

ANTEMURALE HETEROSEXIS: SECURITIZATION IN CROATIA VIA CONTEMPORARY ONLINE HOMOPHOBIA IN THE CASE OF THE PORTAL 'NAROD'

Srdan M. JOVANOVIĆ

Ph.D., Visiting Research Associate,
Polish Institute for Advanced Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences
E-mail: srdjan.jovanovic@piast.pan.pl

Abstract

Even though homophobia in Croatia can be followed since the years of the Independent State of Croatia as a Nazi puppet state during World War II, it has become significantly more pronounced since the wars of the Yugoslav secession in the nineties. Strengthened by a nationalist *Weltanschauung* that does not see homosexuals as part of the nation, it became even further reinforced by the Catholic Church in Croatia. Much of the contemporary homophobic discourse can be found on the portal *Narod*, where alleged attacks on Croatia, the Croat nation, and in particular, the Catholic Church, are regularly promoted within its textual production. The rhetoric is one of securitization, wherein homosexuality is presented as a threat to Croatia and the Catholic Church. Seen through the methodological prism of content analysis, through the lens of securitization theory, this article explores the homophobic rhetoric of the *Narod* portal, so far ignored in scholarship.

Keywords: Croatia; homophobia; securitization; content analysis; online media

Introduction

Homophobia is never more than a click away in Croatia. Should one want to read that homosexuals suffer from sexually transmitted diseases far more than heterosexuals (Narod.hr, 2017d), or that homosexuality is due to 'a twisted understanding and an irresponsible living of God's gifts' (Narod.hr, 2016), or perhaps that not allowing homosexual marriages is equal to the support for heterosexual marriage (P.Ć., 2016), one simply has to visit the 'People' portal at *narod.hr*.

Boasting a nationalist, populist and highly clerical *Weltanschauung*, *Narod* is the ‘go to’ online space for a daily dose of homophobia in Croatia. A running theme is easily identified, and that is the ‘threat’ coming from homosexuality, a threat that is ‘promoted’ by the European Union and local ‘national traitors’, wherein a securitization discourse is being developed in order to present the alleged threat as real. The Catholic church is seen as the only defense against the alleged ‘evil’, and consequently, presented as under attack by enemies within and without.

When it comes to research on the media (primarily newspapers, dailies and portals) within Croatia, most research has so far concentrated on the main traditional print media, such as the dailies *Večernji list* and *Jutarnji list* (Ciboci, 2017; Jergović & Raguž, 2017; Labaš & Osmančević, 2014; Majstorović, 2017; Miošić, 2013; Plivelić, 2017; Vlanić, 2012), which seem to be the only two media that figure as the hub of scholarly interest. *Narod.hr* has seen no attention within scholarly production so far. Seeking to fill this gap, we shall engage the portal through the lens of content analysis, as well as securitization theory.

Societal and political context

In order to put the issue in context, we need to take a look at the most relevant issues regarding homosexuality in Croatia, namely the general situation regarding homophobia, the state of the Croatian media, and the strong influence of the Right Wing, all of which can be said to overlap significantly.

Homophobia can be said to have a long-standing tradition in Croatia, though it has seen a somewhat significant increase since the breakup of Yugoslavia, as ‘during the wars of succession, nationalist politicians on all sides invoked traditional patriarchal gender roles and demonized queers as traitors to the nation. ... Queers were called traitors to the nation for not contributing to the population of national citizens, and pacifists were labeled queers for not participating in the wars’ (Moss, 2014, p. 218). Other researchers have noticed the same issue, namely, that ‘the stigmatization of homosexuality in Croatia was especially notorious in the first half of the 1990s, when it was portrayed in nationalist discourses throughout the Balkans as a trait and weapon of ethnic and political “enemies.”’ (Vuletic, 2013, p. 42). Much of the homophobic sentiment is oftentimes traced to the influence and general societal importance of the Catholic church (Kuhar, 2013), seen often in state-sponsored homophobia through education (Bijelić, 2008), including the invisibility of homosexuals in educational representation (Bartulović & Kušević, 2014), an opposition to gay pride parades and denigration of their participants (Moss, 2014, p. 221), as well as violence against so-called ‘non-traditional’ sexual orientations (Pikić & Jugović, 2006). According to some researchers, Croatia became the country in which Catholicism became most potent, seceding the first place only to Poland (Perica, 2006, p. 319). In 2004, the papal nuncio in Croatia, Archbishop Francisco-

Javier Lozano declared Croatia to be ‘the most Catholic country today in Europe’ (Jutarnji, 2004).

The media in general (in Croatia) are comparatively riddled with problems. Ever since the wars of the Yugoslav secession, Croatian media have (similar to their Serbian counterparts) been fostering an atmosphere of violence and (primarily) ethnic division (DellaVigna, Enikolopov, Mironova, Petrova, & Zhuravskaya, 2014). Though the general media situation (mostly due to regulation) has recently somewhat improved, at least according to some researchers (Perusko, 2011; Zgrabljic Rotar, 2003), others would disagree, saying that there was ‘an overall improvement of social institutions and the “quality of life” in general. However, an opposite claim could also be made, in this case related to the media system in Croatia’ (Popović, 2014, p. 194), due to the high influence of politics and a general lack of effectiveness of regulatory media bodies, while, when adhered to, ‘legislative provisions are often breached in favor of media owners at the expense of journalists, but without repercussions’ (Popović, 2014, p. 200). With all of the above in mind, it is to no surprise that research has found that homosexuality tends to have a negative framing in many Croatian media (Romšić, 2013), as well as that the media are among the main creators of public opinion of homosexuality (Souček, 2015).

Homosexuality in Croatia is, however, not exclusively linked to the Catholic Church, but to the rather developed Croatian Right Wing as well, which overlaps with said Catholicism. Ever since World War II and the Croatian Nazi-puppet state (Bartulin, 2006; Huttenbach, 1991), we can follow a strong Right Wing orientation within it (Sprinzak, 1995), culminating anew during the nineties, and the resurgence of the Ustaša movement (Čular, Gregurić, & GoetheUniversity, 2007), responsible for large portions of contemporary bigotry within the country, as the ruling elites often ‘a heteronationalism that promoted traditional family structures and gender roles, idealizing Croatian women as mothers and Croatian men as soldiers’ (Vuletic, 2013, p. 38). With such a nationalist worldview, one that effectively removes non-heterosexuality from the very corpus of the nation, it is of small wonder that homophobia found a fertile ground on which to grow in Croatia. Homosexuals are, according to this *Weltanschauung*, not a part of the nation, and thus consistently ‘Otherized’.

Methodology and theory

Scholars have already studied the ways in which the media can reproduce homophobia (Kellner & Share, 2007), as ‘whether the dominant media discourse defines homosexuality as a perversion, sickness or crime or defines it as a normal expression of human sexuality has a significant impact on how individual gay males or lesbians view themselves and their relationships to society’ (Steiner, Fejes, &

Petrich, 1993, p. 397). This is drawn upon the concept of mediatization (Livingstone, 2009) as an ever-increasing influence and impact of the media upon politics and society (Hjarvard, 2004; Mazzoleni, 2014), figuring in social scientific analysis ever since Lippman's seminal 'Public opinion' (Lippmann, 1946). In short, 'the concept of mediatization denotes a dynamic process through which media communication shape and reshape society and our understandings of it and through which the media have increased their influence' (Strömbäck, 2011, p. 424); mediatized concepts of homosexuality are no different.

In order to tackle *Narod's* homophobic rhetoric, we are approaching the website's content via content analysis. Media content analysis is 'a specialized subset of content analysis, a well-established research methodology' (Macnamara, 2005, p. 1); according to some researchers, probably the fastest-growing research methodology within mass communication (Neuendorf, 2016, p. 1). We shall take the definition of content analysis within the media from Stone *et al.*, wherein it is defined as 'any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text' (Stone, Dunphy, & Smith, 1966, p. 5), or, in some more detail, as a 'research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayals of women, or whatever) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular form of art' (Berger, 1998, p. 95); in our case, the representative 'amount of something' is homophobic discourse. Drawing on Campbell and Pennebaker (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003), Macnamara identifies a number of instances looked for within the process of content analysis, such as adjectives (which may point to the writer's attitude), metaphors, choice of verb voice (passive/active), narration viewpoint, qualities of tone, establishing of binaries, potential visual imagery within and/or around the text (if available, entering, essentially, multimodal content analysis), and factors of context (Macnamara, 2005, p. 17), which we shall scrutinize within the published content on narod.hr.

Having in mind that we are looking at homophobia through the lens of securitization theory, we shall define securitization via Olesker (2018), drawing upon Buzan *et al.*: 'securitization occurs when actors (usually political elites) use speech acts to construct issues (such as identity) as matters of security by referring to them as existential threats' (Olesker, 2018, p. 3). According to Buzan *et al.*, securitization needs to be 'argued', with the securitizing actor presenting themselves as legitimate, via simultaneously campaigning for the acceptance of a viable threat (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998, p. 24). Though securitization is commonly seen in the speech-acts of political players, it is also known to be a *media frame* (Vultee, 2010), thus highly important within the media as well, discussed in a number of scholarly research pieces (Gaufman, 2015; O'Reilly, 2008; Sarikakis, 2012), having in mind the strong connection between media and politics (Craig, 2004; Gurevitch & Blumler, 1977; Negrine, 2008; Nesbitt-Larking, 2007; Robinson, 1977). After all, 'politics is above

all a contest, and the news media are the central arena for viewing that competition' (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. i). Additionally, scholars have already noticed that securitization can figure as a formative and typical element in various areas of discrimination (Baldwin, Methmann, & Rothe, 2014; Moffette & Vadasaria, 2016); as we shall show within the body of this article, the same can be said to be valid for homosexuality.

Case studies

Drawing upon a search query at the narod.hr website with the 'homosexual*' keyword, we have arrived at over 600 articles that in one way or another tackle the issue of homosexuality. Going straight into the heart of the matter, Catholicism was seen as the primary source of homophobia:

'The Catholic Church remained the only global organization that the powers of this world did not fully subsume. The secularized media and their owners have a clear agenda: do all that you can so that poorly-informed Christians begin to think that it is irrelevant whether somebody is married or not, that it is irrelevant whether they have sexual relations with a person of the same or opposite sex. For this purpose, they are constantly supporting and fakely announcing that the millennial teaching of the Church could change. But the Church did not invent that teaching, it is not the owner of that information, but only its voice'. (I.J., 2015b)

What we see in the paragraph above is what we are here dubbing the *pro-Catholic securitization discourse*. The Catholic church is seen as under attack from the 'secularized media', who have a 'clear agenda' to misinform the population. The Church, thus, is seen as in need of defending. However, at the same time, the Church is portrayed as strong, as it 'remained the only global organization that the powers of this world did not fully subsume'. Presented as a victim, the Church is, thus, still strong. Even though a clerical worldview (via those who support it) is, essentially, the perpetrator of discrimination, this rhetoric pegs the blame on the victims, which has already been tackled in scholarship from a securitization perspective (Coskun, 2010; Gregory, 2012; Saintsing, 2015), as well as other, more broad perspectives (Lim & Fanghanel, 2016; Loescher, 2002). The battle fought by the Church is whether people of the same sex should be married, framed in such a manner as to convey the connotative conclusion that if they did, this would somehow – inexplicably, within the rhetoric – diminish heterosexual marriage. The Church is also presented as not 'inventing' the 'teaching', thus positioning it as the 'middle man', who only 'carries the message' that the people should hear and heed. Interestingly enough, the same source, in addition to positioning enemies on the outside, sees enemies on the inside as well: 'From the media, but also from some participants of

the Synod, one can expect attempts of serious derailing of the discussion from the separated and remarried towards homosexual communities' (I.J., 2015b). Thus, within the narrative, there seem to be unnamed agents working from the very 'belly of the beast' to undermine heterosexuality via an alleged 'derailing of the discussion', with the implication that even debating homosexual marriage would undermine heterosexual marriage.

Another text places its point in a much more straightforward fashion, claiming, in a rather assertive manner, that 'homosexual lobbies [are] in an organized attack on the Catholic church' (F.M., 2015), once again presenting the Church as a victim, wherein the alleged 'homosexual lobby' is seen as the 'attacker', being the highly militarized lexical choice 'attack' was used.

Another way in which homosexuality is presented in a negative light is via painting alleged 'comebacks' from people who claim that they have 'tried' a homosexual lifestyle, and 'seen' themselves that it was a mistake. Such is the case in the interview with Philippe Ariño, described as 'formerly gay', and nowadays campaigning for marriage as an exclusively heterosexual union. In his own words, 'when I had relations with men, or when I looked at them possessively, I was only satisfied for a moment. But I have always been alone, and I never felt complete. In these moments, I had had the illusion that I could live my sexuality as others do, but the truth was that sexuality can be fully lived only in a relation with a person of the opposite sex' (I.J., 2015c). The Catholic church figures as the key hub once again: 'By not practicing homosexuality, I am not saying "no" to my urges, but instead "yes" to God ... he comes to those in need, and even if you offer your finiteness'. This rhetoric serves to paint the Church in a positive light, whilst simultaneously framing homosexuality as an intrinsically negative instance: the author is not saying 'no' to homosexuality *per se*, but simply adhering to the 'will of God'. A similar case can be seen in an article about a certain Simona Mijoković, who, after she had renounced homosexuality, 'came to thank God on the gift of her new birth', as she had also been experimenting with cocaine, heroin, as well as 'adultery and homosexuality' (Narod.hr, 2017c). Note that 'homosexuality', instead of 'homosexuality' is sometimes used by Right Wing sources in order to present homosexuality as an ideology (thus the suffix -ism), as an ideology can be changed.

In 2018, *Narod* carried over a text by one Nikolina Nakić, undersigned as 'author, blogger, and mother of four'; the very offering of the information that she had four children can be seen as Catholic virtue-signaling. According to the 'mother of four', marriage 'is challenged in the modern society', as 'so-called gay marriages have become an ingrained fact in the West, and the Western public is mostly pacified into the acceptance of the gay agenda. So-called gay marriages, and the consequent child adoption, have become reality in the West ... if only they had invested a modicum of effort into legislation of the defence of families and children' (Narod.hr, 2018). She furthermore sees the 'success in the defense of marriage in the successful

cooperation between the Catholic church and civil scene ... she has encouraged priests not to tire in being the voice of the heart and consciousness of parents and spouses'. The two times mentioned 'so-called' gay marriages within a single sentences speaks about the author's incredulity towards homosexual marriages. Homosexual marriages are here yet again seen as an instance that go against families and children, discursively positioning the very interest in homosexual marriage as detrimental to heterosexuality.

Another way in which homosexuality is framed as 'problematic', and thus in receipt of a strong securitization discourse, is by stressing its illegality within Croatia. An article by Marito Mihovil Letica lays claim that 'one should not particularly need to stress that the term "same-sex marriage" is ... an oxymoron, a nonsense – in Croatia also against the Constitution' (Mihovil Letica, 2017). Same-sex marriage is within the text given within parentheses, in order to stress its alleged artificial nature.

The 'threatening' nature of homosexuality is regularly seen on *Narod*, as, in order to create a securitizing discourse and frame homosexuality as 'attacking' and ultimately detrimental, it is necessary to continuously present it as a threat. In 2018, Krešimir Miletić wrote at length about his perceptions of this alleged problem. According to him, there are 'organized attacks on the Catholic Church, priests and the faithful' in Croatia, all stemming from homosexuality. The extreme securitization of the rhetoric is seen in the adjective 'organized', by which the alleged 'attack' is presented as more vile and pernicious than ever. At a certain point, Miletić even writes about strategies for 'confusing homophobia of true believers', painting homophobia itself as a positive issue (Miletić, 2018). In a perpetrator-to-victim discursive twist, he claims that homosexuals are 'portrayed as victims', namely, they are 'systematically presented as a vulnerable minority that is being under attack, "discriminated against", to whom the "stronger majority" do not allow to fulfill their "human rights"'. What is of importance in the quote above is the excessive use of parentheses, which tells us about the author's negative stance towards human rights, as well as his denial of discrimination against homosexuals. He additionally sees the recent Croatian referendum – in which the vote against same-sex marriage won the majority – as 'in Croatia, the first citizen referendum by which marriage as a life partnership between a man and a woman was protected, was successfully organized via the uses of state-of-the-art democratic methods'. This sentence is telling. First of all, the author frames it as a referendum of citizens, drawing upon populist notions such as the 'will of the people' (Stanley, 2008), the 'volonté générale' (Mudde, 2004), in order to justify his own rhetoric. The whole referendum was additionally framed as 'protecting' marriage, in a further attempt to securitize the discourse (and the topic in general); the unspoken connotation is that, if there is a need for 'defense', there is a type of 'offense', 'attack' taking place. It was called a 'rough evading of the will of the Croatian people ... by which a possibility of allowing homosexual couples to adopt children' (Perić, 2014). The adoption of children by homosexual parents is

specifically framed as the children being exclusively adopted by female couples, so that the child would ‘intentionally and with premeditation be relieved of the right to have a father’, by homosexuals who ‘have to painstakingly build their entire lives on illusions, starting from the one by which there is nothing unnatural in same-sex relations’ (A.B., 2015). The child is here presented as a victim, again via homosexual ‘perpetrators’. The framing of homosexuality as ‘unnatural’ has long figured as a critical hub for scholarly research (Baker, 2004; Horn & Szalacha, 2009; White, 1991).

A second common trope identified is the reporting on homosexuality-related events throughout the world, with commentary. After the advent of the #metoo movement, *Narod* chose to concentrate exclusively on accused sexual predators who are homosexual, such as several pieces on Kevin Spacey (Marušić, 2017; Narod.hr, 2017a, 2017b; Sarkotić, 2017). In other places, *Narod* chose to report on alleged ‘baby buying’ in the USA in a piece against surrogate motherhood, where, even though there was no mention of homosexuality for the couple that chose surrogate motherhood, surrogacy was forcefully framed as ‘one of the options for the solution of infertility for homosexual couples’ (Žic, 2017). Drawing upon the papacy and Catholicism in general is also a common trope within the reporting-on-the-world instance, such as in the article about pope Francis not accepting the new French ambassador due to the fact that he was a declared, out-of-the-closet homosexual (Horvatić, 2017). Similarly, in 2015, Elton John’s wish to discuss gay rights with Vladimir Putin was ridiculed by *Narod*, that claimed that John was ‘previously known by such excesses’ (I.J., 2015a), while the mayor of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro, was praised for claiming he would not allow a gay parade in his city, as ‘it is simply about the fact that a man and a woman, and their children, are a natural family’ (D.G., 2015).

Conclusion: antemurale heterosexus

The content analysis of the homophobic textual production within the *Narod* portal from Croatia drives us to an undeniable conclusion that it is strongly against homosexuality, and that it can be consequently classified as highly homophobic. Drawing upon a century of homophobia, strengthened by the nationalism and communitarianism since the wars of the nineties, homophobia is here seen as merging almost entirely with local perceptions of Catholicism and the Catholic Church. Discursively, this is conducted via a securitization discourse, via which homosexuality is presented as a serious threat to Croatia, primarily through an alleged attack on the Catholic Church, with which the Croatian national identity is strongly linked (Bukowski, 1979; Powers, 1996).

Whilst homosexuality is presented as ‘attacking’ Croatia and the Catholic Church, the very designation ‘homophobia’ itself is occasionally framed in a positive

manner. Homosexuals are seen as leading an attack on Catholic Croat values, and the Catholic Church is seen as the last vestige of hope, a sort of *antemurale heterosexus* for the state and people of Croatia: heterosexuality, thus, has to be 'defended' against the onslaught of homosexuality. Much of the textual production concentrates on same-sex marriage; to be more precise, *against* it, as homosexual marriage is seen as intrinsically negative, an instance that would be detrimental to heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage. Homosexuality is further seen as 'unnatural' and as a cornerstone of a perpetual attack onto heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage. Going back to Macnamara's (2015) methodological points, we see the clear establishing of binaries, such as heterosexual/homosexual, Catholic/non-Catholic, including a constant negative framing of homosexuality, coupled with positive framing of Catholicism that 'fights' against it.

Scholars have noticed that there have indeed been 'gains made in recognizing and protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people: since 1990, homosexuality has been decriminalized in more than 40 countries, legislation protecting LGBT people against hate crimes has been enacted in more than 30, same-sex couples can now legally marry in 22 countries' (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 1). Croatia, clearly, has ways to go on this account.

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