, where the value 5 indicates the answer *Disagree Strongly*

14 Values range from 1 to 5, where the value 5 indicates the answer *Disagree Strongly*

15 Values range from 0 to 10, where 10 indicates the right position

Furthermore, the age of the respondents also had a statistically significant effect. The direction of impact is as expected—older respondents are more attached to homophobic attitudes. Analysing the effect of other independent variables, we observed that the economic position of the respondents represented a statistically significant predictor—a higher economic position led to the rejection of homophobia. Education, i.e. years of formal schooling, as one of the most important indicators of modernisation processes, also has a statistically significant impact, with the fact that the impact is somewhat weaker compared to other socio-demographic predictors. Furthermore, a significant finding is related to the effect of place of residence. The negative value of the standardised coefficient B indicates that the respondents from rural areas are more supportive of homophobic attitudes, which may be explained by the greater survival of traditional patterns of behaviour in rural areas (Petrović, Radoman, 2020).

In the second model, the effects of left-right orientation, authoritarianism, and religiosity were analysed. By including these variables, the model explains close to 20% of the variance of homophobia. The results show that religiosity and authoritarianism are the most significant predictors. A positive value of the standardised Beta coefficient indicates that more religious respondents tend to have a higher degree of homophobia. It's a significant finding that education is now diminishing in importance, suggesting that religious respondents, regardless of their level of education demonstrate a higher level of homophobia.

It was hypothesised that authoritarianism correlates with homophobia; in other words, respondents who endorse authoritarianism are likely to support homophobic attitudes. A significant finding indicates that the attitude »Country needs most loyalty towards its leaders« is not a significant predictor, whereas the attitude »Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn« emerges as the most significant factor ($B=-0.200$). Political orientation, as measured by positioning on the left-right orientation scale, also significantly influences the attitude toward gays and lesbians. Respondents who position themselves on the left show more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians and their rights. These data are similar to previous studies that show positive correlations in relation to authoritarianism, political conservatism, religiosity and socioeconomic status (Herek, 1988; Morrison and Morrison, 2003; Petrović and Radoman, 2020).

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis, there is a significant level of homophobia in Serbia, while attitudes change very slowly. The main finding of the research indicates that the level of homophobia has not changed in the past two decades. Approximately one-quarter of extremely homophobic respondents believe that *Homosexuals are no better than criminals and should be punished in the extreme*. Other attitudes reflect various discourses present within the framework of prejudice against gays and lesbians – some of them are framed by traditional moral norms and emotions (*Ashamed if a close family member is gay or lesbian*) while others are part of modern discourses, like parenthood and adoption rights (*Gay and lesbian couples right to adopt children*).

The research also examined various versions of homophobia – we explored differing degrees of acceptance through various statements concerning attitudes towards gays and lesbians. Findings show a distinction between proclamatory support for gays and lesbians and actual readiness to support the LGBTIQ population (such as adoption rights). This trend aligns with the rhetoric of political leaders, often professing pro-European values yet lacking genuine democratic commitment to protect the rights of marginalised groups. Future research in this field could benefit from the development of more refined scales for measuring attitudes towards nonheterosexuals, including other subgroups within this category, such as transgender individuals. Additionally, specific research into attitudes towards gays and lesbians is warranted, with analyses covering topics such as homophobia and gender norms, traditionalism and negative attitudes towards sexual minorities.

Comparative analysis showed that North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and probably Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bošnjak, 2023) have a distinct lack of LGBTIQ acceptance compared to the European countries. In this part of the Balkans, the data from this study align with the present situation, reflecting a significant level of homophobia. Anti-gay graffiti on the streets, hate messages during Pride events, strong resistance from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), as well as systemic barriers to the enactment of laws and the acceptance of LGBTIQ individuals as equal members of society, are evident. Religious authorities prone to condemnation and pathologisation, along with traditionalism (Jovanović, 2022; Petrović, Radoman, 2020) in Serbian society, contribute to an atmosphere of stigma and panic surrounding homosexuality.

Annex

Table 1. *Attitudes Toward Homophobia in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, mean (1–5)¹⁶*

Year	Country	<i>Gays and lesbians free to live life as they wish</i>	<i>Homosexuals are no better than criminals and better than criminals be punished in the extreme</i>	<i>Gay and lesbian couples' right to adopt children</i>	<i>Ashamed if close family member gay or lesbian</i>
2003	Serbia	2.98	2.77		
	Croatia	2.62	2.22		
	Montenegro	3.06	3.05		
	North Macedonia	3.24	3.18		
2018/2019	Serbia	3.16	2.4	4.06	3.3
	Croatia	2.67		3.68	2.66
	Montenegro	3.08		3.96	3.33
2020/2022	Serbia	2.9		3.8	2.91
	Croatia	2.72		3.46	2.68
	Montenegro	3.16		3.67	3.2
	North Macedonia	3.67		4.39	3.62

16 Higher values indicate a higher degree of homophobia.

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