The Continuing Presence of the Extreme Right in Post-Milošević Serbia

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Introduction

1 This paper aims at surveying the extreme right scene in present-day Serbia. Its focus is on informal associations which represent the prototypical organizational form of the contemporary extreme right rather than on political parties. So far, such loosely-structured groups have rarely been studied, presumably because their societal impact seems hard to assess. The case of Serbia however, where they have flourished especially since the ousting of Slobodan Milošević, demonstrates that informal extreme right groups and networks, while they may not have realistic chances of usurping political power, can considerably limit the security and civil freedoms of other citizens.

2 Over the past few years, Serbian extreme right activists have abused public space and the civil rights they deny others to spread their ideology of hatred and intimidate or even attack perceived enemies. The climate of insecurity and fear created by such mostly unsanctioned offences poses a threat to the strengthening of civil society and the success of democratic reform in Serbia which should not be underestimated.

2 Before I go on to discuss the programme and activities of Serbia’s most visible extreme right groups in more detail, it might be useful to define the term “right-wing extremism”. The most inclusive (and therefore also contentious) definition was suggested by the British historian Roger Griffin, who sees contemporary right-wing extremism as a form of fascism, which he defines as “(...) a political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism”. Other scholars have proposed to include a second characteristic – a fundamental opposition to democratic values, institutions and processes – into the definition of right-wing extremism. Obviously, such minimum definitions are the
result of idealizing abstraction and do not embrace all possible aspects of the phenomenon being investigated\textsuperscript{10}. However, they seem useful in that they avoid the problems associated with definitions which enumerate various elements of right-wing extremism\textsuperscript{11}, for example, that it is not clear if the ideology of a given party or association has to demonstrate all, most, many, a few or maybe only one of those characteristics in order to be classified as extreme right.

In this paper, I classify such groups as extreme right (a) whose ultra-nationalist ideology emphasizes populism and the idea of renewal or rebirth culminating in the creation of a new social order (Griffin’s definition) and (b) whose “political culture stands against the fundamentals of the democratic system”\textsuperscript{12}.

**Extreme right associations in contemporary Serbia**

Since 2001, the Serbian extreme right, which emerged during the 1990s, has gained considerable public visibility.\textsuperscript{13} Arguably, its flourishing is connected to Serbia’s perennial political and economic instability as well as to the accompanying crisis in value orientation and social norms.\textsuperscript{14} The Serbian extreme right scene is a loosely-knit network of informal groups which can be (and sees itself as) divided into two camps. The Christian right, whose ideology is characterized by clerical nationalism, political conservatism, and xenophobia, has forged links with the Serbian Orthodox Church (Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, SPC) as well as with the political establishment\textsuperscript{15}. The most prominent groups in this camp are the Srpski Sabor Dveri (Serbian Assembly Doorway\textsuperscript{16}) and the Otačastveni Pokret Obraz (Fatherland Movement Dignity). Students’ associations such as Sveti Justin Filozof\textsuperscript{17} (Saint Justin the Philosopher), which originated at Belgrade University’s Faculty of Philosophy, or Nomokanon\textsuperscript{18}, an association of law students, and the group Vitez (Knight), which is based at Belgrade’s medical school, also belong to the Christian right.\textsuperscript{19}

The racist extreme right, which is well-connected to international neo-Nazi and white supremacist networks, consists of groups such as Krv i Čast (Blood and Honour), Nacionalni stroj (National Formation) and Rasonalisti\textsuperscript{20}. Just like the Christian right, these groups stress xenophobia, authoritarianism and the need for a fundamental renaissance of the nation. What distinguishes them is their insistence on the centrality of “race”, while Orthodox religion is relegated to the background. The racist extreme right seems to have less activists than the Christian right. Since it has repeatedly and aggressively encroached on public space, however, it should not be lightly dismissed as marginal.

Currently, the Serbian extreme right seems to concentrate on spreading its worldview through publications and events such as public discussions, concerts, demonstrations etc. Its most important platform is the internet, which activists and sympathizers use to communicate with each other, announce events, and circulate propaganda material.\textsuperscript{22} Many extreme right groups also publish magazines and books; one even hosts a TV programme.\textsuperscript{23}
The Christian right: Srpski Sabor Dveri and Otačastveni Pokret Obraz

The Srpski Sabor Dveri originated in 1999 when a group of students of Serbian philology at Belgrade University started publishing the magazine Dveri Srpske. Today, the Srpski Sabor Dveri has chapters in more than 20 Serbian towns. Dveri regularly organize well-attended public lectures and meetings in Belgrade, other Serbian towns and abroad. Together with Vitez, an association of Orthodox physicians, Dveri campaign against abortion and for higher birth-rates to strengthen the Serbian nation (Pokret za život/Movement for Life). Dveri are affiliated with the Association of Serbian Youth (Sabor Srpske Omladine). They also initiated the Srpska Mreža (Serbian network), a network of Christian Right groups.

Dveri’s programme is based on svetosavlje, i.e. a combination of Serbian Orthodox piety and extremely nationalist attitudes. The prominent place Dveri accord to svetosavlje links their programme to early 20th century Serbian Orthodox thinkers such as Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, who is controversial because of his anti-Semitic opinions. In a speech entitled “The Nationalism of St. Sava” (1935), Velimirović portrayed the medieval saint as the creator of the SPC and of the Serbian nation, thereby postulating an indissoluble bond between religious and national sentiments. In accordance with this interpretation of Saint Sava’s heritage, Dveri propagate the close cooperation of state and church, which they see symbolized in the two-headed eagle of the Serbian coat of arms and personified in Saint Sava and his brother Saint Stefan Prvovenčani. Consequently, Dveri demand substantial changes in the political system which would give more power to professional associations and “crkveno-narodni sabori”, councils of (arbitrarily chosen) “representatives of the people” and the SPC. Dveri also promote the restoration of the monarchy.

A conviction that there is a special bond between god and the Serbian nation lies at the centre of Dveri’s worldview. Supposedly, Saint Sava forged a covenant (zavet) with god, which was later confirmed by Car Lazar when he opted for a “heavenly kingdom” (carsko nebesko) on the eve of the Battle of Kosovo Polje (1389). By organizing the 1804 Serbian uprising against the Ottomans, Karadorde renewed this covenant. The Serbian nation is obliged to eternally bear witness to the covenant by respecting the nation’s spiritual and moral values and by defending its ethnic territory. This includes the repression of everything deemed “abnormal”: “For Serbs, homosexuality and other forms of deviant behaviour, abortion or sectarianism [i.e. membership in non-traditional religious groups or participation in their activities, BNW] cannot be normal phenomena and we will fight against them by peaceful means.”

In their programme and other publications, Dveri stress a nationalized religiousness, secular national issues and the need for a comprehensive renewal (obnova) of the nation which alone would make Serbia once again “strong and healthy”. Their ethnopluralism, as well as their homophobia and non-acceptance of alternative faith groups, points to the fact that their proclaimed tolerance is rather limited. Also, Dveri express a deep-seated mistrust not only of the current political elite, but more generally of liberal democracy, which they aim to replace with a hierarchical society governed by pseudo-democratic institutions (the crkveno-narodni sabori) and a king. In Dveri’s utopia religious, political and personal freedom would be restricted in case of its incompatibility with the “spiritual and moral values” of the Serbian nation. Following
the definition given in the introduction, Dveri could therefore be classified as belonging to the extreme right. Importantly, however, Dveri is the only organization discussed in this article which admits the importance of human rights and explicitly limits its struggle for a national renaissance to peaceful means.

The Otačevski Pokret Obraz is a more radical Christian right organization, which was set up in the mid-1990s when a group of Belgrade students began publishing the magazine Obraz. Today, the association allegedly has several thousand activists in Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republika Srpska. Obraz, led until 2001 by the late Nebojša M. Krštić, became notorious when a number of its members participated in the assault on the 2001 lesbian and gay pride parade in Belgrade. Over the years, various racist, especially anti-Semitic, graffiti were attributed to Obraz; however, such accusations were never proven.

Similarly to Dveri, Obraz sees orthodox piety and an exaggerated patriotism as the foundations of the Serbian nation and frequently refers to Nikolaj Velimirović as its chosen spiritual and moral authority. Using the words of epic poetry, the association represents its activities as a struggle for the “honourable cross” and “golden freedom”. Obraz portrays itself as the furtherer of the Serbian nation’s resurrection on the basis of svetosavlje: “Obraz is the only movement for a school with faith, politics with honour, a patriotic army and a state with God’s blessing.” Obraz’s central goal is the establishment of a strong and wealthy nation-state which would be able to defend itself against its many perceived enemies. In order to achieve this, liberal democracy, which Obraz calls a “judeo-masonic” tool of oppression, must be replaced by a corporative state led by patriotic and pious statesmen. In Obraz’s ideal society, “offences” such as homosexual orientation or a non-Orthodox creed would be punishable.

What distinguishes Obraz from the more moderate Dveri is Obraz’s openly proclaimed hatred for non-Serbs, especially for Albanians, Muslims and Croats, their fervent anti-Semitism and their repeated threats to resort to violence in order to realize their aims. It comes as no surprise that Obraz denies any Serbian responsibility for the Yugoslav wars of secession and celebrates Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić as Serbian heroes. In 2002, for example, the organisation launched a campaign in support of Radovan Karadžić under the heading “Every Serb is Radovan” (“Svaki je Srbin Radovan”). Furthermore, Obraz threatens that Serbia will use force to regain hold of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, which it defines as “territories of the Serbian Fatherland”.

Even such a short survey of Obraz’s programme shows that the organization fulfills the criteria for being classified as extreme right. Firstly, Obraz promotes an aggressive nationalism with strong clericalist elements. Secondly, it claims that a profound renewal is necessary for the Serbian nation to overcome its present wretched and decadent state. Thirdly, Obraz rejects liberal democracy and the humanistic values it is based on. Fourthly, Obraz endorses the use of violence against opponents.

Krv i Čast and Nacionalni stroj

The association Krv i čast (Blood and Honour) was founded in 1995 as a member of the international, UK-based Blood and Honour neo-Nazi network. Combat 18, an organization which Krv i čast describes as its activist branch, was set up in 2003. Krv i čast boasts chapters in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Apatin and Jagodina. It publishes four
magazines, organizes concerts, participates in neo-Nazi meetings abroad, regularly celebrates Hitler's birthday etc. Krv i čast promotes “leaderless resistance”, a strategy which emphasizes individual and small group activism. There is no formal membership, making it impossible to say how many activists the organization has.  

Krv i čast is affiliated with Nacionalni stroj (National formation), another informal white supremacist and ultra-nationalist group. The Krv i čast website features the programme and proclamations of Nacionalni stroj, reports on its activities and promotes its controversial leader Goran Davidović. Nacionalni stroj’s programme is very similar to that of Krv i čast, and as a member of the US-based white supremacist network Stormfront, Nacionalni stroj undoubtedly belongs to what could be termed the “racist international”. 

Over the past few years, activists of Krv i čast and Nacionalni stroj may or may not have been involved in incidents such as the destruction of the Belgrade and Niš mosques in March 2004 (connected to clashes between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo in the same month), attacks on the pacifist group Žene u crnom (Women in Black) in July 2005, and, more recently, an assault on Bosnian and Serbian peace activists in Niš (May 2007). In any case, these and other similar incidents are celebrated on Krv i čast’s website as laudable patriotic acts. In autumn 2007, Krv i čast and Nacionalni stroj organized a nationalist rally in Novi Sad (the “March for Serbian Unity”), which was prohibited by the local authorities. Nevertheless, several dozen extreme right activists were able to gather in the city centre, which resulted in clashes with counter-protesters. Planning for similar marches to take place this year is already under way. The “activism” of Nacionalni stroj and Krv i čast includes discriminatory graffiti on public and private property, which constitutes an offence under Serbian law as an incitement of ethnical, racial or religious hatred.

Krv i čast can undoubtedly be classified as a neo-Nazist association. Not only do they openly admire National Socialism and venerate Adolf Hitler. Even more significantly, they believe that humanity is divided into unequal “races” of which the white “race” is allegedly the most highly evolved. In the modern world, however, the white “race” is in peril of extinction unless it overcomes the ills of multi-culturalism, decadence and democracy through a revolutionary struggle for its biological continuance and cultural rebirth. This rebirth depends, inter alia, on higher birth-rates and a ban on abortion – a view that Krv i čast share with the Christian right groups Dveri and Obraz. According to Krv i čast, the most dangerous enemies of the white “race” are the Jews, who are held responsible for the current sorry state of Serbia and especially for the 1999 NATO bombardment (a claim also made by Obraz). The neighbouring nations, who are said to unjustly “occupy” the “Serbian” territories of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, are similarly disliked by Krv i čast activists.

The programme of Nacionalni stroj resembles that of Krv i čast. Nacionalni stroj promotes the “preservation and rebirth of the healthy values of the Serbian nation as a constituent part of the white race”. The association demands a centralized nation-state based on “national liberty, social rights and the racial-biological protection of the nation”. According to Nacionalni stroj, “racial” and national consciousness have the potential to overcome the conflicting interests of different strata of society, resulting in the harmonious coexistence of the “organic national community”. This community would be led by an authoritarian head of state, who would enjoy the support of a strong army and the national church, presumably the SPC. Only white people loyal to the Serbian nation
would be entitled to full citizenship. Furthermore, the media would be controlled by the state, while homosexuality, pornography, abortion and non-traditional religious groups would be outlawed.  

20 *Krv i čast* and *Nacionalni stroj* clearly deserve the label “extreme right”. They promote an aggressive nationalism, based on the purported supremacy of the white “race”. They claim to fight a revolutionary struggle for the renewal of the Serbian nation and the white “race” in general. *Krv i čast* and *Nacionalni stroj* incite hatred against other nations, political opponents and religious, ethnic and sexual minorities. They despise the notion of equality, reject democracy, and, judging by their activism, endorse the use of violence to further their aims.

**Summary and outlook**

21 This paper surveyed the extreme right scene in contemporary Serbia and discussed four groups – *Srpski Sabor Dveri*, *Otačastveni Pokret Obraz*, *Krv i čast* and *Nacionalni stroj* – in more detail. It showed that the programmes of these organizations are strikingly similar in that they focus on an exaggerated nationalism centred on the idea of national rebirth and a populist suspicion of democratic values, institutions and processes. The main difference seems to be that the Christian right groups yearn for a renewal of the nation through a return to “traditional values”, among which Orthodox piety, hierarchical social relations and a rural way of life feature most prominently, while the racist right associations strive for a national renaissance based on the alleged supremacy of the white “race”. In their call for authoritarian rule and a strong leader who would guarantee national unity by suppressing internal dissent while at the same time “defending” the nation’s interests against its many perceived external enemies, all four groups are united. They also share a hatred of difference which expresses itself in the refusal to accept as legitimate opinions and lifestyles other than their own.

22 Necessarily, the descriptive survey presented in this article leaves many questions unanswered. What do individual activists and sympathizers believe, and how does that relate to the programmes formulated by extreme right groups and parties on the one hand, and the opinions of the non-extremist majority of Serbian citizens on the other? How widespread are extreme right ideas in contemporary Serbia? How can we evaluate Serbian right-wing extremism in its international context? To answer these questions, further and more detailed research is needed.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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NOTES


3. Mudde (Cas), « Central and Eastern Europe », in Mudde (Cas), éd., Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe. London/New York, Routledge, pp.269-271)

4. Eatwell (Roger), « Ten Theories of the Extreme Right », in Merkl (Peter H.), Weinberg (Leonard), éds., Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century. London/Portland, OR, Cass,


6. Attacks on members of Serbia’s Muslim, Romany and Jewish minorities proliferate (cf. AI 2001, Byford 2003:5f, Stephen Roth Institute 2005). Sexual minorities are also targeted by violent extremists, as the incidents in connection with the 2001 gay pride parade in Belgrade illustrate (cf. AI 2001, Nikolić 2001). Frequent threats against critical journalists and civil rights activists (cf. GSA: Policija ignoriše pretnje, 22/04/2008, Pretnje smrću predsedniku NDNV, 05/04/2007, both on http://www.b92.net/, accessed 26/04/2008) can often also be traced to origins in the extreme right scene.


14. Several important aspects of Serbian statehood – territory, form of government, constitution, and symbols – remained unresolved until rather recently. Political violence, which culminated in the 2003 assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, also contributed to Serbia’s instability. Roger Eatwell (2003:50-58) called explanations of the rise and success of right-wing extremism that focus on such structural aspects „demand-side theories“.


16. This translation follows Byford 2003:6. Literally, dveri means doors. The term refers to the doors in the ikonostas, the partition in Orthodox churches which divides the sanctuary from the nave (cf. Kuburic:4).

17. The association promotes “national values” in institutions of higher education with the aim of introducing such contents into teaching and research as would “lead to the spiritual and cultural renewal” of the Serbian nation. http://www.svetijustin.cjb.net/, O nama, accessed 26/04/2008.


19. These groups’ classification as extreme right, however, would need to be based on a thorough analysis of their respective ideology and activities which this short survey cannot offer.


22. Internet forums and blogs are the most important means of communication for the extreme right. See for example Komentar-Srpski Internet Parlament/Glas Desnice ( http://www.komentar.org.yu/, accessed 30/01/2008) or http://www.vidovdan.org/, accessed 26/04/2008. On Internet use by the German extreme right, see Fromm 2007 and Schenkel 2007.


24. Between 1999 and 2007, 31 issues of the magazine appeared. Currently, the regular issues are published electronically, while the special issues still appear in print. Cf. http://www.stari.dverisrpske.com/, O nama, accessed 15/11/2007, see also http://www.dverisrpske.com/, Štampano izdavaštvo and Elektronsko izdavaštvo, accessed 01/02/2008. Special issues in the past discussed, for example, “Communist crimes against the Serbian people”, “Hate speech against everything Serbian” and controversial historical figures such as Draža
Mihajlović, the World War II Četnik leader, or Nikolaj Velimirović, the early 20th century theologian, Serbian nationalist and Orthodox saint.

25. According to Dveri, its popular Thursday lectures at Belgrade University’s Technical Faculty are usually attended by several hundred people (www.staridverisrpske.com, Beogradska duhovna renesansa, accessed 15/11/2007). On other events organized by Dveri, see http://www.dverisrpske.com/, O nama, accessed 26/04/2008.


36. “Homoseksualizam i drugi vidovi devijantnog ponašanja, abortus ili seksuvalno ponašanje za Srbe ne mogu biti normalne pojave i protiv njih ćemo se boriti svim miroljubivim sredstvima.”


40. However, only the rights to life, property, education and equality before the law are recognized as “God-given”, basic human rights. Cf. http://www.dverisrpske.com/, Načela i smernice Srpskog Sabora Dveri, Obnova srpske prosvete, accessed 16/01/2008.


45. This, again, is possibly due to the alleged sympathies of high-ranking individuals in Serbia’s political establishment for Obraz and its aims.


61. In neo-Nazi circles, “18” stands for the initials of Adolf Hitler.
This paper surveyed the extreme right scene in contemporary Serbia and discussed four groups – Srpski Sabor Dveri, Otačastveni Pokret Obraz, Krv i čast and Nacionalni stroj – in more detail. It showed that the programmes of these organizations are strikingly similar in that they focus on an exaggerated nationalism centred on the idea of national rebirth and a populist suspicion of democratic values, institutions and processes. The main difference seems to be that the Christian right groups yearn for a renewal of the nation through a return to “traditional values”, among...
which Orthodox piety, hierarchical social relations and a rural way of life feature most prominently, while the racist right associations strive for a national renaissance based on the alleged supremacy of the white “race”.

Cet article étudie l’extrême droite dans la Serbie d’aujourd’hui et aborde quatre groupes - Srpski Sabor Dveri, Otačastveni Pokret Obraz, Krv i čast et Nacionalni stroj –plus en détails. Il montre que les programmes de ces organisations sont très semblables en ce qu’ils se concentrent sur un nationalisme exacerbé basé sur l'idée de la renaissance nationale et une remise en cause populiste des valeurs, des institutions et des processus démocratiques. La principale différence semble être que les groupes de la droite chrétienne aspirent à un renouveau de la nation par un retour aux “valeurs traditionnelles”, dont la piété orthodoxe, les relations sociales hiérarchiques et un mode de vie rurale prédominant, tandis que les associations de la droite raciste œuvrent en faveur d’une renaissance nationale fondée sur la prétendue suprématie de la "race" blanche.

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