

Autocratic Genderwashing: Gender-Equality Reforms in Serbia

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Abstract

While gender equality is usually linked with democracy, autocratic regimes frequently take the lead in such reforms. Focusing on the case of Serbia, this article demonstrates how gender equality reforms can be used as instruments of autocratic regimes. As electoral autocracies nowadays depend on international legitimation and support, they need to present a democratic image to the international audience. Very often they achieve this by introducing gender-sensitive policies and increasing the public visibility of women. This study shows that the democratic backsliding evidenced in Serbia since 2016 has been followed by increased attention to gender equality. In recent years, the Serbian parliament has increased the gender quota for national and local parliaments to 40% and passed several important pieces of legislation, including the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence (2016) and the Gender Equality Law (2021). Additionally, the regime has appointed a record number of women to executive government positions. Since 2017, Serbia has had a lesbian woman serving as a prime minister and the government formed in 2020 was labelled a “women’s government,” with 40% of ministerial positions held by women. This article argues that the regime tends to adopt these democratic reforms while, at the same time, manipulating their meaning to advance a conservative agenda and bolster anti-gender mobilizations. These different—often contradictory—strategies help the regime address a variety of audiences—both international and domestic—and gain their recognition.

Keywords

autocratic genderwashing; electoral autocracy; gender equality; instrumentalization of women’s rights; Serbia

1. Introduction

Gender equality reforms are commonly associated with democracy. One way by which to differentiate democratic from non-democratic countries is by looking at the protections they provide for human and minority rights. The process of autocratization in many countries such as Russia and Turkey has been

followed by an erosion of women's rights. However, recent literature suggests that many autocracies, particularly electoral autocracies, are increasingly implementing gender equality reforms in greater numbers than democracies (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015). For instance, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) suggest that among the 75 states with electoral gender quotas, approximately two-thirds (51) are governed by various autocratic regimes. These countries, among others, include Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Serbia. While these emerging trends have still been insufficiently explored, there is growing evidence that autocrats may well instrumentalize gender equality for international image management purposes (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Donno et al., 2022; Tripp, 2023). One underlying reason for this is that every country in the world today wants to be seen as democratic. By introducing gender equality reforms, autocratic regimes can, at least for a while, maintain the illusion of democracy even in the face of electoral and media freedom violations.

However, this literature is still very new and numerous questions remain unanswered. We still know little about the specific strategies these regimes use and the on-the-ground effects of gender equality reforms. Looking at the case of the competitive authoritarian regime in Serbia, this article sheds light on how the regime twists these reforms into its own instrument, subverting their potentially positive effects in the process. While these reforms are typically viewed through a democratic lens, this study argues that they can also serve as a façade, following the genderwashing literature. However, since political elites have diverse audiences, both their intentions and the messages they send are often more complex and sometimes even controversial. This article explores these complexities to understand better the when, how, and why of gender equality reforms in competitive authoritarian regimes.

2. Gender Equality Reforms and International Reputation

In democracies, gender equality reforms tend to be perceived as a result of the strong influence of women's movements, which lobby for change. Conversely, in autocratic regimes where civil society is repressed, such reforms can rarely come from the grassroots level (Donno et al., 2022). In these contexts, gender equality policies tend to be initiated from the top down. Researchers are increasingly intrigued by the reasons why authoritarian regimes choose to adopt such reforms. Donno et al. (2022) argue that this cannot merely be explained by their different starting points, whereby, democracies have already achieved certain levels of gender equality. Instead, they suggest that countries with higher levels of women's rights tend to adopt more gender-related laws.

The literature offers at least two explanations for the rise of gender equality policies in autocracies. One explanation revolves around internal legitimation, where the regime seeks women's support to maintain its power (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Lorch & Bunk, 2016). Women's rights policies enable the regime to co-opt women, as they may fear that any regime change could lead to a decline in their newly acquired rights. Recent research suggests that political opposition in electoral autocracies tends to be less supportive of gender-related reforms once these reforms are embraced by the regime, as they are reluctant to legitimize autocratic leaders (Noh et al., 2023). Prioritizing women's empowerment, women's groups may worry that the fall of the regime could result in the abolishment of gender-related legislation.

Another explanation relates to external legitimation and reputation (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Donno et al., 2022; Tripp, 2019, 2023). Electoral autocracies use a range of tactics to influence their international

reputation because (a) they often depend on international aid and (b) they face diverse pressures (such as shaming) if they fail to comply with international norms (Escribe-Folsch & Wright, 2015). Since the end of the Cold War, democracy has emerged as a fundamental value in the international community and a country's international reputation is closely tied to its democratization efforts. There are two potential reasons for gender equality corresponding well with these goals. First, most democracy promotion programs nowadays include support for gender equality and many assessments of democracy, such as Freedom House and V-Dem, include gender equality among their democracy indicators. Since gender equality has been included in the liberal peace and state-building packages, countries subjected to these directed liberalizations are particularly incentivized to perceive gender equality as a reputation-building instrument. Second, gender equality has become increasingly viewed as a field in which countries can showcase compliance and boost their democratic reputation without significant survival risks for the regime. Unlike initiatives promoting political pluralism, combating corruption, or granting media freedom, which can pose threats to a regime's stability, gender equality reforms are perceived as less risky, and thus serve as a viable substitute for more costly reforms. Recent literature characterizes these reforms as "autocratic genderwashing," i.e., an autocratic regime's tool for constructing its democratic image while at the same time drawing the focus away from ongoing authoritarian practices (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022).

While international image management has increasingly been used as an explanation for gender equality reforms in non-democracies, there is still insufficient empirical evidence as to either the motivations of the regimes for adopting these reforms or the reforms' effects. Recent literature suggests that such regimes, particularly in Africa, opt for quota adoption as this is perceived as one of the least costly strategies for their authoritarian image management (Tripp, 2023; Valdini, 2019). Using a survey experiment with citizens of Sweden and the US, Bush & Zetterberg (2021) found that electoral gender quotas indeed boost a country's reputation for democracy and increase access to foreign aid. In contrast, exploring how international audiences perceive gender equality reforms in electoral autocracies, Bush et al. (2023) found that while quotas increase the perceived level of democracy, they have a limited impact on international support for foreign aid. They argue that other reforms, such as those related to women's economic rights, have more positive effects on both a country's reputation and support for aid, while at the same time diverting attention from issues such as media control or restrictions on political freedoms. Similarly, Donno et al. (2022) suggest that laws addressing violence against women, in addition to gender economic reforms, represent the most effective strategy for increasing international support for foreign aid. Analysing variations in women's share of cabinet seats in 38 African countries under authoritarian rule between 1973 and 2013, Kang and Kroeger (2022) identified a strong correlation in recent years between an increase in the number of women in the cabinets of electoral autocracies and the inflow of foreign aid.

While this emerging literature establishes a correlation between particular reforms and foreign aid or international reputation, many questions remain open. Political elites may have complex motivations for their decisions, which need to be unpacked more systemically. Even if increases in foreign aid and reputational boosts are the only motivations behind gender equality reforms, which reforms actually produce these intended effects? There is also a lack of understanding regarding the meanings constructed around gender equality, how adopted laws are interpreted by regime representatives, and how their meanings change depending on the audience. So far, existing literature has suggested that such policies are rarely implemented (Htun & Jensenius, 2020), but their effects on gender equality in society remain insufficiently explored.

In addition, there has been a lack of research as to when these reforms are adopted, at which specific moments, and under what circumstances genderwashing is chosen as a strategy. Arat (2022) has demonstrated that the “when and how” depend on a regime’s goals across different political stages. For instance, when Erdoğan’s Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey and wanted to legitimize its rule in a secular context, they expanded liberal laws on women’s rights. However, as they solidified their rule and started democratic backsliding, they reinterpreted the previously adopted liberal reforms to promote conservative ideologies. Finally, as the regime delved deeper into autocratic rule, they dismantled egalitarian institutions and replaced them with conservative alternatives (Arat, 2022). Looking at the case of a competitive authoritarian regime in Serbia, this article aims to fill some of these gaps in the literature on autocratic genderwashing by exploring the when, how, and why of gender equality reforms in greater depth. The following sections demonstrate how the regime can employ these varied, and at times contradictory, strategies simultaneously, directing them towards different audiences.

3. Competitive Authoritarianism in Serbia

Serbia is a good case for studying autocratic genderwashing due to its rapid slide into autocracy since 2012 and its strong dependence on international legitimation. The country started its transition from competitive authoritarianism under Slobodan Milošević to democracy in 2000. Following the wars and international sanctions of the 1990s, the early 2000s were marked by Serbia’s reintegration into the international community under a liberal state-building framework (Džuverović & Milošević, 2021). By 2006, Serbia was ranked as a semi-consolidated liberal democracy (V-Dem, 2023). The democratic backsliding began once again in 2012 when Aleksandar Vučić’s Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)—formed in 2009 through a split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party—rose to power (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023). Trying to distance themselves from their radical past, the party leadership adopted more moderate and pro-EU positions. Vučić emerged as the party’s prominent figure and its most popular politician, displaying strong inclinations toward centralizing power and personalizing politics (Spasojević, 2021). These tendencies persisted through subsequent snap parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2016 and presidential elections in 2017, signalling the onset of a crisis of electoral democracy in Serbia. This crisis reached its peak with the opposition’s parliamentary boycott in 2019, followed by the boycott of general elections in 2020, with concerns regarding unfair electoral conditions being raised by both international and domestic organizations (CRTA, 2020; OSCE, 2020).

In addition, the regime relies on the media control it successfully established by employing subtle coercion, financial incentives through advertising, and the outright purchase of media outlets (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). The influence of civil society has been reduced to a token procedural role, marginalized, and sidelined from meaningful participation (Lončar, 2021). Since 2019, Serbia has unanimously been ranked as a hybrid regime and electoral autocracy (Freedom House, 2023; V-Dem, 2023). Additionally, existing democracy reports indicate that Serbia, alongside Turkey and Hungary, is among the countries experiencing the most significant declines in democracy (Hellmeier et al., 2021).

International support has played a significant role in fortifying Vučić’s position. His previous portrayal as a firm-handed minister of information during Milošević’s regime in the 1990s required a reshaping of his image, rendering him more susceptible to external pressures. Vučić was compelled to reaffirm his allegiance to the West and his determination to lead Serbia towards European Union integration, which started in 2008 and is deemed irreversible. Although international influence has not been strong enough to forestall

democratic regression, maintaining international legitimacy has remained essential to the regime, particularly due to Serbia's economic dependence on the West. In contrast to public opinion surveys, which show that the citizens of Serbia tend to believe that China and Russia provide the country with the most aid, data shows that the Serbian economy is heavily dependent on the EU (Kowalski, 2021). The EU is by far the greatest investor in and trade partner to Serbia, accounting for 62% of Serbia's total trade. In addition, the EU's annual foreign aid to Serbia is higher than the aid received from all other countries combined. Other major providers of development aid to Serbia include Germany, the US, the United Arab Emirates, the UN, and other Western European countries (Hartwell & Sidlo, 2017). On the one hand, these strong ties with the EU have prevented more blatant forms of autocratization; on the other, the EU has chosen to turn a blind eye to Serbia's considerable democratic shortcomings in exchange for stability in the region (Bieber, 2017). Vučić's cooperative approach during negotiations with Kosovo (2013, 2021–2024) and the migrant crisis (2015–2016) have demonstrated that Serbia can be a factor for stability in the Balkans. The following sections demonstrate that gender equality reforms represent an additional area where the regime has tried to boost its legitimacy.

4. Research Design and Methods

Previous research has shown that initial reforms during the democratization phase in Serbia (2000–2011) were a result of a vocal campaign and pressures from civil society, namely women's organizations (Nacevska & Lokar, 2017) and feminist voices within political parties (Lončar, 2023). In addition, they also represented an effort to harmonize the country's laws with EU legislation (Lončar, 2023). In this phase, Serbia adopted several major reforms, including a 30% electoral gender quota in 2002 for local elections and in 2004 for the national parliament (see Figure 1). The 2002 Criminal Code listed for the first time domestic violence as an explicit criminal offence. The parliament further adopted the first Law on the Equality of Sexes in 2009 and the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in 2009. These laws significantly increased women's presence in representative institutions, but implementation of anti-discrimination laws remained minimal (Slootmaeckers, 2022).

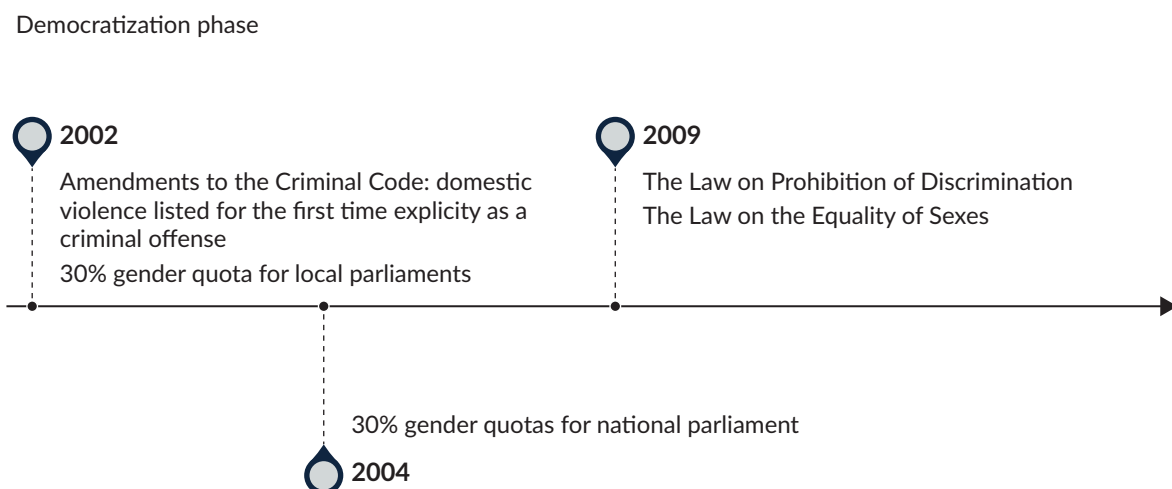


Figure 1. Main gender equality reforms in Serbia during its democratization phase (2000–2011).

However, we still lack empirical evidence on both the actors and motivations behind the gender equality reforms after 2012, i.e., during its autocratization phase. To explore the how, when, and why of gender equality reforms during the autocratization phase in Serbia, the analysis takes several steps.

First, the key reforms in this period were identified (see Figure 2). One group of reforms addressed violence against women. The parliament ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) and also adopted the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence. Under Vučić’s rule, Serbia has made additional improvements in the area of political representation. In June 2017, Vučić appointed Ana Brnabić as prime minister, a newcomer to politics with no party affiliations. She held this position until the parliamentary elections in December 2023. Brnabić’s main quality, as Vučić suggested, was that she was an openly lesbian woman. Brnabić’s appointment marked a historic moment as she became the first woman and the first lesbian person to hold such a prestigious office in Serbia, and only the fifth openly gay prime minister in the world. In 2019, she further made history as the first openly gay prime minister to have a same-sex partner give birth while in office. In 2020, Serbia raised the electoral gender quota to 40%, intending to achieve gender parity in politics. Following the 2020 general elections, Serbia formed a “women’s government,” with a female gay prime minister and 10 out of 23 ministerial positions held by women. Finally, in 2021 Serbia adopted several amendments to the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and the long-awaited Law on Gender Equality, signalling a broader focus beyond biological differences between sexes, and addressing not only formal equality between men and women but also considering gender-based discrimination and inequalities faced by individuals of diverse gender identities. The Law on Gender Equality now guarantees equal participation and representation and provides legal tools for preventing gender-based violence and discrimination in various areas. It further mandates the use of gender-sensitive language in public institutions and the media.

Second, since all these reforms were adopted by the parliament, the empirical analysis focuses primarily on parliamentary debates during which these specific reforms were discussed and passed. These debates serve as a crucial source of information, offering insight into the rationale behind proposed reforms, providing justifications and presenting arguments both for and against their adoption to the public. Third, most of these reforms were announced by the president during media conferences before entering parliamentary procedures. To better understand the motivations behind this, a content analysis was conducted on these

Autocratization phase

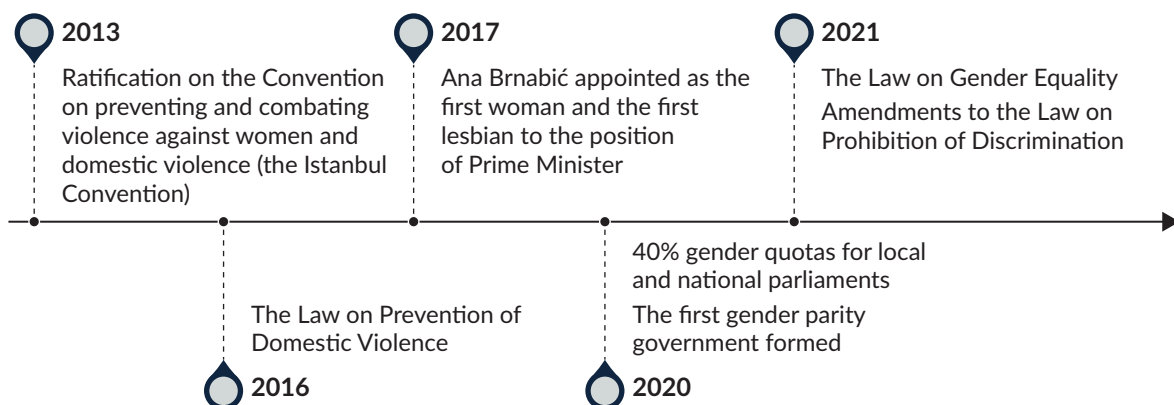


Figure 2. Main gender equality reforms in Serbia during its autocratization phase (2012–2024).

speeches. Fourth, the article looks at the main gender equality indexes and the European Commission's reporting on Serbia's progress in this field to explore the effects of the reforms: Were they effective in increasing reputation, and to what extent? The final step in the analysis addresses timing: When were these reforms adopted and how did this relate to the key moments in Serbia's autocratization process?

5. Gender Equality Reforms as a Cloak: Twisting Gender Equality Into an Instrument of Authoritarian Image Management

Answering the question of why political actors propose and adopt certain reforms is challenging to say the least, because their motives are often complex, different actors involved may have divergent perspectives, and very often these actors' motives remain unspoken. However, looking at their claims can help us to at least partially understand their motivations.

President Vučić's media conferences suggest that international reputation was a dominant motive for the appointment of a female prime minister in 2017 and the formation of a gender parity government in 2021. Announcing his decision to propose Ana Brnabić as a candidate for the prime ministerial position to the National Assembly, president Vučić offered the following explanation as a main reason for choosing an at-the-time non-partisan individual for such a high position:

I am convinced that in the coming period it is important to ensure the further strengthening of Serbia's reputation in the international community, both in the West and in the East, both on the path of European integration, which remains the strategic goal of the Republic of Serbia, and in relations with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the United States, Arab countries, but also other states and peoples around the world. Serbia has to improve its image even more. Serbia does not have to prove its independence and sovereignty to anyone, but it seems to me that Serbia deserves an even better place so that the citizens of Serbia can be even more proud of their country. (Vučić, 2017)

The reason for Ana Brnabić being such an important figure in Serbia's international reputation was elaborated by Vučić a year earlier in the parliament, when he selected her as a minister for state administration and local self-government, saying that she is a member of the gay population:

Ana Brnabić does not hide it and proudly talks about it....She was so sweet and kind, she told me: "President, I hope you don't mind, I am certain that this will be a topic for them..." And I replied: "No, I don't mind at all. All that is of interest to me, Ana, is your results, and I know how hard-working and dedicated you are." I am very happy for the opportunity to work with Ana and I don't care, it's her right. (Vučić, 2016)

Two days later presenting the cabinet to the members of parliament, Vučić repeated the same claim, adding, in response to criticism from the right-wing parties:

But that does not mean...let me say it to those who claim that we have already legalized homosexual marriages, who I guess do so to scare the people and gain additional votes. We neither have done it, nor is there any plan or an idea to do so. (Vučić, 2016)

This claim immediately suggested that her appointment was meant to be purely symbolic in terms of substantive gender equality within society. Indeed, as a prime minister, Brnabić has been very reluctant to engage with issues related to gender equality. She claimed that she was not a spokesperson for the LGBT community and has rejected the characterization of herself as a gay minister. She also denied experiencing discrimination in Serbia, refuting claims that Serbia was a homophobic country (Surk, 2017). Nevertheless, same-sex civil unions remain illegal in Serbia, same-sex couples are prohibited from adopting children, and no legislation exists to address the position of intersex persons. Consequently, while Ana Brnabić can make official visits to the EU with her same-sex partner, in Serbia she has no legal connections with either her partner or their child.

There is broad evidence that her appointment was merely “for show,” while her effective role was to obey the president. In the above-cited claim, the president portrayed her as “sweet and kind,” attributes traditionally associated with femininity and perceived vulnerability, while positioning himself as a paternal figure offering protection and guidance. When he announced her selection for the position of prime minister, he argued that although officially she would serve as prime minister, her role would be to focus on economic issues, digitalization, and the IT sector, while a male leader of another political party—who is more experienced in politics—would essentially cover the political issues (Vučić, 2017). This initial framing set the tone for their future relationship dynamics. It quickly became apparent that Brnabić had limited agency in her role as prime minister. As Aničić argues, she was “relegated to a position of a silent presence” (Aničić, 2018, p. 261). Despite the Serbian Constitution stipulating the prime minister to be the most powerful position in the state, with the president’s role primarily ceremonial, Brnabić kept referring to Vučić as her “boss” and merely executing his directives (Zaharijević & Antonijević, 2024, p. 96). By assuming this submissive role, Brnabić inadvertently reinforced and perpetuated the patriarchy instead of challenging it.

A similar pattern was evident when the gender parity government was formed in 2020. Announcing the formation of the new government, president Vučić justified it through the need to improve the country’s image, thereby positioning himself as an authoritarian leader, who is above the government:

Another idea, my wish: I asked the candidate for the Prime Minister if it would be possible that 50 or close to 50 percent of the Government members are women. I think that this would be revolutionary for Serbia, that in doing so we would present our country in the best possible way and show, not in words but in deeds, how gender equality works, and show that women are equally capable and even more capable of performing the highest state functions, and I believe that the head of the cabinet will have understanding for this political request. (Vučić, 2020)

In her inaugural speech in the parliament three weeks later, Ana Brnabić mostly spoke about the economy. Prime ministers in Serbia use their inaugural address to set their vision of the country in the coming period and present the government’s main goals and tasks. Gender equality was mentioned in just two sentences at the end of her long speech when she invited other organizations and institutions to follow the government’s example of gender parity.

A tentative explanation of why Serbia cared about its international legitimacy in these specific moments was the heightened international attention regarding increased media control and limited electoral freedoms in Serbia. The main gender equality reforms coincided with moments in which Serbia was under a negative

spotlight. For example, the first large-scale anti-regime protests in Serbia started in 2016 after an illegal demolition of houses in a Belgrade neighbourhood that had stood in the way of the government-led Belgrade Waterfront project. The common features of these protests were demands for accountability and media and electoral freedoms, as well as concerns for democratic backsliding in Serbia. It was during this period that international attention towards Serbia's undemocratic practices began to intensify. Concerns regarding democratic backsliding, erosion of press freedom, electoral integrity issues, and other challenges to democratic principles garnered increased attention from international organizations, human rights groups, and foreign governments (OSCE, 2017). Enjoying a reputation as Europe's favourite stabilocrat, Vučić had to manage his international image and distract the West from bad news about the country.

Similarly, the decision of opposition parties to boycott the 2020 general elections due to irregularities and unfair electoral rules prompted additional reforms. Knowing that the boycott could turn negative attention on the regime, it could reasonably be expected that the ruling party introduced the following measures to counteract any potential harm to its democratic reputation: the electoral threshold was lowered from 5% to 3% to incentivize more parties to participate in the elections and affirmative action measures for national minorities and women were strengthened. Despite the general recommendation against amending electoral laws in an election year (Venice Commission, 2002), these measures were enacted in the parliament just one month prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections. After the elections, the ruling majority was composed of 243 out of 250 MPs in total, leaving the parliamentary opposition with a mere 7 MPs, 6 of whom were national minority representatives.

Since the political participation of women is one of the indicators of political pluralism, one could expect that one aim of introducing more women (and national minorities) to the government was to counter the lack of party pluralism. These amendments included raising the gender quota from 30% to 40%, which was presented to the audience as a breakthrough in the protection of gender equality, even though the percentage of women in the parliament at that moment was 37.2%. However, these changes only resulted in a modest 2.56% increase in the parliamentary presence of women during the 2020–2022 period. Following the 2022 elections, the percentage of women declined to 35.2%. The changes to gender quotas were accompanied by a carefully orchestrated performance: the legislation was proposed by a prominent female opposition MP, ostensibly to foster an image of cooperation, democratic decision-making processes, and equal treatment of opposition parties. This performance was aimed at annulling criticism alleging that the parliamentary majority stifled debate and silenced opposition voices. Intriguingly, the same MP later joined the regime post-elections as the minister for human and minority rights and social dialogue.

All of these examples provide evidence that autocratic genderwashing is at least partially an explanation for gender equality reforms in Serbia. Media reports suggest that these moves indeed had an immediate positive effect on Serbia's image internationally: Brnabić's appointment received widespread acclaim, creating an impression of progress on gender equality in a country where nearly half the population considers homosexuality to be an illness (CESID, 2021). While she was not previously active as a feminist or advocate for pro-LGBTQ rights, her identity itself served well to send the intended message. For instance, the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade congratulated her appointment with the message: "Serbia now looks like progressive Scandinavian countries" (Ilić, 2021). International media such as *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* wrote about Serbia's historic step (Erickson, 2017; MacDowall, 2017). They later also wrote about the gender parity government at length, praising Serbia for gender equality. International

commentators promptly suggested that Serbia’s “women’s government” propelled the country “to the brink of the global top 10 for gender equality” (Savic, 2020).

Gender equality rankings also note these improvements (see Figure 3). Serbia’s ranking surged from 54th position in 2014 to 19th in the world on the Global Gender Gap Index, primarily as a result of the improvements in the domain of political power and political participation. Its rise began in 2017 after Ana Brnabić was appointed as prime minister, although it dropped again to 38th position in 2023 (The World Economic Forum, 2012–2023).

In 2016, Serbia was the first non-EU country to produce a Gender Equality Index, which was first launched by the European Institute for Gender Equality to monitor progress in terms of gender equality across the EU. Serbia’s ranking over the years has demonstrated continuous progress in improving gender equality, particularly in the domain of decision-making. In 2021, Serbia stood in 23rd place among the EU member states, the UK, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia (Babović & Petrović, 2021). While Serbia’s position in general has seemed to improve, all of these indices suggest that the improvement is mostly visible in the domain of power, while gender equality in the domains of health or economy still rates low.

Democracy rankings such as Freedom House also include gender equality among their indicators. Similarly to gender equality rankings, they also recognize Serbia’s progress in political representation but point to the challenges women face in the job market and widespread domestic violence (Freedom House, 2024). All these reports claim that despite new legislation adopted in 2016 aimed at preventing domestic violence, such violence remains a problem within society, and implementation of these laws needs to be improved. When referring to Ana Brnabić’s appointment, the Freedom House report from 2018 argues (with the reports from 2019 to 2023 repeating the same):

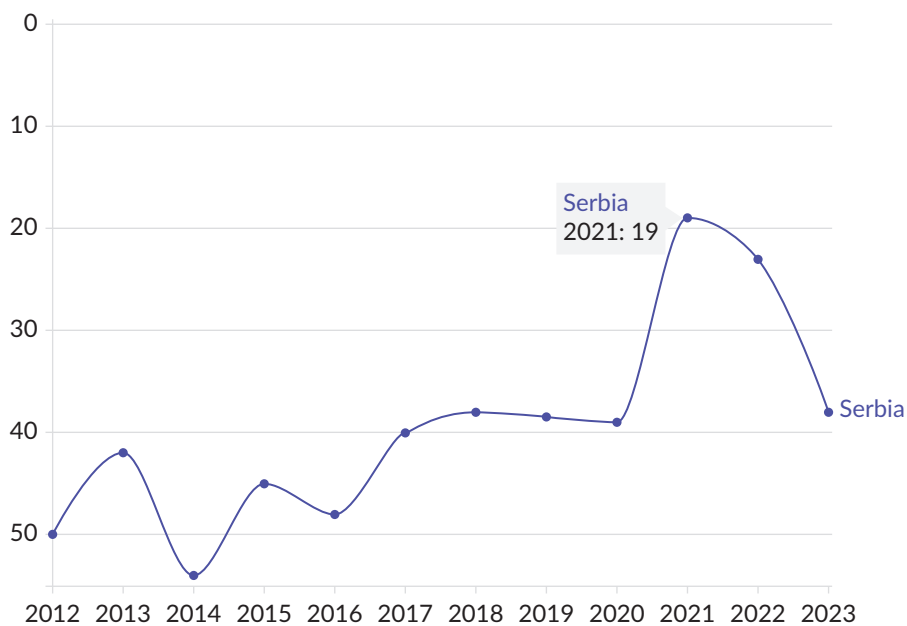


Figure 3. Serbia’s ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index 2012–2023.

Ana Brnabić became Serbia's first woman and first openly gay prime minister in June 2017, but critics argued that her appointment was a superficial bid to please the EU rather than a genuine sign of greater engagement on issues of importance to women or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. (Freedom House, 2024)

Similarly, the EU acknowledges the steps forward but points to slow implementation, lack of official sex-disaggregated data and statistics in several domains, and a delay in adopting action plans (e.g., related to the prevention of gender-based violence), which prevents implementation of the previously adopted laws and strategies (European Commission, 2023). Pointing to the delay in implementation and widespread gender-based inequalities within Serbian society, these reports support a genderwashing conclusion. In addition to the lack of substantive effects across society, international reports suggest that the adopted reforms also do not produce the expected effects at an international level. Even when international reputation explains gender equality reforms, these intentions are not necessarily effective, particularly in the long run.

6. Domestic Audiences: Gender Equality Reforms Serving Conservative Ends

The previous section has shown that international image management is a convincing explanation for gender equality reforms in Serbia. However, the findings point to additional complexity: While international audiences are important, the political elites also address domestic audiences. Initially formed through a split from the radical right-wing SRS, the SNS sought to distance itself from its extremist roots and cultivate an image of a pro-European and modern party to garner support internationally. Since its formation, the party has had to play different roles in front of the international community and its electorate to keep the support of both audiences. Over time, as it solidified its grip on power and monopolized control over public institutions and the media, the party turned to gender equality policies as a means to mask Serbia's increasingly autocratic tendencies from the international community. Internally, however, the SNS aims not only to maintain its position as the ruling party but also to become the sole political force with widespread voter backing. This necessitates adapting its messaging to cater to diverse constituencies, leading to the simultaneous promotion of controversial discourses.

Gender equality reforms were meant to signal to the progressive and liberal parts of society that the SNS has broken with its radical past and has the capacity and intention to represent voters across the ideological spectrum. Justifications of the proposals aimed at preventing gender-based violence suggest that the regime was—in the first phase (2012–2016) at least—partially interested in gender equality not only because of its international but also domestic reputation. Parliamentary debates point to two main explanations when justifying the 2013 and 2016 reforms related to gender-based violence. First, government representatives argued that “violence against women and domestic violence is a serious social problem that the Republic of Serbia also faces” (Jovan Krkobabić, deputy prime minister and minister of labour, employment, and social policy, parliamentary transcript, 17 October 2013) and consequently that there is an urgent need that Serbia addresses this issue (Nela Kuburović, minister of justice, parliamentary transcript, 15 November 2016). The second explanation offered in both cases was that the reforms were required as part of EU integration and the harmonization of its legislation with the legal *acquis* of the EU.

However, to appeal to as broad a constituency as possible while maintaining its dominant position in a country where the majority of voters are conservative, the ruling political party has consistently juggled between a more pro-European and liberal stance on women's rights and anti-gender discourses. While acknowledging the importance of women's presence in public spaces and gender-related legislation in principle, the Serbian regime has adeptly redirected these reforms to advance conservative objectives. This balancing is visible both in the way that gender equality reforms are adopted and in the parliamentary speeches of SNS MPs. Since 2016, SNS has been the party that predominantly spoke about women, creating an impression that they had monopolized the gender equality theme. However, when SNS MPs speak about women, they mostly speak about pregnant women and mothers, positioning themselves as guardians of natality, traditional values, and patriarchy. Women's rights are portrayed as a priority primarily due to concerns over negative demographic trends. The emphasis is not on supporting women as individuals or achieving gender equality, but rather on viewing women solely as birth-givers:

Children have a special position in Serbia, in our society, and it should be so, and we are always ready to give up everything, precisely for the sake of our children and descendants. That is why we need to invest much more in the birth rates and the support of the first child....We need to talk about it, we need to put pressure on it, and I think that precisely, if our male colleagues do not think about it much, we, women in politics, must be louder and ask for more money for support and birth giving....We want women to be modern, to get involved in politics, to be educated, to work, to be in their careers, to be as dedicated as possible, but we need support, we need kindergartens, we need schools, we need help at home if you want us to cover all that is required of us, to give our maximum as citizens of this society. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 21 November 2019)

We are fighting for gender equality, equality between men and women, and in that fight, we should remember that we must not lose the most beautiful qualities that adorn a woman, which is to be and remain the gentler sex, and also for men to be and remain gentlemen. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 13 December 2016)

Since 2016, SNS MPs have delivered the highest number of speeches mentioning women compared to other political parties. However, in the 2016–2020 assembly, one-third of their speeches referred to women primarily in the context of praising the ruling majority (the president in particular), highlighting the government's achievements, and criticizing the opposition. Therefore, while MPs do address women, they do not necessarily advocate for their rights or seek to improve their societal status. Rather, these speeches aim to enhance the image and influence of the ruling political party. Moreover, claims about women are often utilized to discredit political opponents:

I cannot help but notice that every time a law enters parliamentary procedure, the opposition displays enormous hatred towards the Government of the Republic of Serbia and towards Aleksandar Vučić, who are doing nothing but fighting through these laws and showing enormous efforts to improve lives of Serbian citizens. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić absolutely cares about women who are unemployed and who are the least employable, namely women who are between 40 and 50 years old and who lost their jobs precisely because of the policies of those experts across the room. That hurts them the most, and that is the reason why they are tireless in fabrications and lies. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 25 October 2018)

We help women, empower them and implement measures, we introduce programs related to a better social economic status of women. What they [the opposition] do, they insult them and call them derogatory names, they even physically hurt or disparage them. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 6 March 2019)

These claims suggest that the regime instrumentalizes the gender equality theme for diverse purposes. While international reputation is a significant part of its agenda, it is reasonable to assume that it also—at least in the first years of its rule—wanted to address the progressive segments of society. In the second phase after 2016, the regime exploited the theme in the parliament mostly to delegitimize the opposition and secure a predominant position. The second phase is also characterised by the rise of anti-gender discourses, which have been promoted simultaneously with the promotion of gender equality.

At the same time as the gender parity government was being formed, Serbia made a step in an illiberal direction. It founded the Ministry of Family Care and Demography, appointing a politician known for his misogynistic and homophobic remarks to lead it (Ćeriman & Vučković Juroš, 2023, p. 7). Yet, the ministry made no significant actions and the minister rarely made public appearances. They have rather been supporting civil society discussions on demographic challenges and slowly shifting the public attention to these issues without alarming international observers. Vučić's regular participation in the Budapest Demographic Summit, alongside other leaders from Central and Eastern Europe known for their conservative views, as well as church leaders and experts, further underscores the illiberal agenda. The summit actively promotes traditional family values as a solution to demographic challenges.

Another example involves the emergence of anti-gender mobilizations, which started in 2017 in response to an education package aimed at preventing sexual violence in kindergartens and schools. This package, designed to guide teachers on addressing issues such as body image, sexuality, consent, and gender-based violence, was developed by a prominent NGO in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Policy and the parliament (Ćeriman & Vučković Juroš, 2023; Zaharijević & Antonijević, 2024). However, public backlash fuelled by right-wing political parties and groups brought the package down within two weeks.

The media played a significant role in perpetuating a narrative about the supposed sexualization of children, aligning itself with typical anti-gender discourse suggesting that traditional family values were under threat and that homosexuality was being promoted. The minister of education joined this narrative, condemning the package despite its prior governmental approval. He argued that certain aspects of the package were “against our tradition and culture,” implying that the EU had demanded sexual education (Popadić, 2017).

The strengthening of authoritarianism and right-wing populism within the SNS can also be read in the debate on the Draft Law on Gender Equality. Initially, it was anticipated that this law would be passed alongside the Law on Same-Sex Partnership, as both jointly entered the parliamentary procedure. Yet, the president immediately said that he would not confirm the law, citing its alleged unconstitutionality due to the constitutional definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006). Although the draft law, proposed by Brnabić's government, aimed to legalize same-sex unions and did not mention marriage, the government quickly withdrew the proposal from the parliament.

On the other hand, the Law on Gender Equality was adopted after a heated discussion between dissatisfied anti-gender—primarily male—voices within the SNS and the minister for human and minority rights and

social dialogue. There was an intriguing performance at play here: Both laws were proposed by the minister who was, prior to her sudden appointment to the government, a prominent opposition MP. After being a vocal democrat and a feminist for more than 20 years, she was not perceived by the public as a representative of the SNS. In that sense, while the regime stood behind the bill, the domestic audience did not necessarily have that perception. Vučić's clear stance against same-sex partnerships and vocal anti-gender discourse in the parliament strongly shaped public perceptions about the laws. The Law on Gender Equality was adopted but its main intended consequence was ticking the EU boxes and turning attention away from Serbia's autocratization practices.

There were very few voices within the SNS who wholeheartedly supported the law, even though the bill was proposed by the party and adopted by its MPs. The main concern centred around the notion of gender, which, according to the ruling party MPs, distorts the "natural" roles and relationships between men and women. Interestingly, during these discussions, women MPs remained noticeably quiet. Their silence sharply contrasted with their outspokenness when instrumentalizing women's rights to praise Vučić and criticize the opposition:

What are we going to do with people who suddenly wish to feel like the underrepresented sex and say: "It does not matter; I feel a bit like a woman"? Are we going to quickly open gender reassignment surgery somewhere? We have all witnessed that some individuals here changed nations, some changed their place of residence to become councillors, some changed their name; it is to be expected that people will want, for the sake of their position, to quickly change their sex. Who will determine in that situation whether someone has changed their sex? (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 18 May 2021)

In the scarce parliamentary discussions on the law, the concept of "gender" was completely separated from the fight for equality and linked to "gender ideology," "LGBT ideology," and "Western innovations." This suggests that Serbia is joining a wave of right-wing populism and anti-gender mobilizations, which are becoming increasingly resonant across Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The process of passing this law is a good example of the instrumentalization of gender equality. Both the president and the government supported the law because of international pressure. Surprisingly the whole process was very inclusive and many civil society recommendations were adopted. However, the public in Serbia had a different perspective: there were no feminist voices within the parliament who publicly defended the law beyond the sole feminist minister, who had spent her whole political career genuinely advocating for gender equality. Due to the electoral boycott, democratic opposition was not present in the parliament, which additionally explains the silence. The ruling coalition MPs were either quiet during the parliamentary debates or spoke against the law. This speaks to the dominant conservative party membership within the SNS, but also a strong party discipline as they in the end had to vote for the proposal and pass the law.

The shift from a more progressive orientation when the SNS came to power to the rise of anti-gender discourses within the party since 2017 suggests that the regime may well shift further toward right-wing populism and anti-feminism in the coming period. If so, Serbia would follow the path of Hungary and Turkey, in which the approach to gender equality has changed depending on the regime's goals across different political stages. This suggests that the timing and regime changes, in addition to the genderwashing perspective, could have a significant effect on gender equality reforms.

7. Conclusion

This article adds to the emerging literature on gender equality reforms in autocratic regimes. It contributes particularly to our understanding of gender equality in Central and Eastern Europe, a region relatively underexplored in gender scholarship (Bogetić, 2022). Focusing on the case of Serbia, this study illustrates how electoral autocracies may weaponize gender equality reforms to maintain their international legitimacy, although the intended effects of such strategies are not guaranteed. Since ruling parties in such regimes aim not only to be in power but to be the only relevant actor upon the domestic political scene, they also need support from more progressive parts of society. Unlike democratic reforms in the areas of rule of law, political pluralism or media freedom, which could destabilize and threaten the regime's survival, gender equality reforms are perceived as less risky and yet still deeply intertwined with democracy. Consequently, they serve as a convenient option for autocratic leaders seeking to demonstrate compliance with international democratic norms. However, since its survival depends on broader audiences such as conservative voters, the regime needs to balance these democratic reforms with a more conservative agenda. Consequently, these reforms can only partially translate into substantial advancements in gender equality within these countries. Implementation gaps persist and the governments frequently manipulate the narrative surrounding these reforms to align with conservative agendas internally.

The case of Serbia underscores how governments can shape the perception of their decisions to suit different audiences, often leading to contradictory outcomes. Regimes can simultaneously make contradictory moves such as promoting gender equality while simultaneously suppressing it. For instance, while the appointment of a gay woman as the prime minister was lauded internationally as a symbol of tolerance and gender equality, her positioning in Serbia reinforced existing patriarchal structures. Similarly, the Law on Gender Equality was an important milestone in Serbia's progress towards EU integration, but domestically the regime managed to exclusively portray its disagreements with the law, framing it as an attack upon the Serbian traditional family and national survival. These findings highlight the potential for gender equality reforms to inadvertently empower regimes to further entrench autocratic practices, ultimately undermining the very principles they purport to advance. Finally, the article points to the need for additional research on the connections between gender equality reforms and different political stages of hybrid regimes, those in between liberal democracies and closed autocracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Transcripts of all plenary sessions of the National Assembly of Serbia are available here: <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/transkript>

Recordings of the parliamentary sessions, committee meetings, and media conferences are available at the website of the Serbian parliament: <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/prenosi.2092.html>

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