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NAVIGATING GENDER NORMS AS A WOMAN IN EASTERN EUROPEAN POLITICS

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A Discourse Analysis about Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Ana Brnabić

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Gender and politics have always had a complex relationship. Currently, the world is experiencing two simultaneous yet contradictory evolutions concerning gender equality. On the one hand, there is the rise of the anti-gender movement which is calling for a return to traditional gender norms.[1] This is said to be a reaction to the increasing amount of people who have grown disillusioned with the promises of neoliberalism whom several political parties – particularly right-wing populist ones – have managed to mobilize.[2] They accomplished this, amongst others, by discussing these issues in a very emotional and moralizing way; by suggesting a return to an idealized past – including amongst others traditional gender roles – they offer a simple solution to the current crisis.[3] At first sight, this may seem disconnected from contemporary gender discourse but they are actually inherently connected since this idealization of the past includes an emphasis on traditional gender norms, the nuclear family and a heteronormative society.[4] In this rhetoric, feminism and minority rights have become symbolic of the alleged corruption and demise of modern, western society which, hence, needs to be counteracted.[5]

However, while this increasingly powerful anti-gender movement is gaining ground, women, and LGBTQ+ people are still becoming increasingly more prominent in politics. A woman holding a (visible) position of power is still very rare, but it already happens much more often than it did before.[6] However, this apparent progress also needs to be nuanced because this increased visibility does nothing to change the structural inequalities that are harming marginalized groups:[7] individuals may be breaking through the glass ceiling at an increasing rate, but this development does not mean that the ceiling is any closer to cracking.[8]

There are, in other words, two increasingly influential movements which are pulling in opposite directions. This paper investigates the impact of these movements and their simultaneous existence, particularly in Eastern Europe, by doing two

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case studies of high-profile female politicians: the Belarusian representative Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. It is, however, important to note that even though this paper focuses on Eastern Europe, this is happening all over Europe and the world.[9]

Concretely, the research project will try to answer the question: how did gender affect the rise and functioning of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Ana Brnabić as prominent politicians in their respective countries? This question is broken down as follows:

- ⊗ *How did the circumstances in which these women appeared in politics affect their rise?*
- ⊗ *In which ways were both these circumstances and this rise gendered?*
- ⊗ *In what ways does gender limit the political functioning of these women?*
- ⊗ *Does it also offer them opportunities? Which?*
- ⊗ *How do they deal with these circumstances?*

To answer these questions, I will perform a qualitative discourse analysis that studies the different narratives which have been constructed around both women in both academic literature and the popular press.

The paper itself will be structured as follows. Firstly, I will briefly introduce the environment in which both women operate, starting with the general relation concerning gender relations and expectations, as applied to women in politics. Subsequently, I will zoom in on the situation Belarus and Serbia. This will be followed up by the methodology in which I discuss how I have gathered and analysed my sources. Finally, there are the two case studies themselves, starting with the Belarusian one, that present the most significant theories, strategies and patterns that emerged out of the discourse analysis.[10]

Gender and Politics

Firstly, it is important to define gender because this concept is not as straightforward as it seems. For many people, particularly the anti-gender movement, gender is defined in a very binary way based on biological sex.[11] However, this is an oversimplification because both biological sex and gender exist on a spectrum.[12] They also do not have to correspond with each other. From a poststructuralist perspective, gender is a social construction based on certain acts and cultural signifiers.[13] Here, gender norms are being created and recreated based on how people (are told to) behave according to their gender in a process that Judith Butler called "gender performativity".[14] This is the perspective that I will take here as well. The focus of this paper is on two cisgender women, and investigates the narratives constructed around them which are framed in the traditional male-female binary, which disregards nonbinary and transgender people. Consequently, my discussion of these sources will replicate this framing.

Furthermore, the paper, especially the case study concerning Ana Brnabić, will also discuss issues regarding gender and sexuality relatively interchangeably. Both issues are of course very different but they are also deeply intertwined, particularly in the context of this paper. The anti-gender movement does not only push back against the advance of women's rights but also against the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people. This correlation makes it difficult to discuss the struggles of one group without referencing the other. After all, both kinds of discrimination originate from the same "crime" of transgressing gender stereotypes or a refusal to conform to them.

Gender stereotypes are the structures through which traditional gender norms – and the accompanying power inequalities – are being enforced.[15] They do this by prescribing how a woman should (not) behave. Gender is considered a binary in which women are the opposite of men. A woman is supposed to display feminine-coded, communal traits – such as compassion, sociability and protectiveness – rather than masculine-coded, agentic ones – which include confidence, competitiveness, and assertiveness.[16] These communal and agentic traits are also framed as mutually exclusive.[17] This entails that if a woman shows herself to be a successful leader – which is masculine-coded – she perceived as

"unfeminine" and gets punished for this transgression.[18]

Consequently, female leaders are stuck in what is commonly called a "double bind"; they cannot be perceived as either too masculine and agentic – which would trigger backlash – nor can they come across as too feminine and communal, because that would make them appear incompetent and unfit.[19] This prescription of communality, therefore, makes women inherently unsuitable for positions of power because they are not supposed to have what it takes.[20] When women do exhibit the necessary traits, they are met with backlash and moral outrage because they go against the societal prescription that women are nice and passive.[21] All of this is being legitimized by the argument that these prescriptions are not culturally constructed but rather "natural" and "biological" facts, which makes it difficult to oppose and deconstruct them.[22]

There are, however, also ways to counteract or circumvent this kind of sexist hostility. Firstly, in some cases it is possible to frame communal traits as an advantage. A good example of this is the Covid-19 pandemic in which female leaders – such as Jacinda Ardern – were, statistically speaking, more successful at dealing with the health crisis than the "strongman leaders" – such as Donald Trump – that usually dominate politics.[23] Secondly, many female politicians combine their communal and agentic traits, which disproves the idea that they are mutually exclusive.[24] This is the most commonly used strategy because it is generally perceived to make them appear "more effective, more likeable, and more trustworthy".[25] However, this approach only works when people believe these communal traits are an accurate reflection of the politician's actual character and not merely a strategic performance.[26] Both case studies will exemplify and illustrate these strategies.

The discussion surrounding gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights has become an increasingly polarized and geopolitical issue, amongst others because it has become closely associated with the rejection or acceptance of 'Europeanisation'.[27] All over (Eastern) Europe, these values of inclusivity are regularly framed as a sign of the "moral decay" of the West.[28] This is especially apparent in Serbia and Russia whose respective orthodox churches are a powerful voice in this discourse; they position themselves as a possible saviour of the West because they have successfully resisted "the corruption resulting from sexual revolution".[29] In this ultraconservative rhetoric, gender equality is framed as symbolic for "the decline of Christian civilization" because to them, Christianity is Europe's normative foundation.[30]

However, here too there is a powerful countermovement, in which the European Union plays an important role. In the twenty-first century, the EU has increasingly incorporated values of democracy, liberalism and inclusivity into its external policies and membership criteria, paying special attention to gender equality and the rights of minorities.[31] On the one hand, ultraconservatives have used this as fuel for their rhetoric by creating a discursive link between EU conditionality and colonialism[32] that frames it as a "threat to national, cultural, and religious identity".[33] On the other hand, this conditionality is still a successful and vital part of the EU's engagement with partner countries. Several scholars have noted that most policy changes in (Central) Eastern Europe and the Balkans have been motivated by the promise of EU membership and its accompanying requirements.[34]

In Serbia, the promise of EU membership has, for instance, encouraged the government to introduce several policies to improve the rights of women and queer people.[35] Many of these policies remain very surface-level or performative in that they manage to look very good without actually changing much.[36] On top of that, the implementation of these policies remains lacklustre.[37]

This strategy of performative inclusivity is also referred to as 'genderwashing', or in case of the LGBTQ+ community, 'pinkwashing'. The concept of genderwashing is defined as follows: ""[by] taking credit for advances in gender equality, autocratic governments put the spotlight on an area that is widely seen as linked with democracy,

while drawing the focus away from persistent authoritarian practices".[38] In other words, these pretty policies act as a distraction from what is actually going on inside the country.[39] Both Serbia and Belarus can be accused of at least one of these strategies.

On paper, Belarus is an electoral democracy but in practice the country has not had any real elections since 1994.[40] The country also has a parliament in which women occupy approximately one third of the seats.[41] However, this parliament barely has any influence because essentially all of the political power remains in the hands of the political elite.[42] Similarly, the country scores high in the Gender Inequality Index and the Global Gender Gap Index,[43] implying that they have a high degree of gender equality. In practice, however, these numbers hide a very patriarchal society with, amongst others, a big pay gap and legislation that bans women from 180 professions because these could harm their reproductive health.[44]

In Serbia, the picture is better but still not as good as it is commonly presented as. Here as well, there is a lot of (gendered) discrimination, even though gender equality is guaranteed by the constitution.[45] For instance, only one in four of Serbian women own any real estate.[46] Regarding their political representation, there have been several measures, including quota, which have increased female political participation to one third.[47] However, at the executive level, this is only one in five.[48]

On top of that, in both Serbia and Belarus, the women who do obtain positions of power, are almost exclusively loyalists who have explicitly stated that they do not want to be associated with – let alone participate in – feminism.[49] This dynamic exemplifies the earlier statement that an increased presence of marginalized people in the government does not automatically entail increased political power or representation for these groups.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the narratives that have been created around both Tsikhanouskaya and Brnabić as they have been presented in the popular media and, subsequently, discussed in the academic literature. I focus on the media because it plays a critical role in the conversation of gender and politics. After all, most of the contact between politicians and the general public happens through their media depictions, which the people subsequently use to construct their image of that politician.[50] This media depiction also regularly reproduces and reinforces gender stereotypes, thus contributing to the disadvantaging of women in positions of power.[51]

In this paper, I will investigate how this dynamic has affected the politics of two female politicians in conservative Eastern Europe, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Ana Brnabić, particularly in the context of their appointment. I do this by performing a qualitative discourse analysis of the way in which both the media and academics have framed the appointment and political rise of these two women. The use of discourse analysis allows me to look at how the different narratives are being constructed and identify certain patterns and common themes.[52]

For each case study, I have tried to gather a diverse array of sources to analyse. My data set consists of a combination of books, academic papers, and newspaper articles that are written by both Eastern European and Western authors. However, I was limited in this search by the fact that I speak neither Serbian, Belarusian nor Russian. Consequently, most of these sources were written in English and published by western-based journals and newspapers. I ended up analysing 38 sources for Tsikhanouskaya and 27 sources about Brnabić. In this analysis, I asked the following three questions:

- ⊗ *What did the author observe that they relate to the gender of Tsikhanouskaya/Brnabić?*
- ⊗ *Do they interpret this observation? How?*
- ⊗ *How do their interpretations relate to those of other authors?*

Based on this information I reconstructed the popular narratives surrounding both women in a

way that exposed the reasonings and dynamics behind them. This way, I contributed to two conversations. Firstly, this study illustrates the obstacles for women in (Eastern European) politics and how to deal with them. Secondly, it shows how authoritarian regimes instrumentalize gender in their own favour but also how these strategies can be used against them.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the Mother of the Belarusian People

In 2020, Belarus' president Lukashenka made two critical mistakes that ended up triggering an unprecedented popular uprising and political awakening in the country.[53] Firstly, he failed to adequately respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. He, for instance, infamously recommended vodka and driving tractors as remedies to the health crisis.[54] Consequently, many people took matters into their own hands and started organising themselves.[55] Volunteers produced and collected masks, as well as a lot of other necessary equipment, money and food for both patients and caregivers.[56] The networks that emerged here, would form the backbone of the protests a few months later.[57]

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team also capitalized on this resentment to mobilize the people and unite them behind their cause.[58] In this unification of the opposition, Tsikhanouskaya was also aided by Lukashenka himself, albeit accidentally. One of the ways in which the president had managed to hold onto power for so long was by eliminating opponents before the elections, leading people to believe that there is no real alternative.[59] In 2020, there were "three candidates of hope", two of which he imprisoned, Viktar Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski while the third, Valery Tsapkala, fled to Russia.[60] However, when Tsikhanouski's wife Sviatlana decided to run for president in his stead, she was allowed to do so.[61] It is by now commonly accepted that Lukashenka allowed this because he did not feel threatened by a woman.[62] As presidential candidate, she immediately joined forces with two women from the other candidates' teams, Tsapkala's wife Veranika and Barbaryka's campaign coordinator Marya Kalesnikava, thus physically uniting the opposition behind her.[63]

Tsikhanouskaya's success is said to rest on three pillars: a minimalist agenda, a hyperfeminine gender performance and the weaponization of prejudices. Her political agenda only consisted of three points: the release of all political prisoners, her promise to organize democratic elections and a return to the original constitution of 1994.[64] This agenda immediately positions her as a transitional candidate who does not want to become president herself but wanted to enable the Belarusian people to choose their future in a democratic election.[65] This entails that the people who voted for her did not actually vote for her specifically but rather for the promise of democracy and, perhaps even more importantly, against Lukashenka.[66]

The people were already frustrated with the president's many blunders – including the mishandling of the pandemic and the violent crackdown on the post-election protests – which had broken the social contract between him and the people beyond repair.[67] Tsikhanouskaya managed to channel these grievances and inspire the people to finally do something about the situation. The fact that she kept her own political ideas out of this campaign and presented herself as an interim president was crucial to her success because it kept the people united behind her. Veranika Tsapkala has even stated that this absence of personal opinion was the reason she originally joined forces with Tsikhanouskaya.[68]

This limited agenda also helped her appear less threatening, which is another crucial factor in her breakthrough. This allowed her to circumvent a lot of the sexist attitudes held by her audience. Firstly, she has always framed her candidacy as "accidental" and emphasized her lack of personal ambitions.[69] She achieved this by, for instance, repeatedly stressing that she had been put in this position by external circumstances, specifically by the president's imprisonment of her husband.[70] This way, she drew attention away from her own agentic actions – participating in the presidential race and leading the protest movement – which

could have triggered sexist backlash. [71] She did this by wrapping her behaviour in feminine traits such as devotion to her husband and worry for her children's future.[72] For instance, during her two televised speeches, she "made a highly personal appeal, [emphasising] her own experience with repression, the arrest of her husband, and threats to her children".[73]

By playing the loving wife and devoted mother first and foremost, Tsikhanouskaya was able to depoliticize her candidacy and overall public image. This allowed her to navigate the double bind by conforming to traditional gender expectations despite being a presidential candidate. This strategy is not unique to Tsikhanouskaya but actually part of a wider pattern in which female leaders are presented as "accidental" and "surrogates": they enter politics in service of the agendas of other people which "seemingly lessens the potential threat that women pose to the established gendered order".[74] The same framing was, for instance, used for Angela Merkel and Margaret Thatcher.[75]

Afterwards, this framing was criticized for the way in which it reproduces patriarchal values but at the same time, many consider it to be the reason for her success. By framing her candidacy as "accidental," Tsikhanouskaya also framed it as a sacrifice to display her love for her husband and in service of the same kind of heteropatriarchal values represented by Lukashenka.[76] Similarly, Siegień and Siegień have connected her gender performance to the strong legacy of the Second World War in Belarus, particularly the myth of the "women, forced to bear the burden of the struggle to survive".[77] They state that female heroism in this context "is that of the victim" and recognize this dynamic in Tsikhanouskaya's performance.[78] The part of her gender performance that receives the most criticism is the emphasis she puts on her identity as a wife and mother. In her rhetoric, she reinforced the "natural" nuclear family with a dominant father and his devoted, subordinated wife and projected this "onto the model of the state as a large family".[79] In this, Tsikhanouskaya's example illustrates how women in positions of power continue to be limited by the dominance of gender norms in their societies.

Furthermore, this strategy can also be interpreted as a weaponization of these patriarchal prejudices against the regime that exposes and subverts them.[80] In this reading, Tsikhanouskaya and the people who followed her example do exhibit a lot of agency in the way they use stereotypes to their advantage, even if they do so by reproducing sexist attitudes. Tsikhanouskaya's self-presentation as "a surrogate for her husband and her shy and non-threatening style" are probably what allowed her to gain such "mass appeal even among more traditional voters".[81] Some have, therefore, interpreted her gender performance as a way to weaponize the prejudices of her society in her favour. The above discussion of how she hid her agency behind female stereotypes is another good example of this reading.

Tsikhanouskaya's gender performance may have relied on traditional feminine stereotypes, but, through her actions, she also displayed an unexpected strength and resilience. Lukashenka tried repeatedly to bully her into submission, first by throwing gendered attacks at her but later also by threatening her safety and that of her family.[82] She responded by sending her children to neighbouring Lithuania and later followed them into exile. She did this after he had threatened to imprison her alongside her husband and, therefore, leave their children parentless.[83] However, once she was safely in Lithuania and outside of the regime's reach, Tsikhanouskaya picked up her activism and started acting as the legitimate representative of the Belarusian people and was accepted as such by the international community.[84]

In sum, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya did three important things during her campaign: she used a minimalist agenda with three, very general points that everyone could agree on and which depoliticized her campaign. She also had a hyperfeminine gender performance that allowed her to appeal to even the most conservative members of her audience. Finally, she managed to weaponize the regime's sexist attitudes against it. The campaign as a whole heavily relied on the reproduction of

patriarchal sentiments. For this, Tsikhanouskaya was criticized, particularly by liberal-feminists[85], but simultaneously she probably would not have succeeded without it. Especially because, the way in which she approached this was actually very agentic.

Ana Brnabić, Sign of Progress or Conservative Puppet?

As opposed to Tsikhanouskaya, the Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabić has much less control over her narrative, as will be illustrated below. This has affected the way in which she navigates her political career. Unlike the previous case study, this section will mostly discuss the conversation surrounding gender equality from the perspective of the LGBTQ+ community because this is what most of my sources focused on. As was discussed in the introduction, this does, however, not affect the relevance of the discussion because discourses about gender equality and queer rights are so intertwined.

It is difficult to overestimate the historical and symbolical significance of Ana Brnabić's appointment as Serbia's prime minister in 2017 but there are also many reasons to be sceptical. She is the first woman and the first queer person to hold such a prestigious office in Serbia and only the fifth openly gay prime minister in the world. In 2019, Brnabić also became the first high-ranking politician whose same-sex partner gave birth while in office in the world. Nevertheless, it is important to question how genuine all of this is. Koen Slootmaeckers warns for falling into the trap of interpreting every small step Serbia takes towards improving minority rights as a sign of progress.[86] He and several others argue that Brnabić's appointment should be read as part of president Vučić's strategy to present Serbia as more adherent to the values of the European Union – in this case regarding inclusivity – than it actually is.[87] After all, her appointment makes the country appear more LGBTQ+ friendly to an international audience – particularly the EU – without actually having to engage with LGBTQ+ issues themselves.[88] This simultaneously improves Serbia's public image (in the eyes of the West) and helps to divert attention from the country's increasing authoritarian tendencies and human rights abuses.[89] This is why Ana Brnabić has often been discussed in the context of genderwashing and pinkwashing.[90]

The speech in which Vučić announced that Brnabić would be his successor as prime minister acts as a good illustration of this theory. In this speech, he used very gendered language which simultaneously highlights and downplays the importance of Brnabić's gender and sexuality. He starts his announcement by mentioning her gender and, subsequently, her sexuality.[91] Only then, he mentions her name and immediately repeats that she is lesbian, this time accompanied by a reference to her "pride" in that she does not hide her sexuality.[92] This statement hides another crucial point, which will be discussed below. By emphasizing this aspect of identity in this way, Vučić shows, – according to Aničić – that this is her most important quality for him.[93]

However, later in the speech, he verbally contradicts this implication by denying the significance of her sexuality and claiming he chose her because of her qualifications, dedication and non-partisanship.[94] It is also important to note that by emphasizing all of the things that set her apart, Vučić others Brnabić in a very direct manner.[95] After having repeatedly emphasized her sexuality, the president feminizes his successor by highlighting that she is also "kind and sweet".[96] It is also important to note that she is no longer non-partisan because in 2019, Brnabić officially joined the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the party of President Vučić.[97]

On the surface, this seems similar to Tsikhanouskaya's strategy which was also based on the emphasis of her femininity. However, there is one crucial difference and that is the framing subject. Here, it is not Brnabić who is positioning herself as the best candidate for the job, but Vučić, who is for all intends and purposes her boss. He is the one holding all of the power while Brnabić does not appear to have much agency in this relationship, as is exemplified very well by his references to her sexuality.[98]

Even though the president praises her openness concerning her sexuality, this was actually the first time that it was mentioned in a public setting. In other words, Brnabić did not come out of the closet herself but, at best, consented to being outed by the him in this time and setting.[99] This considerably reduces her agency, particularly as a queer person for whom the decision when, how and to whom to come out is considered an important milestone. This is especially the case in a homophobic country such as Serbia where it can be very dangerous to be out as a queer person.

Secondly, it is Vučić who gets the most benefit out of her outing, and her appointment as a whole. Her marginalized identity does not only look good on the international stage but also decreases the amount of power she can obtain in the Serbian government. It, amongst others, makes it more difficult to influence her colleagues or find allies amongst them.[100] This is currently exemplified by her attempt to legalize same-sex partnership which is currently being blocked by Vučić.[101] So, even when Brnabić wants to stand up against sexism and queerphobia, she does not have the powerbase to do so.[102] This also serves as an example of how Serbia is growing increasingly authoritarian under Vučić's leadership.[103]

However, this last example is an outlier. Most of the time, Brnabić avoids any discussion about issues regarding gender and the LGBTQ+ communities in Serbia and works to uphold the status quo rather than improve things. She regularly stresses the fact that she does not wish to be a spokesperson for the queer community and would prefer to be judged on what she does, rather than who she loves.[104] Julia Gillard claimed something similar during her tenure as Australia's prime minister[105] but later came back on this when she said: "We [have] never lived in an environment free of any stereotyping. We [have] never lived with true gender equality".[106] This kind of sentiment is common within politically marginalized groups, including women, because these people rarely get the luxury of being judged on their qualifications without their identity being taken into consideration.[107] She has also infamously declared that Serbia as a society is neither homophobic, sexist nor xenophobic, and stands by this declaration despite all evidence to the contrary.[108]All in all, the contribution of Ana Brnabić to the advancement of minority rights remains negligible.[109]

Besides the fact that her sexuality – and to a certain degree her gender as well – others from her colleagues in the government, Ana Brnabić is also alienated from a large part of the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia. As a western-educated, queer woman, her identity is particularly intersectional and prone to criticism from all directions.[110] Before becoming part of the Serbian government, Brnabić had a successful business career which provided her with an amount of financial stability that allowed her to avoid a lot of the discrimination that queer people face in her country.[111] This includes the fact that she can live more openly queer than many others, is able to live with her partner Milica Djurdjic and can even raise a child with her.[112] However, there are other forms of discrimination that cannot be avoided with money or political power. Brnabić, for instance, does not have any parental rights over her son with Djurdjic because she is not his birthmother.[113] Yet, Brnabić does nothing to improve this situation and even denies that this kind of inequality exists.[114] Over the years, several theories have come up to explain this denial, three of which will be discussed here.

Firstly, there is the pinkwashing which was already briefly introduced earlier. Statistics have shown that the appointment of a queer person or a woman in a high office, such as prime minister, is generally preceded by a high degree of societal acceptance of these marginalized groups.[115] As exemplified above, this is not the case for Serbia. Yet, the mental connection is still there. Consequently, Brnabić's participation in this strategy acts as a smoke screen. By having her participate in its government, Serbia appears to a much more equal society in which the rights of minorities are indeed respected. This decreases the amount of pressure that is being put on the government to make actual efforts to improve the situation on the ground.

A second explanation is that of respectability politics, which is when politicians publicly adhere to the expectation of the general to obtain electoral success.[116] In this case, it is possible that Brnabić's statements do not correspond with her actual views but that she is toeing the party line and social expectations.

Thirdly, it can be argued that she supports and participates in this harmful regime because she gets personal advantage out of it. After all, Brnabić's support of conservative Serbian politics has provided her with a lot of privileges, including the ability to stay out of the fight for minority rights.[117] Her participation in the government has, for instance, allowed her to obtain a quasi-equality for herself and her family. On top of that, her closeness to the president may offer her a sense of security in an otherwise very hostile environment.[118] It is, therefore, in her personal interest to maintain this position. This could also explain why she does not miss any opportunity to highlight "her allegiance to the 'Serbian cause'" and, therefore, her support of its values and goals even when these are directly opposed to her own best interests as a queer woman.[119]

All things considered, the appointment of Ana Brnabić as prime minister was indeed a significant milestone, but it is one that requires several footnotes. Firstly, many people interpret her appointment not as a genuine sign of progress but rather as a part of Vučić's strategy to be an EU member. By appointing a lesbian prime minister, he can make Serbia appear more progressive and inclusive without introducing actually meaningful change. Secondly, Brnabić herself is very reluctant to engage with issues regarding homophobia or gender inequality, including the infamous declaration that she has never been discriminated against. Part of this can be attributed to her social class and political career but even then it is highly unlikely that she actually did not experience any discrimination in her country. This statement could, therefore, be interpreted as genderwashing and/or respectability politics. Thirdly, there is the question why someone would participate in their own oppression. This might be because it provides them with several personal advantages and securities in an otherwise very hostile environment.

Discussion

On the surface, Tsikhanouskaya and Brnabić have a lot in common: they are both connected to powerful men and rose in a context of crisis, both use patriarchal rhetoric to appeal to their conservative audience and navigate the double bind by combining agentic and communal traits. However, the ways in which they approach these things are very different.

Firstly, there is their relationship to the oppressive regimes in question. Tsikhanouskaya built her platform to oppose it and reintroduce democracy in her country. Her powerful connection is her husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the influential anti-Lukashenka influencer whose pre-existing platform she used to kickstart her campaign. Brnabić on the other hand, was given a platform by then prime minister and current president Aleksandar Vučić.

Secondly, and most importantly, there is the amount of agency both women have. Tsikhanouskaya had much more control over her narrative and how she uses it to pursue her own goals while Brnabić's narrative was constructed and spread by the president himself, in service of his own agenda. Consequently, her actions are also in service of his regime which entails that she is an active participant in its continued oppression of women and queer people, as well as the country's increasing authoritarian tendencies. At the same time, her participation does help the country improve its international reputation. Tsikhanouskaya, on the other hand, uses the tools she has available to oppose and expose the humanitarian crimes of her government and give the Belarusian people a voice via the international platform she has built.

Furthermore, this paper has also illustrated several ways in the (performative) adherence to values of democracy and gender equality can be used in service of conservative agendas. In Belarus, Lukashenka organized elections in which he had eliminated every serious opponent and in

Serbia, Vučić appointed a prime minister that gives of the impression that his government is more progressive than it actually is. Both presidents have also been accused of genderwashing their parliaments by including a high number of women without this actually improving political representation.

None of these developments are unique to authoritarian regimes or Eastern Europe. Tjitske Akkerman has, for instance, analysed the rhetoric of six far-right parties in Europe and concluded that their "acceptance of same-sex relationships and gender equality" are merely rhetorical strategies.[120] An example of this is the populist right-wing Finns Party which can also be accused of genderwashing. Similar to the loyalist women in Serbia and Belarus, the female members of this party have also declared that they want to be "women, not feminists" and put "special emphasis [on] motherhood and caring".[121] The party's policies themselves are also conservative and sometimes even outright anti-feminist; they have even admitted that the only reason their party has a women's organization is because they would otherwise lose certain subsidies.[122] Also in neighbouring Sweden, a country known as one of the most gender equal countries in the world, a former member of the far-right party Sweden Democrats (which is part of the current government), Margareta Sandstedt, believed that "gender equality is one of the roots of all societal conflicts".[123]

Conclusion

The two case studies in this paper illustrate the intricacies of gender in contemporary politics, particularly within a conservative context. They show how women can operate in this environment, both as a part of it (Brnabić) and how it can be opposed (Tsikhanouskaya). In this paper, I have – amongst others – exemplified how progressive actions can be made more acceptable by wrapping them in feminine stereotypes but also how prejudices and stereotypes cannot be entirely avoided. They remain a significant factor in contemporary politics and be weaponized both by and against (female) politicians. In the same vein, I have illustrated how contemporary attitudes towards gender and equality in general can be used by authoritarian and/or patriarchal regimes in service of their own agendas.

This way, the paper also contributes to our understanding of the anti-gender movement, the intricacies of the increased presence of women and people from marginalized communities in the government as well as the intersection of the two. It also exemplifies why the fact that individual are breaking through the glass ceiling does not necessarily entail structural change, as was mentioned in the introduction. On the contrary, these women are often forced to reproduce gender stereotypes in order to succeed and many even participate in and support these oppressive structures. This way, the status quo is being confirmed rather than subverted.

Additionally, it shows how traditional gender stereotypes and expectations continue to be a significant obstacle for politicians even though it also provides certain opportunities. The flipside of this coin is, however, that this also provides certain opportunities for authoritarian and populist decision-makers to instrumentalize gender and inclusivity in service of their own goals, for instance as a distraction from human rights abuses. At the end of the road, however, this paper only analysed two very specific case studies. Further research will, therefore, have to determine how reflective these results are of Europe-wide, or even global, developments and what that would entail.

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[10] Lastly, I need to address the spelling. Both Belarus and Serbia use the Cyrillic alphabet and especially in case of the Belarusian names, there are several transliterations in circulation. In the name of consistency and clarity, I have opted to always use the transliteration that originates from the Belarusian spelling, rather than the Russian one. Serbian has its own official transliteration.

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