Epilogue

With the speed of academic publishing always slower than we would like it to be, I want to take the time to reflect on some of the key events in Serbia that have happened since the end of my fieldwork. Though it is not my intention to provide a detailed overview of everything that has happened in Serbia since, I do want to highlight some of the key areas in which the processes identified throughout the book have persisted, and also some areas where clear signs of change can be observed. This attempt to pull the research into the present is a vital aspect of my relational and transnational approach to studying the Europeanisation of LGBT politics as all the so-called outcomes of this process are nothing more than outcome-in-process. They are an arbitrary endpoint of observation and require continuous updating.

So, where do things stand in Serbia? I hope after reading this book one would be less likely to assume that the appointment of Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister – the vignette with which I opened the book – is a sign of ‘progress’ and of a change in the Serbian approach to LGBT rights and politics. In line with what I have argued throughout the book, this appointment should be seen as a continuation of Vučić’s tactical Europeanisation processes. He seeks to conceal himself and his autocratic tendencies (see Bieber, 2018) with a veil of LGBT friendliness that aims to misdirect attention from his real political goals – nationalist, illiberal and focused on traditional values. His political stance becomes incredibly clear when we consider his speech during the 4th Demographic Summit, which was held in Budapest in September 2021 under the overall summit theme of ‘Family: The Key to Sustainability’. I will quote his speech at length, not only because the mere presence of Vučić at this summit speaks volumes about his real political affinities, but also because the content of the speech provides a unique insight into his political mind, and his views on how Serbia fits within the current political system. Immediately after three priests and a rabbi blessed the summit, while preaching the sanctity of marriage and the importance of family, Vučić took to the stage to start his address:
Dear friends, Katalin [Novák – Hungarian Minister for Families] is very much right saying that life is a question of survival, at least in Serbia and many other countries in the region. When we speak about demographic issues, it really became a question of survival, but it also is becoming one of the most important political issues ... I'm not going to speak about different measures how we started incentivising, how we are going to subsidise people who will have more kids. That is mainly what has already been done or we are going to increase and improve all financial terms for the families and kids in particular. I'm going to speak, and I'll do it as brief as it is possible, about politics, mindsets, and different opinions; if it is possible to have different opinions on this issue. But I will first of all try to depict the situation in the present day ... We are facing a new, a sort of liberal political Marxism ... which is forcing us to listen to new theories which are going to change our lives. But changing our lives in a way that we are losing our life and losing possibility for our own survival.

And today, if you analyse it, or let's say ten years ago, rule of law became the only issue that we were bothered with. Ok, rule of law is very important, no doubt, no question about it. But then, even in Europe, in our continent, it became a rule of logic jihadi war against those that are disobedient. Then – ok, it fulfilled its role – then we got climate change issues as the most important ... But is it really the most important question? Is it really more important than demographic issues? Is it really more important than the future of our countries, than the future of our nations? Is it really more important, or is there something more important than our kids, than our children? ... But nobody is discussing that. Nobody is discussing that ... It's not very fashionable, even not fancy, if you want to speak about it and you have to always be wrapped in a way that someone from those Marxistic liberal circles would like to see you ... You will know that I'm saying the truth ... because there are some other guys that are – I cannot say instructing the media – but still that are very good in creating media environment from which we cannot for which we cannot escape. We are entrapped in a way, and on the other hand we have to find solutions. That's why I'm profoundly grateful to you, because today we're going to hear a lot of great ideas, we're going to learn something. We come here to learn many things and then to introducing the measures in our country. I am not ashamed to say this; to the contrary I'm very glad that I'm here. I believe that unifying ourselves and not only speaking about our nations, speaking about our visions, about our ideas for the future, about creating the platform for certain survival of our countries that is something that we need to work on ...

I believe that it's high time to act and to react on our own hypocrisy, and to taking action which will lead us to the certain future and to the future that will keep our nations and other countries alive. (Aleksandar Vučić, 4th Demographic Summit, 23 September 2021, Budapest: emphases added)'

The reference to ‘Marxistic liberal circles’ is of particular interest as this seems to refer to the ‘Western’ approaches to liberal freedoms and what
the right would often refer to as the ‘woke’ agenda, including LGBT rights, women’s rights etc – an agenda which, according to Vučić, will lead to the demise of Serbia. He knows he cannot escape playing to the politics. In order to be able to advance his nationalistic, profamily politics in Serbia, he admits that he must do so ‘wrapped in a way that someone from those Marxistic liberal circles would like to see’ him. Vučić seems to have become an expert in presenting himself as the reformer to Europe – seemingly aligning with the EU’s value system – while domestically maintaining politics that undermine any LGBT-friendly reform. The fact that he has been so successful is demonstrated by the gradual continuation of the EU accession negotiations with new chapters being opened, irrespective of the questionable status of rule of law and fundamental rights issues in Serbia and the EU’s fundamental rights first approach.

This embrace of tactical Europeanisation has not been without consequences for LGBT people in Serbia. To illustrate my point, consider the track record of Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister. While I do not seek to deny the importance of representation and the potential impact Brnabić might have by virtue of being the Prime Minister, her politics and her approach to LGBT politics and equality have been far from supportive to LGBT people. Already in the immediate aftermath of her appointment, it became clear that Brnabić would do very little for LGBT people. Following the media attention she received as the first female/lesbian Prime Minister of Serbia, she stated that: ‘Serbia is changing and changing fast, and if you will, I am part of that change, but I do not want to be branded “Serbia’s gay PM”’ (quoted in Wintour, 2017). When asked whether she would push for further reforms on LGBT rights, she said she believed Serbia would become more tolerant if economic security could be found for its citizens. Moreover, she explained that she does not think Serbia a homophobic country:

I know that is one of the perceptions, and I understand attitudes are different in parts of Serbia ... The citizens of Serbia have a right not to be portrayed by a loud [homophobic] minority. We can have a culture where we disagree, as long as there is tolerance and no violence. We all have different views and values, but I don’t want to change people’s thinking by law. (quoted in Wintour, 2017)

Whereas these statements might be a reflection of her own experience in Serbia – she comes after all from a relatively affluent family and holds a privileged position in Serbian society – the impact of this statement is not to be underestimated as it shows how unaware she is of the day-to-day lived experiences of LGBT people in Serbia. To further illustrate her detached-ness from the wider LGBT population, consider the events of 2019. Brnabić made international headlines again as the first Prime Minister to have a
child with a same-sex partner while in office (BBC News, 2019). Within a month of the birth, the Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar imposed new rules which meant that anyone with a ‘history of homosexual relations during the last five years’ would be banned from donating ‘reproductive cells’ for artificial insemination, in vitro fertilisation, or even for laboratory tests (Synovitz and Cosic, 2019). Despite the fact that this de facto bans LGBT people from being able to have children (when considering the rules with existing family law), Brnabić did not see any issues with these new rules and did not take any action to overturn them. In fact, she and her office refused to provide any comments. Whereas these are just snippets of her regime, what has become clear is that Brnabić remains disconnected and unconcerned with the everyday plight of LGBT people, apart from her yearly visit to the Belgrade Pride parade where she makes big (empty) statements about LGBT rights.

In the last year, the Serbian government started working on a new Same-Sex Civil Partnership Bill. While such a law would provide a much-needed and welcome recognition of same-sex couples in Serbia, one would be once again short-sighted to conclude that the fact that the government is preparing such a bill is a sign of any change of heart within the ruling party. In fact, following the 2020 parliamentary elections, the new bill is being proposed and developed by the newly appointed Minister for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, Gordana Čomić (formerly part of DS, and non-partisan since May 2020). The fact that a former member of the Democratic Party is proposing the same-sex partnership law is not without political meaning, as it once again creates political distance between the ruling party (SNS) and LGBT rights. It further allows Vučić to express his disagreement with the law without appearing to go against his own party. And indeed, in May 2021 Vučić declared that, as President, he would veto the law if it made it through Parliament, as he believes the new law goes against the constitution, which defines marriage as a heterosexual union (European Western Balkans, 2021).

When it comes to the Serbian government, it is clear that there is little interest in really engaging with LGBT rights and issues of anti-discrimination – not only through the accounts of events I mentioned above, but also through its general inaction regarding the implementation of the 2009 anti-discrimination legislation. For example, the government strategic documents (anti-discrimination strategy and action plan) were never implemented and never replaced when they expired. With regard to the judiciary, it must be noted that there have been some important final verdicts on cases of homophobic discrimination and hate crimes in more recent years. Yet the actions of the judiciary remain rather limited when it comes to hate crimes and discrimination cases. As I am writing this Epilogue, the Belgrade Pride
Info Centre had just been attacked again by a group of young men. Though this is the eleventh attack since its opening, none of the perpetrators have faced any consequences and no actions seem to have been taken by the authorities, despite the fact that there is ample CCTV footage and the Pride Info Centre has 24/7 police protection. As high-profile cases do not attract consequences, it does not come as a surprise that general victims of hate crime and discrimination remain reluctant to report their cases to the authorities (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

Up to this point, everything might seem doom and gloom, but that is not how I want to finish this Epilogue. I want to take the last few paragraphs of *Coming In* to reflect on some of the positive developments that have happened in Serbia, more specifically the work that has been done by LGBT activists to respond to their political environment. First and foremost, since the end of my fieldwork, there have been several new NGOs within the Serbian landscape, many of which are increasingly turning their attention away from policy to community work. A noteworthy example is the new organisation Da Se Zna (To be known). Having experienced how the system fails victims of discrimination and hate crime, the founder established Da Se Zna in 2016 with the aim of mapping and documenting the violence committed against LGBT people. Since then, the organisation has grown significantly in capacity and their scope of activities. Today, they are ‘primarily focused on strengthening the community through legal and psychological support, direct work with the community and conducting campaigns, but also on various advocacy activities aimed at relevant institutions and decision makers’.2 While the support for victims of discrimination and hate crime provided by the association is vital to improving the implementation of the legal framework, I also want to draw attention to some of the campaigns they ran with the aim of producing wider social change. In one of these campaigns, they reclaimed an antiquated and parochial Serbian tradition through which members of the public used to place ads in newspapers to publicly shame people they felt wronged by. In a queer act of reclaiming, Da Se Zna used this technique to spread love instead of hate. They asked supportive parents, who were willing to publicly testify their support for their LGBT children, to place an ad in national and local newspapers to declare that they ‘would never disown my son because he loves and lives with a person of the same sex’.3 As result of this campaign an organisation for the parents of LGBT children was set up.

And some significant changes can be observed with regard to Belgrade Pride. As several key organisers of the event were forced into asylum, a new generation of activists got involved in its organisation. This new energy allowed Pride to become more engaged with LGBT people in Serbia. One
of the key changes here has been the opening of the Belgrade Pride Centre in central Belgrade in 2017. Originally only funded for one month, the centre was reopened in 2018 and has been open ever since. It has developed into community space with different activities throughout the year. In 2019 Belgrade was chosen by the members of the European Pride Organisers Association to host EuroPride in 2022. Belgrade Pride had put in its bid with the aim of bringing EuroPride to Southeastern Europe and making Serbia the first country outside the European Economic Area to host the event, which it hoped would bring visibility to LGBT rights in the Western Balkans.

As this book went to press, EuroPride had just taken place in Belgrade. However, it proved to be a very different event than the organisers had hoped for. Being in Belgrade and observing the twists and turns of politics, I could not help but notice how the events of that week were in many ways haunted by the past politics of Pride in Belgrade. In the months before, Serbia witnessed levels of public homophobia that it had not seen since 2009. Four days before the event, EuroPride was banned in a way very similar to 2009, where it was not the event itself that was banned but rather the route. Once again security issues and tensions between Serbia and Kosovo were cited. In a last-minute U-turn, the government gave in to international pressure and allowed EuroPride to take place. However, we could not walk the streets, and the Minister of the Interior even said that his ban had remained in effect, and that protesters were only escorted from their gathering point in front of the constitutional court to Tašmajdan Park, the venue where the Pride concerts were held.

As I write, only days after EuroPride, it is too soon to make full sense of what happened or understand the politics of it, but two things are clear. First, the EuroPride week seemed to draw on every aspect of the history of Pride in Belgrade in one way or another, and this book provides key background for understanding what happened. Second, Vučić once again succeeded in instrumentalising the tools of tactical Europeanisation to have his cake and eat it too. But the defiance shown by activists to the state intimidation of that week suggests that LGBT politics in Serbia might be on the point of entering a qualitatively different stage – that is, if activists are able to tap in to this defiance and reconsider how they organise themselves.

Notes

2 See Da Se Zna, 2021 (Who are we) [Online] Available at: <https://dasezna.lgbt/en/who-we-are/> [Accessed 17 April 2022].