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ARTICLE

From Radical Right to Reactionary Internationalism: Serbia, Russia, and the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

This article contributes to the ongoing debate on reactionary internationalism by linking it with scholarly discussions on civilisation and civilisationism, which have mostly been running in parallel trajectories. By doing so, it attempts to address the question of how the radical right, rooted in numerous particularisms, such as cultural, national, and religious, has managed to foster a global movement with an internationalist ideology that poses a significant challenge to the liberal international order. Through an analysis of the relevant literature and a case study of the Serbian radical right, this article tries to elucidate this question and bridge the gap between the two debates by demonstrating that civilisationism forms the core of reactionary internationalism, unifying the radical right from the West to the East. This article examines the Serbian case and its history of civilisational and geopolitical reactions as a possible paradigm for the contemporary radical right in general. Furthermore, it explores the role of Russian revisionism and war in Ukraine in shaping this civilisational discourse, specifically considering the narratives built around the Serbian foreign fighters' network in Ukraine. An additional contribution of this article is that it provides a non-Western perspective on civilisation, religion, and nationalism.

Keywords: reactionary internationalism; civilisationism; radical right; Serbia; Russia; war in Ukraine

Introduction

In his editorial to the 2022 issue of New Perspectives, Michelsen (2022, 313) gave a striking evaluation of the current international order: "Liberal failure is all around us… ecological, economic, technological, military, a crisis within democracy and between democracies, alongside the return of proto-violent relations between nuclear armed states in Ukraine. […] The faith which Liberal order relied upon has become shaky. So much that the war in Ukraine has appeared to provide an opportunity for Liberals to find unity and purpose again". The past decade has seen a significant shift in global affairs due to events such as the Arab Spring, conflicts in Libya and Syria, the emergence of the Islamic State, the migrant crisis, the civil war in Ukraine, Brexit, Trump's electoral victory and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These occurrences fundamentally altered the post-Cold War world order, bringing it perilously close to the brink of a global disaster.

Undoubtedly, a new world is emerging, and its defining feature is the assertion that liberalism is declining (Ikenberry 2018, 2024; Parsi 2021). According to the 2024 Democracy Report, liberal democracies are a small minority, representing only 13% of the world's population, while most of humanity (71%) resides in autocracies (Nord et al. 2024). This surge of autocracies has profound

implications for the global order, as it not only challenges the dominance of liberal democracies, but also reshapes international relations. The rise of reactionary populism, anti-globalism, and anti-elitism is a stark reality in our times. These are the ideologies that leaders like Trump, Putin, Xi, Erdogan, or Orbán embody. They echo similar discourses and exhibit clear rhetorical parallels (Abrahamsen et al. 2020). Their foreign policy agendas harmonise in their opposition to globalisation and the existing international order. Recent manifestations of this trend were the Russia-China summits in 2023 and 2024, where presidents Putin and Xi reiterated their countries' 'unlimited friendship,' aligning "in countering American dominance and a Western-led world order" (Buckley 2023), as well as the BRICS expansion (Erlanger et al. 2023). This geopolitical shift particularly impacts small states historically navigated between the West and the East, such as Serbia. The country's ongoing quest for alternatives to Western influence (i.e., China and Russia) and the ambiguity in its foreign policy (for instance, toward the war in Ukraine) have been further fuelled by the resurgence of global factions (Vučković and Radeljić 2024). Ikenberry (2024) suggests that the world is gravitating towards three evolving geopolitical factions: the global West (US and Europe), East (Russia and China), and South (Brazil, India, and others).

For leaders of the global East and South, such as Putin, Xi, Modi, Duterte, Bolsonaro, and Erdogan, liberalism represents nothing more than imperial universalism, "a trend towards cultural self-cancellation that must be reversed" (Michelsen 2022, 314; Zhang 2023). Moreover, various organisations and individuals from the global West belong to the same political milieu: the National Rally (RN), Fidesz, Lega, Party for Freedom, Flemish Interest, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Sweden Democrats, Finns Party, Law and Justice, Vox, and others (Akkerman et al. 2016; Caiani and Cisar 2019; Pereyra Doval and Souroujon 2021; Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023; Ivaldi and Zankina 2023; Weisskircher 2024). Although they display some significant ideological differences (Brubaker 2017; Lopez Aguilar and Pino Uribe 2023), for instance, towards LGBTQ+ rights or the role of Russia in the international order, all of them can be subsumed under the umbrella term 'reactionary internationalism,' as suggested by MacKay and LaRoche (2018). Reactionary internationalists are united in their illiberal nationalism, intolerance towards minority politics, weakness for authoritarianism, and contempt for multiculturalism and universalism (Motadel 2019).

In ideological terms, reactionary internationalists are usually categorised as either new right (Drolet and Williams 2018; De Orellana and Michelsen 2019; Gianoncelli 2021), far-right (Stojarova 2013; Laruelle 2015; MacKay and LaRoche 2018), or radical right (Minkenberg 2002; Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2018). In this article, I opted for the term 'radical right' since the New Right was a historical movement that started in Europe during the 1960s (Drolet and Williams 2018; Abrahamsen et al. 2020; Bar-On 2013), and it should not be confused with the whole ideological family, while the far-right (or extreme right) is usually associated with fascist and neo-Nazi movements, which tolerate or embrace violence[1] as a political method (Shekhovtsov 2018, xxiii). Abrahamsen et al. (2020, 104) point out that "to understand today's radical Right movements, we must resist seeing them as simply the extension of fascism" since most of them have dismissed the fascist legacy, racism, and fundamentalism. Unlike the far-right, they are not strictly anti-systemic (Pirro 2015, 3). Minkenberg (2002, 337) defines 'radical right' "as a political ideology, whose core element is a myth of a homogeneous nation, a romantic and populist ultranationalism directed against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principles of individualism and universalism" (see also Mudde 2007; Pirro 2015; Rydgren 2018; Shekhovtsov 2018).

This article contributes to the ongoing IR debate on reactionary internationalism (MacKay and LaRoche 2018; De Orellana and Michelsen 2019) by linking it with scholarly discussions on civilisation and civilisationism (Brubaker 2017; Hale and Laruelle 2021), which have been mostly running in parallel trajectories. By doing so, it tries to explain the following puzzle: How did the radical right, embedded in numerous particularisms, such as cultural, national, and religious,

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manage to develop a global movement with an internationalist ideology that became the utmost challenge to liberalism and contemporary international order? Drawing on relevant sources and a case study of Serbian radical right, this article attempts to answer this question and reduce the gap between the two debates by showing that civilisationism is the essence of reactionary internationalism, which binds the radical right from the USA to the Far East, making it an internationalist movement.

The case of the Serbian radical right is selected to portray this theoretical argument because, as some authors suggest (Hussain 2018; Mujanović 2019, 2021; Vio 2019), it has served as an inspiration or exemplar for the contemporary political reaction on a global scale. Therefore, the article explores this example as a possible paradigmatic case of religion and nationalism amalgamation into a civilisational reaction, with a particular focus on the Serbian foreign fighters in Ukraine (primarily covering the period preceding the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion). This case also brings attention to Russian influence on the radical right, as Serbia plays a specific role in Russian geopolitical imagination (Suslov et al. 2023; Suslov 2023a, 2023b; Vukasović and Stojadinović 2023; Petrović 2024). Furthermore, an additional contribution of this article is that it provides a non-Western perspective on the issue. As Akturk (2022, 211) acknowledges, most scholarship on this issue "implicitly builds on the Western European experience, which is not generalizable due to the exceptional institutional separation of secular and religious authority."

In addition to an extensive literature review, this article draws on primary data collected through fieldwork conducted in Serbia from 2021 to 2023, including more than 30 semi-structured interviews with representatives of Serbian radical right organisations, subject-matter experts, government officials, civil society activists, journalists, and members of religious communities (the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement). The interviews concentrated on the broader topic of radicalisation and extremism in Serbia, including questions about the influence of the Serbian state and the church, the role of Russia and the war in Ukraine, and the involvement of foreign fighters in the Serbian radical right organisations. Additionally, online ethnography (Hart 2017) was employed to examine foreign fighters' Internet communities, interactions, and narratives. In particular, the analysis encompassed a variety of right-wing YouTube and Telegram channels, such as those related to Serbian foreign fighters in Ukraine (e.g., Dejan Berić, the 'Wolves'), Serbian war reporters (Danijel Simić, Igor Damjanović, and Miodrag Zarković), and other relevant media outlets (Helmcast, Balkan Info, Slavija Info, Srbin Info, etc.). The article is divided into four sections, followed by a discussion and a conclusion. The first section provides an overview of the debate on reactionary internationalism, whose civilisational perspective is investigated further in the second part of the text. The third section analyses the case of the Serbian radical right and its civilisationism, while the last part brings this to the intersection with the Ukrainian conflict and foreign fighters phenomenon.

Reactionary Internationalism

A call to scholars by MacKay and LaRoche (2018) "to re-examine reactionary politics–both in the discipline and in history more broadly" marked the opening of a new debate in the field of international relations. They identified the gap in contemporary scholarship, an absence of a reactionary theory that "likely shaped field's inattention to political reaction as such" (MacKay and LaRoche 2018, 1). Moreover, they argued that contemporary politics are marked by political reactions, either in the form of Western nativism or Islamist radicalism, which constitute a global trend with little systematic insight into or understanding of it. Being rooted in liberal idealism and non-reactionary realism, IR theories have not explored this recurring feature of international politics.

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This political reaction espouses the restoration of the past political order, asserting its superiority over the present. "Reactionaries believe in a lost prior order that is constitutive of the good life or conditions for human flourishing, recognize a specific event or a process that destroyed it, and blame some actor, group, or event for that destructive change" (MacKay and LaRoche 2018, 2). They begin by constructing an idealised past, which is a baseline for judging the present and future. In addition, they identify an event or process (e.g., globalisation) that ruined the previous order and attach it to certain actors or groups (liberal elites). Finally, they contextualise their endeavours into the framework of Western (post)modernity, which is the overarching cause of the political reaction. In short, this discourse employs self-victimisation as a mobilisation and resistance strategy. Its advocates identify themselves with meta-historical narratives of victimhood and an 'underdog' position, offering future greatness (e.g., 'Make America Great Again') in contrast to current humiliation (Al-Ghazzi 2021). Zhang (2023) argues that reactionaries employ postcolonial nationalism and anticolonial rhetoric to legitimise their politics and mobilise subaltern identities in a Western-dominated world.

We can trace the intellectual origins of political reaction to De Maistre's rejection of Enlightenment rationalism and defence of idealised hierarchical political tradition, Nietzsche's radical criticism of Western philosophy and antimodernism, Spengler's civilisationism and the 'decline of the West,' Schmitt's antiliberalism, De Benoist's and Faye's New Right, and Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism[2] (MacKay and LaRoche 2018; De Orellana and Michelsen 2019; Sanahuja and Burian 2020; Laruelle 2008; Drolet and Williams 2018). The radical right has borrowed certain ideas, such as cultural hegemony and counter-hegemonic struggle, from Gramsci and other left-wing intellectuals (Abrahamsen et al. 2020). Despite their diversity, all these influences, founded on traditional values and rejection of the modern order, aim to transform the world radically.

Contemporary reactionaries are also commonly associated with isolationism. However, this is rarely the case. In fact, they have developed "a relatively coherent programme for an internationalist future: a radical remake of internationalism as a normative architecture", which De Orellana and Michelsen (2019, 3) designate as 'reactionary internationalism' (see also Sanahuja and Burian 2020). Motadel (2019) explains that this phenomenon is not new. Transnational cooperation between right-wing movements is as old as the movements. Nationalism and internationalism have always intertwined. Therefore, rejecting liberal internationalism does not make the radical right isolationist but rather reactionary.

Reactionary internationalism is a crucial conceptual, discursive, and policy framework that unites different organisations and individuals of the radical right. Sanahuja and Burian (2020) explain this form of internationalism as a new expression of Schmitt's 'friend-enemy' distinction, where everything threatening traditional identities and values represents an enemy. Reactionary internationalism is grounded in cultural identity-based subjectivity, resistance to liberal norms, and the restructuring of the international normative system. It draws criticism of modernity and its universalist norms (particularly those related to individualism, minority rights, gender, and the LGBTQ+ population) from preceding nationalist traditions. Modernity is often interpreted in this discourse as cultural degeneration and self-cancellation, while universalist norms are seen as attempts to erase cultural identities and distinctiveness (Michelsen 2022). This form of universalism is considered a totalitarian concept and a threat to national security and the nation. Rejecting universalism is crucial for reactionaries. Particular cultural belonging and putting back national identity to the position it once held is the essence of their political programme (De Orellana and Michelsen 2019).

For example, one of the crucial components of reactionary internationalism is the anti-migration narrative, since individuals are considered bound by their birth cultures, which globalist norms should not disrupt. Therefore, the source of the problem is not the subjectivity of migrants themselves, but international norms. Cultural diversity is welcomed. However, only to be cultivated and managed through segregation. Reactionaries believe that sources of problems, in general, are international, and only restructuring international norms to liberate cultural identity's potential can

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eradicate them. De Orellana and Michelsen (2019, 11) argue that "they focus on unravelling 'imperialist' international norms, so as to 'unshackle' nations from restrictions on economic, identity, or gender power". They are committed to "defending the principles of order, family, property, and nationality in all countries" (Motadel 2019, 78) against the globalising hegemonic order and its ideology of cosmopolitanism (Sanahuja and Burian 2020).

Reactionaries interpret politics as a confrontation between international institutions and technocratic elites on the one hand and themselves as representatives of ordinary people and defenders of national interests on the other. Based on sovereigntist nationalism, anti-globalism, and anti-elitism, reactionary internationalism is profoundly populist both horizontally and vertically. In the vertical dimension, this confrontation is presented as between 'the people' and 'the elite.' The people are rendered as "virtuous, struggling, hard-working, plain spoken, and endowed with common sense", while the elite is seen as "corrupt, self-serving, paralysed by political correctness, and… out of touch or indifferent to the concerns and problems of ordinary people" (Brubaker 2017, 1192). Reactionary movements have emerged, at least partly, due to the structural crisis of liberal order that divided the world population into 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation. The dissatisfaction of the latter with the contemporary order provided the radical right with a social base for their political project (Sanahuja and Burian 2020, 25). These 'left behinds' are "those still tied to locality, who experience migration or cultural cosmopolitanism as a threat… who hold onto tradition, to their inherited communities and prejudices, even as they are being eroded by globalization" (Abrahamsen et al. 2020, 98).

This brings us to the horizontal dimension of populism, the opposition between 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' those who share our values and belong to our nation, and those who are a threat to all of that – such as globalisation, international institutions, Islamist extremism, migrants, and so forth (Abrahamsen et al. 2020; Brubaker 2017). As a result, a Schmittian 'identifiable enemy' (Drolet and Williams 2018, 301) in the discourse of reactionary internationalism can take the shape of alienated and corrupted globalising elites, terrorist groups, criminals, minorities, and migrants. They all represent a threat to traditional values and grounded communities, often expressed through 'culture wars' against abstract individualism and superficial humanitarianism, political correctness, multiculturalism, sexual diversity and gender ideology, or liberal order in general (Sanahuja and Burian 2020). Since this distinction between the in-group and out-group is highly normative and embedded in existential values, it generates distinguishing civilisational discourses that closely link tradition, religion, and nation.

Nationalism, Religion, and Civilisation

In the retrotopian discourse of reactionary internationalism, nationalism and religion play essential roles. They tie individuals to their grounded communities and link the idealised past with a preferred future, thus serving as modes of identification, social organisation, and a way of framing political claims. Brubaker (2011) delineated four distinct approaches to studying this religion-nationalism nexus: religion and nationalism as analogous concepts, religion as a concept that helps explain nationalism, religion as a part of nationalism, and religious nationalism as a distinctive form of nationalism (for a more systematic typology see Akturk 2022).

In the last two situations, religion is closely intertwined with nationalism, and it is almost impossible to discern one from another. Their borders coincide; religion serves as a diacritical marker of ethno-national belonging and the primary source of ethno-national content. Religious myths, metaphors, and symbols are central to the representation of a nation. A symbiosis of religion and nationalism "joins state, territory and culture primarily by focusing on family, gender and sexuality: by defending the traditional family, as the key generative site of social reproduction and moral socialisation, against economic and cultural forces that weaken its authority or socialising power" (Brubaker 2011, 13). Another rising manifestation of this amalgamation is civilisationism or civilisational nationalism (Verkhovskii and Pain 2012). It is a discourse that transcends national

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particularities, creating a supranational space legitimised through religious appeals and shared values. References to (Judeo)Christian, Orthodox, Western, European, Eurasian, or even Russian civilisation became regular in political debate, most notably in the radical right discourse. Civilisationism plays a fundamental role in reactionary internationalism, as a doctrine of reimagining and restructuring international order. It transcends nation-states and their 'petty differences,' offering a vision of new 'empires' embedded into religious cosmologies (Akturk 2022, 211).

Civilisational ideas are both national and global, as they encapsulate the international dimensions inherent in internal values. They serve three interconnected functions: cultural (linking historical meanings to everyday narratives), explanatory (offering a perspective on the current international system), and normative (providing recommendations for a desired future). In this context, civilisations should not be understood as fixed entities; rather, they represent a constellation of ideas, cognitive frameworks, and a set of culturally distinct values that shape human understanding and experience (Tsygankov 2016, 3; Tsygankov 2023, 17-24). Other authors define them as 'imagined communities', 'discursive commonplaces' (Hale and Laruelle 2021, 2-3), or even 'empty signifiers' (Turoma and Mjør 2020, 2; see also O'Hagan 2007).

Brubaker (2017) argues that national populism in the Northern and Western Europe has recently shifted from a more traditional notion of nationalism to civilisationism, constructing the distinction between national 'self' and 'other' in broader civilisational terms. He identifies preoccupation with Islam as a dominant factor that gave rise "to an identitarian 'Christianism'" and "a secularist posture" (Brubaker 2017, 1193; see also Morieson 2021). The central feature of civilisationism is the appropriation of religion in a more secular manner as a civilisational marker between different groups of nations or cultures. Religion here has more to do with shared values and a sense of belonging than piety, beliefs, or worship practices. The radical right embraces Christianity as an antithetical opposition to Islam, a way to minimise its visibility in public. Alternatively, right-wing radicals frame this opposition as the clash between those 'fundamentally emancipated from God' and 'religious cultures.' There are two dominant 'others' in this discourse: Islam and/or secular liberalism (Tjalve 2021, 334).

Political elites appropriated civilisationism to simplify the global world's complexity and to identify their national groups with larger geopolitical and cultural communities. Such identification is mediated by national and religious identities (Hale and Laruelle 2020, 4). For instance, civilisational discourse became part of the Russian foreign policy doctrine in the 2000s to legitimise policies limiting Western influences (to 'unlearn the West') and justify practices related to great-power status (Tsygankov 2016; Linde 2016; Tsygankov 2023, 37-44). "The Putin regime has associated civilization mostly with Europe as a way to claim Russia's legitimate right to be part of European civilization and therefore to have a say in the continent's affairs, or has asserted Russia's status as a unique state-civilization that would be immune to Western standards and a bearer of its own value scale" (Hale and Laruelle 2021, 6). The concept of state-civilisation is rooted in the idea of Russia's 'special path', which positions this state and its sovereign as leaders in global affairs. The natural territorial-political structure of the Russian state-civilisation is an empire, where ethnic Russians serve as the core that unites this state and its multi-ethnic civilisation. This concept rejects a mono-ethnic state as contrary to Russian tradition and history. What binds different ethnic groups into one civilisation is their adherence to Russian civilisational values. Russian state-civilisation is frequently contrasted with Western civilisation due to the perceived departure from religious and family values of the latter (Verkhovskii and Pain 2012, 8; Tsygankov 2016, 6; Malinova 2020, 28; Tsygankov 2023, 38). Hale and Laruelle (2020) discovered that presidents Putin and Medvedev used the term 'civilisation' in their official speeches and statements 288 times between 2000 and 2013/2014. In this period, Russia was mostly identified with European civilisation, to be substituted in the 2010s with the notion of Christian civilisation, not limited to Eastern Orthodoxy. That was part of Putin's 'reactionary turn' after the colour revolutions in Russia's 'near abroad' and 'liberal protests' against his regime in 2011/2012 (Shekhovtsov 2018). He introduced pan-European Christian civilisationism to disassociate Russia from liberal Europe while preserving its status as

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the core of authentic European civilisation under assault. Russia also identified itself with Eurasian civilisation as a bridge between West and East, and a distinctive Russian civilisation ('Russian World') transcending Russian ethnicity and reflecting its plurality. "[I]n his address announcing Russia's annexation of Crimea… Putin declared that Grand Prince Vladimir's adoption of Orthodox Christianity on that peninsula over a millennium ago had laid the 'civilizational foundation' that today unites Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus" (Hale and Laruelle 2020, 5).

Since the reappropriation of Europe is at the heart of the radical right's concerns, this Russian discourse resonates well with the rhetoric of European reactionaries, such as Hungarian leader Orbán, whose notion of 'illiberal democracy' was supplemented by his excessive references to Christian democracy, and Christendom as the essential core of European identity. "God, homeland and the heterosexual family" was his motto (Gianoncelli 2021). Other radical right organisations, namely the FPÖ, RN, and Lega, or the US-based World Congress of Families (WCF), also developed strong ties with Russia, supporting its civilisational discourse (Shekhovtsov 2018; Tjalve 2021). However, long before Putin's 'civilisational turn,' the radical right had associated Russia with its notion of European civilisation based on traditional and spiritual values.

In 1989, leading Russian right-wing intellectual Dugin met De Benoist, 'the father' of the European New Right movement, whom he still considers "the foremost intellectual in Europe" (Crone 2021, 322; Shekhovtsov 2018). As a result, Dugin served as the node of the European New Right for years to come, transposing their ideas into Russian soil. New Right rejected the vocabulary of fascism and racism, substituting the concept of 'race' with 'ethno-pluralism.' However, it revived the classical geopolitical ideas of Carl Schmitt, Julius Evola, Slavophiles and Eurasianists. They combined Schmitt's notions of *Grossraum* and *Reich* with Evola's concept of the 'spiritual empire' to suggest that the post-liberal world order should have a pronounced spiritual dimension as a remedy for the ills of the liberal world (Hooker 2009; Furlong 2011). The New Right envisioned a Paris-Berlin-Moscow-axis with Russia as the centre of gravity of the post-Atlantic world order, an apparent concession to Eurasianism, and a belief that Russia can only survive as a great power (Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017). According to Dugin, Eurasia is associated with "'a plurality of value systems', 'tradition', 'the rights of nations', 'ethnicities as the primary value and the subjects of history', and 'social fairness and human solidarity'" (Shekhovtsov 2018, 43). As Katzenstein and Weygandt (2017, 428) suggest, it is a 'catch-all' vision "that accommodates civilizational, geopolitical, nationalist, religious, anti-globalist, anti-Western and other ideas."

In this Russian civilisational imagination of the new global order, Serbia has been given a particular role, being one of the first post-Cold War countries that stood up against NATO and the West (Laruelle 2009, 31; Vukasović and Stojadinović 2023, 135-136). It is often referred to as "the bastion of the Slavic world," a country that went through "'martyrdom', 'crucifixion', and… 'Golgotha path'" (Suslov 2023b, 95). Putin regularly reaffirms this notion. In his interview with Tucker Carlson, he stated that Russia felt compelled to defend Serbs (against NATO in 1999) because of the strong cultural and historical ties between the two nations, Serbs' exceptionalism, rich Orthodox culture, and long-lasting suffering (Politika 2024). Less than a month later, he underlined this bond again: "Relations between Russia and Serbia are of a special nature, with deep historical roots. I always speak about this with warmth because for centuries – and I want to stress this – the Serbs have been Russia's most reliable allies. We know, remember, and appreciate that" (TANJUG 2024).

Radical Right and Civilisationism in Serbia: 'Saving Europe from Itself'

Scholarly literature has almost completely ignored the problem of the radical right in Serbia, with only one notable exception (Tomić 2013). However, this issue has been addressed indirectly as a part of debates on far-right (Stefanovic 2008; Stojarova 2013; Petrović 2024), populism and nationalism (Berend 2020; Vranić 2020; Spasojević 2023),radicalisation and extremism (Tepšić 2023; Tepšić and Džuverović 2023), and authoritarianism (Jović 2004; Vladisavljević 2014;

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Radeljić 2018; Bieber 2020; Castaldo 2020). While it did not directly address the issue of the radical right, this literature outlined several factors that contributed to the reproduction, dissemination, and acceptance of illiberal and radical ideas in Serbia. These factors include the persistence of an authoritarian political culture, the presence of strong leadership, the phenomenon of a captured state, and power legitimising official memories. One of the reasons for neglecting the radical right in Serbia was that many political parties in post-Yugoslav space instrumentalised nationalism as "their main interpretational frame," which distorted the distinction between radical and moderate right-wing organisations (Tomić 2013, 103). The wars in the 1990s normalised ethnic narratives in post-Yugoslav states, resulting in the mainstreaming of exclusivist nationalism fostered by the state and the media (Tomić 2013; Tepšić 2023).

In this context, Serbian ethno-nationalist organisations resurfaced at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, after nearly fifty years of socialist single-party dictatorship. The new nationalism revived pre-Second World War ethnic and religious traditions, while the Yugoslav wars provided new polarising content. Political organisations such as the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and Serb Democratic Party (in Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), supported by Milošević's regime, wholly determined the development of Serb national ideas in the 1990s, turning radical ethno-nationalism into mainstream political ideology among the Serb population (Tepšić and Džuverović 2023). The Serbian radical right, and nationalism in general, came out of the Yugoslav wars as a reactionary force in both geopolitical and civilisational terms.

Even during the post-Milošević democratic transition (2000-2012), the SRS remained the most popular party in Serbia, further promoting illiberal ideas associated with the radical right. In 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by former leaders of the SRS, won the elections. The new regime gradually reintroduced a style of authoritarianism reminiscent of the 1990s and fostered a political culture focused on strong leadership (Radeljić 2018; Bieber 2020; Castaldo 2020). Additionally, the ideas that emerged during the wars of the 1990s regained prominence and political significance after 2012. These developments resulted in the rehabilitation of the 1990s and the advancement of narratives originating from that era.

Dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the 1990s wars – the expulsion of the Serb population from Croatia, the reintegration of the Republic of Srpska into Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the secessions of Montenegro and Kosovo – placed political reaction at the very core of the nationalist ideology in Serbia. Following this series of 'defeats,' Serb nationalists felt humiliated and frustrated, blaming the local communist and international liberal elites for their failures.[3] As a result, they developed a conspiracy mentality—which is a common trait of societal crises—to maintain a positive image of the self and justify hostility toward out-groups (Petrović et al. 2019, 62). The list of the most popular conspiracy theories and their main plotters included: "1) The Vatican, 2) World Jewry, 3) The Comintern, 4) Islamic fundamentalism, 5) USA-led imperialism, 6) Freemasons, 7) Coca-Cola and jeans culture, 8) Plutocracy, 9) Decadent Western civilization, and 10) 'Democracy'" (Bulić 2011, 193; see also Blanuša 2021).

This was a period of complete disillusionment with the West. The decision of the USA and European countries to back 'Serb enemies,' especially Muslim Bosniaks and Albanians, was interpreted as unjust and unprincipled — a reflection of Western civilisation's 'degeneration' and 'decadence.' The spread of this anti-Western and anti-globalist sentiment gave the reactionary politics of the Serbian radical right a civilisational dimension. Civilisationism was also evident in the public debates between 'First' Serbia and 'Other' Serbia. The former represented the nationalist, Eurosceptic right, while the latter signified the liberal, pro-Western left. "In simple terms, the First Serbia discourse is identified as being dominated by themes of tradition, religion and a highly victim-centered understanding of history, with a nationalistic orientation which frequently puts emphasis on an illiberal value system" (Russell-Omaljev 2016, 20). However, First Serbia should not be characterised as anti-European. On the contrary, it founded its ideological framework upon the principles of 'old European civilisation' (Ibidem, 131-155). According to this discourse, the defeat of the liberal order led by NATO and EU was no longer just a geopolitical precondition for the

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reunification of the 'Serb lands' but also a requirement for returning to a 'true Europe,' a 'Europe of nations,' grounded in traditional values of social order, Christianity, ethnic identities, and family (Tepšić 2023).

Therefore, the Serbian radical right shares the idea of appropriating the concept of 'Europe' by contesting its conventional interpretations and promoting the different notions of Europeanness (Gianoncelli 2021). The appropriation of Europe rooted in Christian values characterises radical ethno-nationalist narratives in Serbia. These narratives define Islam as the enemy of Europe and underline the historical role of Serbia as the defender of Christendom, with the central national myth built around the Battle of Kosovo fought in 1389 (Humphreys 2022; Đorđević et al. 2023). According to this discourse, Serbs defended Europe from the Ottomans for centuries, as well as from Bosniak and Albanian Islam during the 1990s and again from Muslim migrants from the 2010s onward. For example, one of the interviewees compared migrants to Albanians, implying that the latter colonised and seized Serb lands (Kosovo), and that the same can happen with the former.[4] Certain reactionary organisations and individuals worldwide, ranging from radical right parties, such as the RN, AfD, and FPÖ, to far-right terrorists, like Anders Breivik and Brent Tarrant, have recognised this 'historical role' of Serbs, giving Serb nationalism a unique position in a reactionary internationalism (Schwartz 2022; Kosovo Online 2023; Barlovac 2011; Živanović 2019).

Furthermore, modern Serb nationalism has almost completely abandoned the idea of secularism, fitting into the last two Brubaker's (2011) categories: 'religion as a part of nationalism' and clerical nationalism. Even so, this is not just a consequence of the 1990s defeats or a mere reflection of global trends. This is mainly due to the specific position of the church in Orthodox Christian countries. The Serbian Orthodox Church is considered the founder of the nation and is inseparably connected to its political evolution (see Cvetković 2022). Grzymala-Busse (2015, 2) argues that the political power of churches is directly related to their historical record of defending the nation and thus gaining moral authority within society. Historically, the church in Serbia played the role of a proto-state, whereas Serb Orthodoxy served as a proto-ethnic identity. The relationship between the church and state in Orthodox Christianity, in general, is known as 'symphonia,' a 'system of co-reciprocity,' where these two institutions are neither interdependent nor wholly separated. The demarcation line between the church and state remains unclear, leaving space for religious and political leaders to intervene in each other's domains (Leustean 2008; Falina 2007).

The church also gave the central intellectual figure of clerical nationalism and civilisationism to Serbia – Nikolaj Velimirović. Velimirović (canonised as St. Nikolaj of Serbia) was an archbishop from 1920 until he died in 1956 and is considered one of the most influential figures in the church's history. With his circle of followers organised around the "God Worshiper Movement," he predominantly shaped clerical nationalism in Serbia, known under the term – 'nationalism of St. Sava' (*Svetosavski nacionalizam* or *Svetosavlje*).[5] According to Falina (2021, 17), this specific form of nationalism was a "fusion between religious and 'tribal' identities" that "sought to reshape society and move it away from the failed democratic experiment and modern liberal values." Velimirović described it as evangelical nationalism based on the organic unity of religion and nation, church and state. In the aftermath of the First World War, he began criticising Western European capitalist culture and progress, disclosing it as soulless and full of despair while counterposing the values of St. Sava as a "true European who created the oldest nationalism in Europe, a nationalism the whole of Europe should look upon" (Velimirović 1935). For Velimirović, the West and the East were in constant schism, symbolised by Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Dostoevsky's *Svečovek* ('all-human'): "If the West were to go to war with Russia tomorrow, the West would lead a war in the name of Nietzsche… in the name of its egoism, while Russia would fight the war in the name of Dostoevsky… in the name of Christ, in the name of all-human union and brotherhood" (Lubardić 2015, 347).

Following Velimirović's work, a cleric and theology professor, Justin Popović (St. Justin, 1894-1979), explained that they were against Europe because it had betrayed God, substituting it with humanism, rationalism, and individualism (Cvetković 2022, 473). Europe placed a man in God's

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place, making him a measure of everything. By betraying Christ in the name of progress, atheist Europe caused the greatest regress in world history, leading humanity to war and other maladies. A remedy Popović offered for this 'ill civilisation' was Slavic messianism, deeply embedded in Pan-Slavic civilisation and Orthodox spirituality (Prpa 2018, 327-330). 'Godless Europe' was to be confronted with Serb nationalism, depicted by Velimirović as "a frame, in which the icon of Christ stands" (Novosti 2003). For him, the only way to reinstate authentic Europe was through self-renunciation and returning to true Orthodox faith.

Works of Velimirović, Popović, and others created a philosophical foundation for the Serbian radical 'rebellion' against 'corrupted and decadent' Western civilisation. They recognised this situation as Europe's cry for help and a need to be saved from itself. Nonetheless, the 'nationalism of St. Sava' was not ethnocentric or autarchical. On the contrary, it had many different aspects: national, supranational, pan-Slavic, evangelical, and all-human (Falina 2007, 523). In a nutshell, it was civilisational. Falina (2007, 527) argues that "precisely this ambiguity of the language and the message" of 'nationalism of St. Sava' enabled "it to be so popular in present-day Serbia." Although the socialist period interrupted the reproduction of this discourse, the church and Serbian diaspora preserved it to return to Serbian society at the end of the 1980s and through the 1990s. Its influence is notable among today's radical right. Of the four radical right parties that entered the Serbian parliament in 2022, Dveri directly adheres to this form of nationalism,[6] while the rest–Zavetnici, the New Democratic Party of Serbia, and the Kingdom of Serbia Renewal Movement–refer to it more indirectly.[7] Moreover, the SNS regime has facilitated an increased presence of radical ideas within media and public discourse. This development has fostered the normalisation and mainstream acceptance of this ideology, effectively shifting the political spectrum in Serbia further to the right (Petrović 2024, 82-84; Tepšić 2023, 19).

Therefore, the present-day radical right ideology in Serbia, sometimes categorised as the 'Serb Paradigm,'[8] adopts "Orthodox Christianity as a fundamental determinant of Serb identity,"[9] with the Kosovo Myth as its cornerstone. This is followed by the idea of Serb integrations, a union of 'Serb historical lands' (or the 'Serbian World'), namely Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and Montenegro.[10] Another important position in this discourse is the rejection of 'gender and LGBTQ+ ideology' as "totalitarian and very aggressive… and against Constitution, the teachings of all traditional religious communities, public moral, and family values".[11] The Serbian radical right declaratively rejects racism and chauvinism, although they often question or reject minority and migrant rights. They also discard the division of politics into right-wing and left-wing, identifying mainly with patriotism, sovereignism, traditionalism, conservatism, and Christian democracy. They have well-developed international cooperation with their counterparts from France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Russia, as well as supranational organisations such as the WCF, Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), and the International Movement of Russophiles (Gaspar 2023; Dveri 2023; Holzer et al. 2019, 220-225). Russia has a central position in this discourse since, as one of the respondents explained, "it is closer to us in terms of faith and spirituality":[12] "There is nothing so beautiful, wonderful, fulfilling and solemn in this world as Orthodoxy and the culture that sprang from its cradle [Russia]" (Jović 2022, 176).

Serbian civilisationism was formed under the influence of Russian spirituality, culture, and philosophy. Both Velimirović and Popović were inspired by Russian pan-Slavism and Slavophilism (Cvetković 2022, 460; Lubardić 2015; Đorđević et al. 2023). Their teachings echoed the ideas of early Slavophiles (e.g., Ivan Kireyevsky, Aleksey Khomyakov, Konstantin Aksakov, and Nikolay Danilevsky) and Russian church nationalism (or *Russian idea*, e.g., Nikolai Berdyaev and Vladimir Solovyov). The ideas, such as the superiority of the Orthodox religion—as a "supra-individual spiritual togetherness" and "living organism of truth and love"—over the Western civilisation 'infected' by rationalism, atheism, and egotism, and a consequential clash of civilisations, made the foundation of the Serbian civilisational discourse (Dimou 2009, 113-114; see also Holzer et al. 2019; Suslov 2023a). However, the greatest inspiration for Velimirović and Popović was the religious teachings of Fyodor M. Dostoevsky. They considered him a martyr, prophet, and apostle of

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Orthodox Christianity (Cvetković 2022). Dostoevsky's 'Orthodox realism' was an underpinning idea of their social-religious teachings. This 'realism in a higher sense' does not confine itself to positivist, visible reality but also includes a spiritual dimension of the human soul (Tarasov, in Marinković 2020, 22). In other words, reality is twofold: physical (material) and spiritual (Popović, in Marinković 2020, 153). The perspective of Orthodox realism led Dostoyevsky and others to foresee the downfall of the West for disregarding the spiritual dimension of human life, abandoning Christ and forsaking the immortality of the soul. Accordingly, they called for saving Europe through its ecumenical synthesis with Orthodox Christianity and Russia, a new 'Noah's Ark' (Marinković 2020, 35-41).

Representatives of the contemporary radical right in Serbia espouse similar ideological tenets. Like Velimirović and Popović, they have been anticipating the 'final war' between the West and the East since the 1990s Yugoslav conflicts, recognising Russia as a forthcoming liberator of Europe. In his 2007 essay, Marko Marković (1924-2012), an ideologue of the Serbian radical right, argued that the West had conspired against Orthodox Christian and Muslim civilisations, provoking their mutual destruction (in the Balkans and the Caucasus), with the final aim of crushing Russia. The destruction of Yugoslavia and the war in Chechnya were the first steps in this endeavour, which should be followed by conflicts between Orthodox Christian nations, such as Ukrainians and Russians. Marković believed that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine would lead to the Third World War and the destruction of Europe. Consequently, he suggested that only the alliance of Orthodox Christians, which could attract Muslims, would prevent this catastrophe (Marković [2007] 2023, 211-212).

Thus, in this civilisational discourse, the Ukrainian conflict marked the beginning of that 'final war': "That 'something big' that we all expected too much, that great battle between the West and Russia in this new Cold War, has finally begun, and the world will never be the same again. Will it be better after this? I do not know that, but it could not have been much worse than this world we are confined to" (Jović 2022, 215-216). According to the same discourse, the 'special relations' between Serbia and Russia are not merely based on political or economic interests, i.e., Russian support for the Serbian position on Kosovo, energetics, etc. (Vukasović and Stojadinović 2023). On the contrary, this bond is substantial, spiritual, almost ontological, best portrayed by a common catchphrase in Serbia: 'Mother Russia' (Humphreys 2022, 154); or as one of the Serbian fighters in Ukraine explained: "Russia is our sister, mother and brother…" (Helmcast 2023c), strongly reaffirming the idea of 'fictive kinship' (Rekawek 2023, 6).

Serbia, Russia, and Ukraine: The 'Final War' Begins

Research on foreign fighters[13] gained prominence in the 2000s after media coverage of their violent clashes in post-2003 Iraq (Malet 2015). Most of the research has covered Islamists related to wars in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria (Moore and Tumelty 2008; Hegghammer 2010; Borum and Fein 2017). The 2014 War in Ukraine has drawn the attention of researchers to the far-right's intersection with foreign fighters as a possible security threat to the EU (Rekawek 2017; Murauskaite 2020; Kaunert et al. 2023). This pursuit further led to studies of pro-Russian fighters' mobilisation in Europe (Marone 2023; Toscano and Grippo 2023; Guerra 2024) and the divisions within the European far-right caused by the war in Ukraine (Guerra 2023a, 2023b). Nevertheless, only one comprehensive study on foreign fighters in Ukraine has been published to date (Rekawek 2023). According to this report, there were at least 700 European right-wingers among the 17000 foreign fighters (mostly Russians) in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, fighting on both sides (Rekawek 2023, 2). This study analyses the actions of foreign fighters from Western, Central, and Eastern European countries, including the Balkans.

Rekawek (2023, 13) recognises Serbian fighters as "one of the most significant… contingents in the war in Ukraine". In the first years of the Ukrainian conflict, Serbia (together with the Republic of Srpska) was among its principal providers of foreign fighters since the traditional Russian-Serbian

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ties "proved [to be] a useful conduit for recruitment of fighters into the 'separatist' ranks" (Rekawek 2023, 211). Reports from 2017 estimated their number between 100 and 300 (Tepšić 2023, 19; Holzer et al. 2019, 224), while one of the returnees from Ukraine gave a figure of approximately 200–250 Serbian fighters in Ukraine.[14] The influx of Serbian volunteers resumed following Russia's announcement of mobilising military reserves in September 2022. This time, the Russian Federation has granted these individuals legal status and contracts to serve as part of their official army rather than as paramilitaries (Berić 2023b). As a result, the number of Serbian fighters in Ukraine between 2014 and 2024 is probably much higher than previously estimated. According to their own sources (Berić 2023a; 2023d), Serbs are the most numerous foreign fighters in the Russian army. Rekawek (2023, 129) confirms this assessment, at least for the period between 2014 and 2022, stating that "[t]he Serbian contingent in the war in Ukraine was possibly the biggest of all of the European ones present on the front lines."

The EU Institute for Security Studies characterised these volunteers as "veterans of Yugoslav wars, social misfits connected to far-right organisations who… want to 'repay' Russian fighters for their involvement in Yugoslav wars" (Tepšić 2023, 19). According to Rekawek (2023, 130), most of them were motivated by Pan-Orthodox and Pan-Slavic sentiments and their perception of war "as an anti-establishment fight against the West, against NATO". Based on my interviews and an extensive analysis of social media content, it can be inferred that sentiment-related explanations hold a crucial position in the discourse of Serbian fighters. One of the interviewees explained that his motivation to join the war was primarily led by a sense of "common belonging to the Orthodox civilisation."[15] In addition, the situation with Russians in Donbas reminded him of the Serb exodus from Croatia (1995). He wanted to contribute to the prevention of a similar scenario and struggle against the regime in Kyiv, which he compared to the Nazi occupation.

From the perspective of Serbian volunteers, this conflict was neither religious nor ethnic. It is, above all, civilisational. "On one side, there were representatives of Russian civilisation (that we can observe as independent, or as a part of larger Eastern Orthodox civilisation, or even as a part of Judeo-Christian civilisation), while on the other side, there were representatives of Western civilisation (political West), who did not fight directly, but through their 'infantry' in the field, through Ukrainians, in a manner of all Cold-War conflicts and proxy wars" (Jović 2022, 107-108). Nonetheless, Russian civilisation is "not exclusively Orthodox since Soviet heritage is present as well… it has an integralist approach, as they are all members of one Russian nation, which does not consist of only [ethnic] Russians".[16] This 'pluralist civilisation' wants "to resist fascism in the same way their ancestors did over 70 years ago." "It is a continuation of the Second World War, where the USA has taken the role of the Third Reich, with its accomplices of the EU and NATO. This is only one of many global battlegrounds against globalism and imperialism… which are trying to conquer the whole world."[17]

The current conflict, although not religious, is motivated by religious sentiments as evidenced by statements such as "Orthodox Christianity gives me the courage to fight" and "We have to turn to God, to the kingdom of heaven" (Simić 2023). It is worth noting that the motivation to participate in this conflict is not limited to religious beliefs alone, but includes a broader spiritual dimension: "You put yourself in a position to defend your faith, fatherland, home, family… There is a spiritual dimension to it."[18] The aforementioned accounts perfectly exemplify the doctrines of radical right-wing ideologues that juxtaposed the perceived spirituality of the East with the materialism of the West.

Most Serbian fighters who went public with their personal stories shared this discourse, such as their central figure, Dejan Berić, who also served as the recruiter of Serbian volunteers on the Ukrainian battleground (also a member of Putin's People's Front). In the documentary "A Sniper's War," Berić, a veteran and decorated hero of the Donbas War, revealed that he joined the conflict to repay Russia for supporting Serbia and to prevent the same destruction that occurred in Yugoslavia. He accused the USA of destroying his former homeland, which he believed was "one of the best countries in the world" (Berić 2022a). On another occasion, he stated that religion, homeland, and

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family were all vital to him. "Life without religion is wrong since then you can do whatever you want. Thanks to religion, I believe that everything I have done [in war] has been done properly" (Berić 2022b). Berić was also involved in setting up one of the Serbian-Russian groups in Ukraine called 'Wolves' (part of the Russian Armed Forces Tula Division),also known as 'Red Berets' (Berić 2023d). The name was taken from the infamous Serbian paramilitary formation from the 1990s (Tepšić and Džuverović 2023) as a tribute to its members and "all they did for the protection of Serbhood" (Berić 2023c). In March 2023, Berić participated, together with the representatives of Dveri, in the founding congress of the International Movement of Russophiles held in Moscow. After Congress, they gave a joint statement indicating that Russia plans to help Serbia in its resistance against NATO (in Kosovo) after it deals with Ukraine (Berić 2023a).

Other volunteers characterised their participation in the war as directed against satanism and for God-loving piety; as a continuation of the 1990s struggle against NATO; as a war against Western imperialism, Nazism, and human rights terror; as a struggle for Serbian national interests ("This is the place where Kosovo is being defended.") and geopolitical changes that would lead to their fulfilment; and as fighting for the free and just world (Helmcast 2023a; 2023b). All these stories demonstrate the banalisation of reactionary internationalism and civilisational discourses, which allows them to easily spread through different channels of communication and reach out to new supporters and allies among 'left behinds' and dissatisfied with the global world. As Morozov (2015; 2021) argues, Putin has successfully developed an ideological affinity with the global radical right by claiming to represent the weak and deprived ('subaltern empire') and to be the only one who can challenge the global Western hegemonic order. In this interpretation, the conflict in Ukraine is not just a challenge to Russian interests but a frontal assault on the core values of Russian civilisation and a plurality of civilisational views and discourses in general (Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017; Suslov 2023b).

In his speeches, Putin frequently emphasised the defence of traditional values and spiritual and moral foundations of civilisations: "We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan…" (Shekhovtsov 2018, 85). This is often interpreted as a call for "an all-consuming struggle against global liberalism" and creating an "anti-globalist and anti-imperialist front," as Dugin suggested. Such a front should gather all "the forces that struggle against the West, the United States, against liberal democracy, and modernity and post-modernity… This means Muslims and Christians, Russians and Chinese, both Leftists and Rightists, the Hindus and Jews… They are thus all virtually friends and allies…" (Drolet and Williams 2018, 304). Perhaps the best example of the embodiment of this discourse is the role Russia's Chechen forces have in the Ukrainian conflict. One of their commanders, Apti Alaudinov, explained their mission as a "holy war against the Antichrist," reaffirming Russian partnership with the Islamic world: "All forces and units fighting on the side of Russia is the army of Jesus, Isa Alaihis Salam. We are fighting against these forces that impose upon us everything… unpleasant and disliked by God. Everything… unnatural for a man" (Knox 2022).

As already suggested, this discourse adopts the rhetoric of postcolonial nationalism, defined as "the production, consumption, and mobilization of narratives of national identity capitalizing on victimhood or subalternity, articulated through a (post-)colonial relationality to the site of the hegemonic… often designated as the international, the West, or the European" (Zhang 2023, 2). In the global South, this discourse "has fixated on the anticolonial moment to perpetuate a sense of victimhood vis-à-vis the West" (Al-Ghazzi 2021, 51). In India, besides colonialism, Muslim invasions have been identified as a cause of the decline in Hindu civilisation. Chinese self-victimising narratives focus on Western and Japanese invasions preceding communist rule, denouncing "Western hegemony through a constant reactivation of collective memories of national humiliation" (Zhang 2023, 2). However, this is not just a characteristic of the global South's radical

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right, but a radical right in general. In the USA and other Western countries, 'Western imperialism' as a source of self-victimisation is only substituted with the 'political establishment and ideology of liberalism' (Al-Ghazzi 2021, 51), or even 'gender ideology,' 'political correctness' and 'wokeness' (Zhang 2023). Civilisationism of this kind, particularly Eurasianism, enabled Russia to present itself "as an eclectic friend to all of the West's rebels or rejects," thus creating "a potentially useful conduit towards undermining the West" and its liberal consensus (Rekawek 2023, 77). This led some authors to recognise the radical right as a 'fifth column' of the West (Chryssogelos 2010; Gude 2017).

Serbia and the New International Order

Numerous scholars (Acharya 2014; Ikenberry 2018; 2024; Parsi 2021; Michelsen 2022) have suggested that the international order is undergoing significant restructuring. Given this context, and with liberalism now reduced to one camp contested by others, what insights can we gather about this emerging global landscape from studying the Serbian radical right? If the arguments laid out in this article hold valid for Serbia, this raises the question of what other implications can be drawn from the findings and whether Serbia can serve as a paradigmatic case for the global radical right and its internationalism.

According to Flyvbjerg (2001, 79), a paradigmatic case should provide "a metaphor or establish a school for the domain which the case concerns". In the domain of reactionary internationalism, the case of the Serbian radical right fulfils all the criteria for a paradigmatic case, namely, the identification of a lost prior order, a specific event or process that destroyed it, and the actors responsible for that destruction. Serb nationalist discourse constructs retrotopia in the form of the 'Europe of nations' that preceded world wars, which were destroyed by communist and liberal elites. Accordingly, local communist elites fragmented the Serb nation by imposing an artificial Yugoslav state and creating new nations from the Serb ethnic group, whereas international liberal elites prevented the reunification of Serb ethnic lands in the post-Cold War period. This discourse provides the same argument for the 'maladies' of both communism and liberalism — the decadence of Western civilisation and its abandonment of traditional Christian values and identities. Therefore, Serb nationalism is reactionary in both geopolitical and civilisational terms, which makes it particularly appealing to the global radical right.

When the whole of Europe, including Russia, reconciled with the 'end of history,' Serb nationalism resisted it, anticipating the inevitable new conflict between the West and East in the post-Cold War world. In civilisational terms, it reaffirmed the role of religion and the church by promoting the interwar Orthodox criticism of the West. A new generation of intellectuals and activists venerated Velimirović and Popović as saints, echoing their teachings. For instance, one of the most influential bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church today, Irinej Bulović, explained that European civilisation and culture are no longer Christian. "The name of God has returned to the constitution of Russia, while in Brussels, they do not want to hear about it" (Rajević Savić 2021). Even the European Parliament addressed this issue a couple of times, such as in its resolution from March 2022: "[European Parliament] is concerned about the attempts by the Orthodox Church in countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina… to promote Russia as a protector of traditional family values and fortify relations between state and church".[19]

In addition to opposing secular and liberal Europe, Serb nationalism also confronted the perceived 'Islamic threat.' This has made Serb nationalism a figurehead of reactionary internationalism, as right-wing activists around the world have often pointed out. However, Islamophobia contradicts Russian civilisationism, which considers the Muslim world to be an essential ally in the fight against liberalism. In this sense, Russian influence could make Serb nationalism more inclusive towards reactionaries from the Islamic world. Recent support for Hamas and the Palestinians in the conflict with Israel indicates that this trend is taking place among Serbian right-wingers (Komarčević 2023).

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Lastly, Serb nationalism is profoundly postcolonial and deeply rooted in self-victimising narratives, subalternity, and the ideas of struggle against Western hegemony. It revolves around the contrasting relationship between the 'colonial underdogs'—Serbs, Slavs, or non-Westerners in general—and their 'corrupted masters', the US, the EU, or other Westerners (Suslov et al. 2023, 19). The latest example of this discourse was the 2023 elections in Serbia, when 'We - The Voice from the People' advocated decolonisation of Serbia, positioning it as a Western colony. This sort of rhetoric made Serb nationalism increasingly appealing to counterparts from the global South since Serbia has traditionally had cordial relations with African and Asian states from the time of Yugoslav leadership over the Non-Alignment Movement.

Such geopolitical position of the state, which involves proximity to both Russia and China ('ironclad friendship' and 'community with a shared future'), as well as participation in the EU accession process, has created an opportunity for Serbian reactionaries to act as a hub (in an ideational and material sense), establishing connections with their counterparts from the global South, East, and West. For instance, the Serbian People's Party, a pro-Russian political organisation and a member of the ruling regime in Serbia, organised a 2023 CPAC conference in Belgrade to connect Western and Indian radical right-wing organisations (Gaspar 2023). In another example, a pro-Russian French-led Continental Unity organisation that fought in Ukraine was established in Belgrade with the help of local radical right groups (Rekawek 2023, 92). These instances illustrate the mission assigned to Serbia in this new global order envisioned by the reactionary internationalists, which is to "become the centre of confessional dialogue and to serve as the avant-garde of non-Western, essentially Eurasian values in Europe" (Suslov 2023b, 98).

Conclusion

This article discusses the internationalist aspects of radical right ideology in the contemporary global world. It shows that although nationalism is embedded in particular cultural and religious identities, the radical right is neither isolationist nor excessively ethnocentric. In contrast, it has a relatively developed and coherent internationalist ideology – reactionary internationalism – rooted in what is considered widely shared civilisational (traditional) values. This form of internationalism opposes the liberal international order, (post)modernity, and its normative universalism, manifested through global financial and political institutions and elites, and universal norms related to individualism, multiculturalism, minorities, and gender. From the perspective of reactionary internationalism, liberal modernity resulted in cultural deterioration and self-cancellation, endangering ethno-national identities, religions, traditional family, and other core values all historical civilisations allegedly share.

Alternatively, reactionaries offer a radical remake to the international normative structure based on cultural identities and religious values. According to them, the projected structure should rest on the plurality of civilisations and value systems, with ethnicities as the primary subjects of history, followed by social fairness, human solidarity, and economic equality. This 'civilisational turn' has marked the second decade of the 21st century, continuously attracting new supporters. Russia, in particular, integrated civilisationism into its official policies, giving itself the status of the protector of Christian, Eurasian, Russian, and all other traditional civilisations, and a central position in reactionary internationalism.

In this context, the case of the Serbian radical right seems particularly relevant, since it anticipated the development of reactionary internationalism. There are two reasons for this finding. First, Serb nationalists lost almost all their conflicts during the 1990s, including the war with NATO, which affirmed and strengthened their reactionary positions, both in geopolitical and civilisational terms. Second, the 1990s revived a civilisational tradition between the two world wars, making Serbian nationalism essentially incompatible with the post-Cold War liberal order. For the Serbian radical right, accepting international order meant abandoning its 'historical territories', ethnoreligious identity and tradition, and true self-cancellation. Since they could not adapt to it, they

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started advocating a different Europe–a Europe of nations embedded in retrotopian civilisational discourse–and anticipating the inevitable 'final war' between Russia and the West that would break liberal hegemony. However, contrary to the expectations of the radical right, its outcome could revitalise the liberal international order, providing it with a well-known enemy.

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Notes

1 In the present paper, violence is understood as "the intentional act of causing harm to individuals" (Kalyvas 2006, 19), with an emphasis on its physical manifestation.
2 Eurasianism is a philosophical and social-political concept that transcends Russian belonging to either European or Asian civilisation, situating Russia in the centre of the geopolitical concept of Eurasia. The emergence of Eurasianism in the 1920s was attributed to the efforts of members of Russian post-Civil War emigration in Europe, including Petr Savitskii, Nikolai Trubetskoi, Lev Karsavin, and Georgii Florovskii (Holzer et al. 2019; Laruelle 2008).
3 Leader of a radical right political party. 2021. Interviewed by author, May 18. Belgrade.
4 Ibidem.
5 It was named after St. Sava, the 13th-century founder and first archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church (Cvetković 2022, 459).
6 Leader of a radical right political party. 2021. Interviewed by author, May 18. Belgrade.
7 The coalition of Dveri and Zavetnici failed to pass the 3% threshold in the 2023 snap elections, coming short by only 0.17%. However, a new radical right movement called 'We - The Voice from the People' managed to enter the parliament. Typically, radical right parties in Serbia have around 15% of the electorate's support (Spasojević 2023, 270). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the constituency of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and Socialist Party of Serbia comprises a considerable proportion of individuals who identify with radical right political beliefs.
8 Leader of a radical right political party. 2021. Interviewed by author, June 29. Belgrade.
9 Leader of a radical right political party. 2021. Interviewed by author, May 18. Belgrade.
10 Leader of a radical right political party. 2021. Interviewed by author, June 29. Belgrade.
11 Leader of a radical right political party. 2021. Interviewed by author, May 18. Belgrade.
12 Ibidem.
13 Moore and Tumelty (2008, 413) define foreign fighters as "non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities".
14 Returnee from the war in Ukraine. 2021. Interviewed by the author, May 10. Belgrade.
15 Ibidem.
16 Ibidem.
17 Ibidem.
18 Ibidem.
19 "European Parliament Resolution of 9 March 2022 on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, Including Disinformation (2020/2268(INI))". March 9, 2022.

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