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Anti-gender Discourse between “Cult of the Family” and “Traditional Values”

Abstract: This study develops a feminist critical discourse analysis of the official discourse produced by the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography of the Republic of Serbia, from its establishment up to the year 2025, spanning the mandates of three ministers: Ratko Dmi-trović, Darija Kisić Tepavčević, and Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski. Manually coded, the corpus includes 616 articles published on the website of the Ministry in the News section – from the first one published on March 9, 2022, until April 16, 2025. This research contributes to the expanding body of the critical scholarship on the anti-gender discourse and its actors, while offering a fresh perspective by examining the language employed by the state institution responsible for population policy, an area that remains a central focus of the right-wing discourse. From this perspective, the analysis explores the official rhetoric on the crossroads of anti-gender ideas about the “traditional values” of the cis heteronormative family, stereotypical gender roles, and “great national” demographic interests.

Keywords: “cult of the family”; “traditional values”; anti-gender discourse; Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography; feminist critical discourse analysis.

State institutions under right-wing governments, in cooperation with religious organizations and supported by conservative intellectuals, have been the key actors in generating the anti-gender discourse both globally and in Serbia.¹ This paper is a continuation of the previously carried out research on anti-gender actors in the context of Serbia I have done with my colleagues Marijana Stojčić² (the analysis of the media discourse through key anti-gender phrases such as “defence of the traditional family and values”) and Vanja Petrović³ (mapping of the anti-gender actors in the 1990s in

¹ Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Macmillan Publishers, 2024); Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2022); Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

² Nada Bobićić and Marijana Stojčić, “Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji,” *CM: Communication and Media* 18, no. 1 (2023): 3–31.

³ Nada Bobićić and Vanja Petrović, “The Neverending 90s in Serbia: What Came before the Phantasm of Gender,” *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 59, no.1 (2025), online: 134–53.

Serbia). Also, this paper is part of the ever-expanding body of research on anti-gender policies and discourses that has been published in the post-Yugoslav region in recent years.⁴

A topic that stood out in these studies time and again is the fascination of the right-wing anti-gender actors with population policies and demographic ideas about the birth of new generations that will maintain the national continuity. These ideas, especially in Serbia and the broader post Yugoslav region, gained momentum during the 1990s.⁵ As Vanja Petrović and I have shown more elaborately in the paper “The Never-ending 90s in Serbia: What Came before the Phantasm of Gender” (2025), The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), then led by Slobodan Milošević, passed a resolution focusing on the “population renewal” titled *Warning* (Serbian: *Upozorenje*) at its second congress, which took place on October 23 and 24, 1992. The document dealt with the topics of “uneven and unbalanced” demographic development between different regional, ethnic and social groups. In fact, the document is based on militant, racist, and nationalist ideas on how the Serbian people are slowly dying out because of depopulation, while the then-perceived “enemy” such as the Albanian, Bosnian or Roma populations are enjoying a demographic boom. Three years later, the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), Patriarch Pavle, added fuel to this symbolic fire. In his 1995 Christmas message, he accused women of being primarily responsible for the so-called “white plague”, which is a symbolically charged term used to explain the demographic decline of the Serbian population as a threat to the nation. At work was the ideological synergy of the right-wing anti-gender actors who claim that at the top of the world is God, while the power on Earth belongs to an authoritarian ruler with the traditional family as the cornerstone of one’s private life. The role of the woman in such a vision of the world is to give birth and raise children, to be the “mother” of the nation.

The ideas “planted” during the decade of wars and destruction, sustained by the continuity of conservative political elites in power, have remained dominant to this day. In that regard this text is not just complementary to the previously carried out research but adds a new perspective as it focuses on the language used by the state

⁴ Roman Kuhar, “Changing Gender Several Times a Day: The Anti-Gender Movement in Slovenia,” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*, ed. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Adriana Zaharijević, “Spaljivanje u 21. veku – šta stoji iza ‘rodne ideologije,’” *Kultura* 163 (2019): 28–45; Tea Škokić, “O radnoj i rodnoj ideologiji,” *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 67, no. 2 (2019): 247–63; Adriana Zaharijević and Katarina Lončarević, “Rod i ideologija: O pobuni protiv jednakosti,” in *Rodna ravnopravnost – od jednakih prava do jednakih mogućnosti*, ed. Tibor Várady and Marijana Pajvančić (Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2020), 29–44; Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021; Irena Cvetković and Manja Velichkovska, *Who Is Afraid of Gender? Analysis of the Key Narratives and Strategies of the Anti-Gender Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia*, trans. Julija Micova (Coalition MARGINS, 2022); Jelena Čeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš, “From Gender Re-Traditionalizations to Anti-Gender Mobilizations: Care for Family in Serbia and Croatia,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 38 no. 2 (2024): 662–81.

⁵ Jelena Čeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš in their paper “From Gender Re-Traditionalizations to Anti-Gender Mobilizations...” illustrated how heteronormative family models and right-wing “protection of the family and children” have been imposed since the 1990s, connecting these ideas to gender re-traditionalization and militant nationalism during the collapse of the socialist Yugoslavia, which was built around the themes of “declining birth rates and dying out of the nation”.

institution of the ministry in charge of population policy issues. It is important to note that the goal of the research is the analysis of the anti-gender language in institutional announcements, and not the analysis of the policies of the Ministry itself, because that would require a different disciplinary framework and entering the field of the demographic science. In accordance with this goal, the methodology of the feminist critical discourse analysis was chosen, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

First, it is important to include basic information about the Ministry. The Ministry without Portfolio in charge of Demography and Population Policy was established in 2016 as a part of the government led by the conservative Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).⁶ The Ministry was led by Slavica Đukić Dejanović, who has been a member of the previously mentioned Socialist Party of Serbia since 1990. It is the same party that published the document entitled *Warning*.

Four years later, in 2020, The Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography was established, making it one of the youngest ministries in Republic of Serbia today. The Ministry consists of four sectors, the internal audit group and the Secretariat of the Ministry. So far, it has been led by the following ministers: Ratko Dmitrović (October 28, 2020 until October 26, 2022), Darija Kisić Tepavčević (October 26, 2022 until May 2, 2024), Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (May 2, 2024 until April 16, 2025) and Jelena Žarić Kovačević (April 16, 2025 onwards).

According to the Law on Ministries, the domain of this ministry is defined as follows:

“The Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography performs state administration tasks related to: family law protection system; marriage; population policy; family planning, family and children; improvement and development of demographic policy, birth rate policy, quality of life and life extension, reproductive health and internal migration; drafting of national documents and preparation and implementation of campaigns related to demographic policy, as well as other tasks specified by law”.⁷

Sample description and methodological notes

This analysis includes 616 articles published on the website of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography in the News section – from the first article published on March 9, 2022 (in the fifth month after the establishment of the Ministry) until April 16, 2025 when Jelena Žarić Kovačević started her term. The discourse sample was chosen because its analysis gives an insight into how different ideological currents

⁶ SNS has been in power since 2012. Aleksandar Vučić, a central figure in the party, was also an active politician in the 1990s as a prominent young member of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party. In 1998, he was appointed Minister of Information in the government led by the coalition consisting of SPS and Yugoslav United Left (JUL). The SNS party has gone through several phases in its thirteen years of rule, but ideologically it represents a mix of conservative nationalist ideas that have been dominant since the 1990s with neoliberal policies rooted in the widespread and systemic state corruption.

⁷ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 128/2020, 116/2022 and 92/2023.

are reflected through the bureaucratic language of the Ministry due to changes in personal solutions of those who lead the ministry and the attitude of the ruling group that elects them. During the initial phase of constructing the media text corpus, the aim was to exclude news content that did not explicitly address population policies. However, it was found that even media reports primarily concerned with other areas of the Ministry's activities included statements related to population policies and were therefore incorporated into the corpus.

The corpus was manually coded, as its limited size did not require the use of online coding systems. Also, this method was useful because it provides the possibility of in-depth reading of the entire body of texts. In addition, manual coding allowed the identification of differences in the ideological 'colouring' of the discourse among different ministers, even though they all come from the same political coalition.

The subsequent section offers a chronological overview of the news published during three ministerial terms. The fourth term has just started in 2025, therefore it was not included in the corpus. Particular attention will be given to those segments of the media corpus in which different ministerial approaches to the issue of depopulation in Serbia, and to other aspects of the population policy, are articulated at the discursive level. The emphasis is on the discursive differences, because analysis of this layer reveals a relatively wide spectrum from centrist to far-right ideologies in language and symbols used by ministers.

In relation to the discourse analysis, the theoretical framework used in this text is the feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). This is the framework I used in my previous research as well⁸ to detect the key phrases and ideas utilized by local anti-gender actors in relation to their international allies from the East and West. Michelle M. Lazar, who developed FCDA as a distinct approach within the broader field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), explains how the definition of feminist does not only refer to gender as an object of analysis, but implies the introduction of feminist epistemology and practice:

"Feminist CDA is a political perspective which investigates the complex and diverse ways by which gender ideologies that entrench power asymmetries become 'common sense' in particular communities and discourse contexts, and how they may be challenged. This includes discursively sustained assumptions and inequalities, ranging from overt to increasingly subtler forms of sexism. Focusing on social justice and transformation, the objective of the FCDA is to demystify and challenge discourses that continue to buttress gendered social orders in various ways, which harm and foreclose socially progressive possibilities for individuals and groups."⁹ Complementary to the FCDA are the ideas of Heiko Motschenbacher's¹⁰ queer linguistic analysis

⁸ Bobičić and Stojčić, "Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji."

⁹ Michelle M. Lazar, "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, eds. J. Flowerdew and El Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 372.

¹⁰ Heiko Motschenbacher, "Sexuality in Critical Discourse Studies," in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, eds. J. Flowerdew and El Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 372.

regarding the critique of homonormativity, and the questioning of hegemonic, stereotypical and essentialist discourses on gender identities.

The framework of the CDA and queer linguistic analysis allows us to unpack the layered topics that underpin the anti-gender discourse targeting gender equality. “Common sense” ideas about cis heteronormative family as “traditional” or even as the only type of family which is acknowledged at all; sexist views on stereotypical gender roles in private sphere; conservative perspective on the role of woman as mother whose main task is to give birth to new offspring for the “nation”; disproportionately large role given to the clergy regarding their discursive influence on population policies. As content analysis below will show, this kind of discourse is maintained and recycled through the bureaucratic language of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography.

Overview of the corpus and discussion

1. The term of Radomir Dmitrović (October 28, 2020 – October 26, 2022)

We have lost the cult of the family, and the family once held a sacrosanct position in Serbian society.¹¹

This is an existential matter; to be or not to be.¹²

In 2020, the newly established Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography was initially headed by Radomir Dmitrović from the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS).¹³ Before that, Dmitrović was known as a conservative journalist, who was a news correspondent or worked in mainstream media such as *Politika* and *Nezavisni nedeljniak NIN* (in the 1980s), and Radio Television of Serbia (early 1990s). After that, he was the initiator or a member of the newsrooms of several right-wing media outlets, and the editor-in-chief of *Novosti* from 2013 to 2017.

It is important to note that the minister was not elected from within the expert community familiar with demographic issues. Rather, the leadership of the newly established ministry was entrusted to a member of a coalition party whose professional background lies in a different domain—the media sphere. Additionally, the public actor in question was previously known for his extremely conservative views. This choice signalled that the population policies were approached in a populist manner, and that they were seen as a domain for maintaining right-wing ideas about the family.¹⁴

¹¹ *Izgubili smo kult porodice, a porodica je u srpskom društvu imala kultno mesto.*

¹² *Ovo je pitanje postojanja; biti ili ne biti.*

¹³ The party under the leadership of Aleksandar Šapić, which at the time was part of the broader coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

¹⁴ Which is already noticeable in the name change from the more neutral ministry for *demography and population policy* in 2016 to explicitly focusing on *family welfare* in 2020.

During his two-year term, 164 news items were published on the ministry's website, all of which were included in the corpus. Dmitrović closely cooperated with the then Secretary, Milka Milovanović-Minić, and Assistant Minister Aleksandra Čamagić, both of whom occasionally addressed the public alongside the Minister in his official appearances. The discourse of the Secretary and Assistant dominantly remained in the realm of bureaucratic language that focuses on specific policies of the Ministry, and whose establishment is explained by strategic reasons with the aim of improving family-legal protection and demographic conditions in Serbia, especially as part of the "Serbia 2025" program.¹⁵

In one of his addresses, Dmitrović interprets demographic problems and appropriate measures for their solution in the following way:

"If money was the deciding factor, countries in the north of Europe would have a birth rate above three, and no one has a simple reproduction rate of 2.1 – said Dmitrović. He added that even in Albania, which until recently had a level of simple reproduction, that rate fell below 2.1 percent. The birth rate is a complex problem that requires the solution of economic and infrastructure problems, but it also affects the value categories brought about by the modern way of life, said the minister. 'We have lost the cult of the family, and the family once held a sacrosanct position in Serbian society.'"¹⁶

He expressed similar ideas in his speech during the discussion about the amendments to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children: "It is a very complex problem that is affected by several elements, some of which are in the sphere of our relationship to the absolute priorities in life. Once upon a time, it was children, as the greatest wealth and meaning of life, but that has not been the case for a long time. The acquisition of material values in the modern world is high above biological values, above children and people in general. This is evidenced by the fact that, in Serbia (as well as in the rest of Europe), families with very modest incomes tend to have the highest number of children, while extremely affluent, rich and extremely rich families each have one, possibly two children. We must look at the reasons why this is so and see what we can do so that children are again the greatest asset we can have"¹⁷; [...] This is an existential matter; to be or not to be"¹⁸.

¹⁵ "Državna sekretarka Milka Milanović-Minić za Studio B: Prava deteta i unapređenje brige o porodici," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 18, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/drzavna-sekretarka-milka-milovanovic-minic-za-studio-b-prava-deteta-i-unapredjenje-brige-o-porodici/>.

¹⁶ "Ministar Dmitrović u radnoj poseti Prokuplju: Natalitet ne zavisi samo od novca," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 29, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministar-dmitrovic-u-radnoj-poseti-prokuplju-natalitet-ne-zavisi-samo-od-novca/>.

¹⁷ "Usvojen Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o finansijskoj podršci porodici s decom: Porodiljama najmanje 'minimalac,'" *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 06, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/usvojen-zakon-o-izmenama-i-dopunama-zakona-o-finansijskoj-podrsци-porodici-s-decom-porodiljama-najmanje-minimalac/>.

¹⁸ "Saopštenje povodom Svetskog dana Stanovništva," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 10, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/saopstenje-povodom-svetskog-dana-stanovnistva/>.

Aleksandra Čamagić, the Assistant Minister at the time, spoke in a similar way, calling for the promotion of “family values”: “If material conditions were the sole determining factor, countries like Denmark and Norway would have the highest natural population growth, but this is not the case.” In addition, she nevertheless draws attention to the position of mothers with small children, and to the necessity that they have support in all spheres of life, from affordable kindergartens to the fair attitude of employers towards them. It is suggested that flexible working hours would make it easier for mothers in this situation.¹⁹

This kind of discourse achieved the following: a) the situation in Serbia is compared with the situation of the most developed countries in Europe; b) it is mentioned that (competing) neighbouring countries do not have a much better situation in this matter; c) the problem that the minister himself describes as “complex” boils down to a simple thesis about the “values” of the modern way of life versus the “cult” of the family. In another address, the same minister stated that the problem of depopulation was not a daily political issue, but “the scale of personal values is disrupted”.²⁰

To sum it up, the problem is not limited to Serbia, because everyone else has a problem, one could even say that we can “comfort ourselves” because in some respects we are at least comparable to the developed north of Europe. Then, the solution to the low birth rate is not seen in the improvement of social policies, which are reduced to “money” issues, but instead a conservative “fairy tale” is constructed about the cult of the family, on which the discourses about the cult of respect for the dominant religion and the nation are built.

In the words of Minister Dmitrović:

“When it comes to fostering political values in modern Europe, only in Islam is the family very important and it is taken care of – the Minister pointed out, noting that even in Orthodoxy, families with a large number of children are, as a rule, very religious families.”²¹

“‘The family is the basis of the nation and society, without it, demographic renewal is not possible, and therefore we must do everything to preserve and maintain the family, with all the *traditional values* that it carries with it, Patriarch and Minister Dmitrović agreed’ during a visit to Patriarch Porfirije.”²²

¹⁹ “Pomoćnica ministra Aleksandra Čamagić: Olakšati teret mladim majkama,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 25, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/pomocnica-ministra-aleksandra-camagic-olakšati-teret-mladim-majkama/>.

²⁰ “Dmitrović: Demografski problem nije dnevopolitičko pitanje,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, October 5, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/dmitrovic-demografski-problem-nije-dnevopoliticko-pitanje/>.

²¹ “Problem demografije je nastao kao bolest koju na vreme nismo prepoznali,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, December 3, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/problem-demografije-je-nastao-kaobolest-koju-na-vreme-nismo-prepoznali/>.

²² “Ministar Dmitrović i patrijarh Porfirije: Porodica je osnov nacije i društva,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, February 11, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministar-dmitrovic-i-patrijarh-porfirije-porodica-je-osnov-nacije-i-drustva/>.

It is interesting to note a certain shift when it comes to the attitude towards members of other religious communities. The discourse of the Minister is no longer openly militant as was the case in the documents like *Warning* published in the 1990s. Today, broader conservative anti-gender religious coalitions are made, as the “common enemy” is projected on to the gender equality topics and LGBTIQ+ communities. On the other hand, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) has maintained a privileged position in Serbia, as it will be seen even further in the media corpus regarding the term of Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski.

During Dmitrović's term, in addition to cooperation with the UN institutions, interstate meetings were held with representatives of Germany and Hungary. It is stated that Minister Dmitrović and his colleague Minister Katalin Novak, from Prime Minister Orbán's government, which is recognized as one of the key anti-gender actors in the European Union, “emphasized the common position that the family must be preserved and nurtured at all costs”.²³ Continuous cooperation with the Hungarian ministry will be maintained during the next two mandates as well.

2. The term of Darija Kisić Tepavčević (October 26, 2022 – May 2, 2024)

*The family represents the foundation of every society and the greatest asset an individual can possess.*²⁴

*Women are the ones who propel their families forward, and by extension, the entire nation.*²⁵

Darija Kisić, formerly Kisić Tepavčević, a doctor and university professor, became known to the general public during the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. Subsequently, her political career commenced under the auspices of the SNS coalition. From October 2020 to October 2022, she was the Minister of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs in the government of Ana Brnabić, while Dmitrović was the Minister for Family Welfare and Demography. Later, Darija Kisić succeeded him as part of the next government. During her mandate, 305 news items were published on the Ministry's website, all of which were incorporated into the corpus of interpreted texts.

Darija Kisić Tepavčević used a gender-sensitive form of the word minister and was signed as a woman minister in all the news. In addition, her mandate coincided

²³ “Sastanak ministra Dmitrovića i ministarke Katalin Novak: Porodica se mora očuvati,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, Septembre 08, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/sastanak-ministra-dmitrovi-ca-i-ministarke-katalin-novak-porodica-se-mora-ocuvati/>.

²⁴ *Porodica je osnov svakog društva i najveće bogatstvo svakog čoveka* *The family represents the foundation of every society and the greatest asset an individual can possess.*

²⁵ *Žene su te koje guraju svoje porodice napred, a samim tim i čitavu zemlju.*

with the period when the Law on Gender Equality adopted in 2021 was in force. In the meantime, the Constitutional Court, in a legally unfounded manner,²⁶ suspended the law in its entirety in June 2024 due to an article that specifically referred to the gender-sensitive language.

Unlike her predecessor, who focused on the “cult” of the family and “traditional values”, the first female minister of the newly established ministry paid much more attention to gender equality and the position of women in society, as well as the harmonization of professional and parental responsibilities.²⁷ Also, as a highly educated woman herself, she emphasized the need to help women balance their business and private roles:

“Being a woman is a great privilege, but also a great obligation and responsibility. Being a mother, wife, sister and businesswoman at the same time shows us how much we know, how much we can and are capable of. Women are the ones who push their families forward, and therefore the entire country.”²⁸

Beyond this principled stance, in other statements Kisić Tepavčević dealt with specific groups of women such as female students. As a particularly valuable policy initiative she notes out support for women who decide to become mothers during their studies. In this period, the position of female entrepreneurs was also in the public spotlight since they were unequally treated in the Health Insurance Act as mothers in labour (the injustice was corrected later, in 2024). The Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography participated in amending the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children, which enabled female entrepreneurs to use maternity leave for the duration of the entire year when they give birth to their third and each subsequent child.²⁹

For Minister Kisić Tepavčević, support for gender equality includes both genders: “When we talk about gender equality and family, we shouldn’t highlight only women, because men also have an important role – not a greater one, but an equal and fair one.”³⁰

Although it looks like a shift in relation to the conservative ideas of her predecessor, the idea of a successful businesswoman who is also accomplished as a mother could not be characterized as particularly progressive either. This viewpoint most closely aligns with what is known as Lean-In feminism. It is a type of feminism that was particularly popular in the last decade, the canonical text of which is the book

²⁶ Grupa autora. “Otvoreno pismo stručne javnosti Ustavnom sudu,” *Peščanik*, September 19, 2024, <https://pescanik.net/otvoreno-pismo-strucne-javnosti-ustavnom-sudu/>.

²⁷ “Porodica – najveća i najjača institucija,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, February 24, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-najveca-i-najjaca-institucija/>.

²⁸ “Podrška ženama da pokažu koliko znaju i umeju,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 12, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/podrskazhenama-dapokazu-kolikoznaju-i-umeju-2/>.

²⁹ “Nove zakonske izmene stupile na snagu – podrška ženama preduzetnicama,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, August 1st, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/nove-zakonske-izmene-stupile-na-snagu-podrskazhenama-preduzetnicama/>.

³⁰ “Podrška ženama je direktna podrška porodicama,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 2, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/podrskazhenama-jedirektnapodrskaporodicama/>.

Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead by Sheryl Sandberg.³¹ Lean-in feminism is based on the idea that women should be encouraged and “assert themselves” in a man’s world, in order to occupy positions that were previously denied to them. It is a version of liberal, or more precisely, neoliberal feminism, intended for highly educated and successful women, who come from privileged communities. As explained by Catherine Rottenberg, this type of feminism was fundamentally hypocritical, as it overlooks structural inequalities in capitalism and contemporary colonialism, focusing on a small group of women who reproduce the system of inequality.

This approach remains within the set neoliberal rules, asking the system to improve a little bit, while maintaining the status quo. Hence, what is certainly a continuity with her predecessor, and with future ministers (see below), Minister Kisić Tepavčević sees cis heteropatriarchal family as an unquestionably positive concept and the “basic cell” of society. In that context, she often compared family to the greatest wealth in her statements:

“I want the entire year of 2023 to be marked by that – for more babies to be born, for there to be lots of happiness and joy in families, for us to have more time for our families, because they are our greatest treasure.”³²

During her mandate, the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography organized a conference on the Family “Serbia – Our Family” for the first time. On that occasion she declared that the Ministry is “strategically ready to support and strengthen the institution of the family, as the most valuable national resource, in every sense of the word.”³³ Although as a minister, unlike her predecessor Dmitrović and her successor Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, Kisić Tepavčević officially congratulated all religious holidays, even during her mandate, the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church received “special treatment”. At the Second National Conference of the same name, Patriarch Porfirije’s vicar, Bishop Ilarion of Novo Brdo, stated “that the family is the most sacred institution and that we should all return to our original identity and healing, both personal and that which includes the family, when we feel that we are part of a whole.”³⁴

³¹ For a critical overview of this feminist movement, see in more detail Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

³² “Porodica i deca najveće bogatstvo”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, November 22nd 2022 at <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-i-deca-najvece-bogatstvo/>; “Ministarka Kisić sa sedmočlanom porodicom u Crnoj Travi”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, December 14, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministarka-kisic-sa-sedmoclanom-porodicom-u-crnoj-travi/>; “Podrška porodicama od velikog značaja”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, December 20, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/podrska-porodicama-od-velikog-znacaja/>; “Ministarka Kisić obišla prvorodenu bebu u 2023. godini u porodilištu ‘Dr Dragiša Mišović’”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, January 1, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministarka-kisic-obisla-prvorodjenu-bebu-u-2023-godini-u-porodilistu-dr-dragisa-misovic/>.

³³ “Srbija – Naša porodica”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, April 3, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-nasa-porodica/>.

³⁴ “Druga nacionalna konferencija ‘Srbija – naša porodica’”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 4, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/druga-nacionalna-konferencija-srbija-nasa-porodica/>.

In addition to the SPC as an influential traditional right-wing actor, during Kisić Tepavčević's term the project "Leap into the Future – Serbia Expo 2027" also began to be mentioned. What was the "Serbia 2025" program under the previous minister is increasingly becoming an Expo during the two years of her mandate. Once again, the corpus highlights the alliance of the right-wing actors consisting of the SPC, the capitalist and political elites, as it was explained in greater detail in my previous research with Vanja Petrović.³⁵

When it comes to international cooperation, during this term, Darija Kisić Tepavčević met with colleagues from Azerbaijan (several times), Hungary (also several times), the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey. She was also present at several international events, such as a conference in Kario (Egypt), a summit in Budapest (Hungary) and the plenary session of the Regional Conference on Population and Development in Geneva (Switzerland). At the summit in Budapest, she addressed the panel next to the ministers of Hungary, Turkey, Qatar, Morocco, Bahrain, Slovenia and Kazakhstan.³⁶ As in the case of the previous minister, the continuity of the anti-gender international cooperation is maintained during this mandate, where Serbia sees its place next to the countries that are committed to an extremely conservative approach to family and population issues.

3. The term of Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (May 2, 2024 – April 16, 2025)

*Serbia is a family made up of all Serbs in the world.*³⁷

*This is a fight we must fight together.*³⁸

Minister Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski was appointed after Daria Kisić Tepavčević. Her choice not to use a gender-sensitive form for the title of her position aligned with her ideological stance as a far-right politician. Her political career began in an opposition party as a young conservative leader during the previous decade, after which she transitioned into the SNS ruling coalition, serving as Minister for Family Welfare and Demography. During her term, 165 news items were published, which, as in previous cases, were all included in the analysis corpus.

Despite being the youngest and representing the so-called millennial generation, her ideological background is closer to Minister Dmitrović than to the previous minister Kisić Tepavčević. However, even in comparison with his public statements, discourse introduced by Đurđević Stamenkovski has moved further to the right. Therefore, she brought back the phrase "white plague" from the 1990s as a symbolic

³⁵ Nađa Bobčić and Vanja Petrović, "The Neverending 90s in Serbia..."

³⁶ "Veći broj beba rezultat populacionih mera," Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 15, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/veci-broj-beba-rezultat-populacionih/>.

³⁷ *Srbija je porodica koju čine svi Srbi na svetu.*

³⁸ *Ovo je borba koju moramo voditi zajedno.*

image for the problem of depopulation.³⁹ Her ultranationalist discourse on population policies was characterized by frequent use of war and battle metaphors: “fight for posterity”;⁴⁰ “the fight we must fight together”;⁴¹ “The fortress that today, in the 21st century, we all need to defend and protect together is the family”.⁴² This is symbolically complemented by a biologicistic language, such as describing the family as a “matrix”, “source”, “nest” or “our roots.”⁴³ This conservative vision of the world is rounded off by ideas about “domestic and family Serbia” and “family, traditional values”⁴⁴ that “need to be nurtured”⁴⁵:

“Family values are the only path to the spiritual and cultural revival of our people [...] This is a fight that we must fight together. Serbia, that is, the citizens of Serbia, must also recognize their role in that fight, because it is about our survival. Whatever we do, we must keep in mind that we will only win if there are enough of us, if we continue to exist.”⁴⁶

This version of the family is the key discursive thread that, despite the other ideological differences, connects all the previous ministers of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography.

When it comes to the Western Balkans regional cooperation, particular emphasis was put on cooperation with the Bosna and Hercegovina’s entity Republic of Srpska. The number of activities on this line of cooperation is greater than in previous two terms, the language is no longer courtly-bureaucratic, but filled with nationalist images of

³⁹ “Društvo kojem je porodica na prvom mestu, ima zagarantovanu budućnost,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 28, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/drustvo-kojem-je-porodica-na-prvom-mestu-ima-zagarantovanu-buducnost/>; “Dani porodice Srbije i Srpske u maju u Višegradu,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 27, 2025, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/dani-porodice-srbije-i-srpske-u-maju-u-v/>.

⁴⁰ “Saradnja Republike Srbije i Republike Srpske na polju porodice i demografije se podiže na najviši nivo,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 7, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/saradnja-republike-srbije-i-republike-srpske-na-polju-porodice-i-demografije-se-podize-na-najvisi-nivo/>.

⁴¹ “Vlada Republike Srbije želi da promoviše obnovu domaćinske i porodične Srbije,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 13, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/vlada-republike-srbije-zeli-da-promovise-obnovu-domacinske-i-porodicne-srbije/>.

⁴² “Porodica je tvrđava koju treba svi zajedno da branimo,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 13, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-je-tvrđava-koju-treba-svi-zajedno-da-branimo/>.

⁴³ “Đurđević Stamenkovski: Da nam se rađa što više dece sa obe strane Drine,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 19, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/durdevic-stamenkovski-da-nam-se-rada-sto-vise-dece-sa-obe-strane-drine/>; “Srbija i Republika Srpska su jedna porodica,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 25, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-i-republika-srpska-su-jedna-porodica/>.

⁴⁴ “Vlada Republike Srbije želi da promoviše obnovu domaćinske i porodične Srbije,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 13, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/vlada-republike-srbije-zeli-da-promovise-obnovu-domacinske-i-porodicne-srbije/>.

⁴⁵ “Delegacija Ministarstva za brigu o porodici i demografiju boravila u Belorusiji,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 14, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/delegacija-ministarstva-za-brigu-o-porodici-i-demografiju-boravila-u-belorusiji/>.

⁴⁶ “Porodica kao temelj budućnosti: Svečano otvoreni ‘Dani porodice’ u Perlezu,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 7, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-kao-temelj-buducnosti-svecano-otvoreni-dani-porodice-u-perlezu/>.

cooperation across the river Drina: “The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are one big family” [...] The Drina River will not divide our children, it will not separate our families, we will always gravitate towards each other and cooperate”.⁴⁷ And: “The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are one family, one household. We are two lung wings”.⁴⁸ The same pattern is repeated in the case of the Serbian communities from Kosovo and Metohija: “The preservation of Kosovo and Metohija is a shared national duty of Serbia and Srpska. The Kosovo Covenant is the cornerstone of our identity”,⁴⁹ and the Orthodox Serbian minority from Montenegro.

In a secular society, influence of religious institutions should have no role in population policy, yet during Minister Đurđević Stamenkovski term it increased even further. On the official website of the Ministry, it was inappropriately announced that Minister Đurđević Stamenkovski met with Patriarch Porfirije with whom she discussed changes to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children. She also visited the patriarch for his birthday in her official capacity.⁵⁰ This position is also consistent with the fact that during her time in the office she did not congratulate any religious holidays to different faith communities except the Orthodox ones, unlike Minister Darija Kisić Tepavčević.

Also, the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography participated in the traditional Family Days, which took place in the first week of September, when Belgrade Pride was also organized. In response to the public criticism that Family Days were created as a right-wing reaction to the LGBTIQ+ gathering, she stated:

“The family cannot be against anything, because it is at the core of the identity of each individual and we believe in it the most, because it is in it that we realize ourselves as people and that is why we celebrate it [...] I emphasize this because we are an Orthodox society and we consider it to be the defence of the family and the defence of the Christian civilization, but on the other hand, we will have allies in the defence of the family in the representatives of other religions, who know that there is no survival of humanity if the family does not survive and if experiments are carried out on it, and such attempts [...] The family is the last line of defence of the European Christian civilization, this is a fact that is spoken about by both the European and world authorities”.⁵¹

⁴⁷“Đurđević Stamenkovski: Da nam se rađa što više dece sa obe strane Drine,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 19, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/durdevic-stamenkovski-da-nam-se-rada-sto-vise-dece-sa-obe-strane-drine/>.

⁴⁸“Srbija i Republika Srpska su jedna porodica,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 25, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-i-republika-srpska-su-jedna-porodica/>.

⁴⁹“Deklaracija Svesrpskog sabora temelj nove epohe strateškog povezivanja Beograda i Banjaluke,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 9, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/deklaracija-svesrpskog-sabora-temelj-nove-epohe-strateskog-povezivanja-beograda-i-banjaluke/>.

⁵⁰“Ministarka Đurđević Stamenkovski se sastala sa Patrijarhom srpskim G. Porfirijem,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 22, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministar-durdevic-stamenkovski-se-sastala-sa-patrijarhom-srpskim-g-porfirijem/>.

⁵¹“Đurđević: Porodica nikada ne može biti kontra bilo čemu,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 09, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/djurdevic-porodica-nikada-ne-moze-biti/>.

Comparing this statement with the ideas from the 1990s, a certain shift can be observed when it comes to the right-wing actors. While at the same time Đurđević Stamenkovski in her other statements calls for “across-Drina” connection among Serbs, she now sees allies in other religious communities when they have a common “enemy” that is reflected in the LGBTIQ+ communities, and their struggle for social and privacy equality. In her view, the family as a “cult”, “greatest wealth”, “last line of defence” is attacked by those who “experiment”. That is why her position is pragmatically oriented towards unprincipled alliances: “No matter how different our policies or ideologies are, we should at least have a social consensus about the values we are fighting for—and is there a greater value for us than the survival and future of our descendants?”⁵²

Cooperation with international anti-gender actors started in previous terms of office continued during the term of Minister Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, who herself comes from the milieu of far-right parties. Cooperation with representatives of Iran, Belarus, and the United Arab Emirates has been carried out. Towards the end of her term, in February 2025, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski addressed the election rally of the far-right German party Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland),⁵³ not officially as a minister but in the gray zone “on behalf of her party”.

Also, in front of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography, she met with the Hungarian ambassador, when she “brought forward the initiative to sign a Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of promoting family values with the relevant Hungarian ministry...”⁵⁴ In a similar tone was the statement within the framework of the Ministerial Conference “Generations together for a more competitive future” held in Budapest (Hungary):

“Serbia and Hungary have shown a strategic determination to take care of the family, support parents and children, and take care of motherhood and parenting. Our common interest is a European family and the restoration of traditional values, because this is how the conditions of survival for our families and nations are created in the future. Hungarians and Serbs are two brotherly nations, and we are not only partners in the political and economic sense, but true neighbours and brothers who share the same view of the role of the family in society and the need to preserve essential values.”⁵⁵

⁵² “Đurđević: Kada porodica dobija, niko ne gubi!”, *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 23, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/djurdjevic-kada-porodica-dobija-niko-ne/>.

⁵³ Iva Martinović, “Podrška iz Srbije desnoj Alternativi za Nemačku: U čije ime govori Milica Đurđević?”, *Slobodna Evropa*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/nemacka-krajnja-desnica-srbija-zavetnici-ministarka/33323038.html>.

⁵⁴ “Srbija i Mađarska zajedno na liniji odbrane porodice i njenih vrednosti”, *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 21, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-i-madarska-zajedno-na-liniji-odbrane-porodice-i-njenih-vrednosti/>.

⁵⁵ “Đurđević u Budimpešti: Mađarska i Srbija prirodni saveznici u borbi za očuvanje porodice”, *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, November 15, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/djurdjevic-u-budimpesti-madarska-i-srbija-prirodni-saveznici-u-borbi-za-ocuvanje-porodice/>.

Variations of similar phrases such as “family values” or “traditional values” indicate an anti-gender discourse that is characteristic of areas dominated by the Russian conservative influence, which, unlike the Western variant, uses the word *gender* less explicitly. Regarding this, loosely speaking “division” of the sphere of influence, the discourse of Minister Milica Đurđević Stamevski coincides with the findings from the quantitative analysis of the media in Serbia, which show the dominance of the Russian/Orthodox sphere of influence.⁵⁶

Conclusion

When diachronic perspective is used to compare the terms of three ministers: Ratko Dmitrović, Darija Kisić Tepavčević, and Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, nuanced differences emerge. On the one hand we have one openly conservative minister (Dmitrović) or one that uses alt-right rhetorics (Đurđević Stamenkovski), and on the other we have a neoliberal approach to gender equality (Kisić Tepavčević). But, in all three cases the authority of SPC, and SNS political dominance stay the same. Similar is the choice of conservative international partners regarding the population politics. Different personal solutions slightly change the discourse to the Left or to the Right, but the Ministry stays true to its name focusing on “cult of the family”.

The corpus of articles published on the website of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography analysed in this paper shows how anti-gender rhetoric merges with the bureaucratic language of the neoliberal conservative government that governed Serbia in the last five years. Looking through the lens of the FCDA methodology it gets clear that state institutions have a significant role in the broader ideological process of normalization of reactionary ideas. Ministers travel all around the country and attend international conferences. Their voices are heard through the mass media. The Ministry oversees both the fund allocation and policymaking. Taking all that into account, if the official communication of the Ministry is based on the premise that heteronormative family is a basic cell of society and populational policies are intertwined with the ultra-nationalistic and clerical ideas of SPC, than it can be said that anti-gender politics have strong allies in the institutions of the currently ruling neoliberal system in Serbia.

⁵⁶ Bobičić and Stojčić, “Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji.”

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