
Book Review

Bojan Bilić (2016) (ed.) LGBT Activism and Europeanisation in the Post-Yugoslav Space: On the Rainbow Way to Europe. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 256 pages.

This edited collection published in the Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology series is the first with a focus on, as the editor Bojan Bilić sums it up, ‘multiple forms and implications of the increasingly potent symbolic nexus that has developed between non-heterosexual sexualities, LGBT activism(s), and Europeanisation(s) in all of the post-Yugoslav states’ (pp. 4). The same set of issues has already been discussed in several articles and chapters (Brković, 2014; Kahlina, 2015; Mikuš, 2011; 2015; Pavašević Trost and Sloodmaekers, 2015). The publication under review therefore attests both to the growing academic interest in the topic and its practical significance in the region. Some of the contributors first met in a 2014 workshop at the University of Bologna, to be joined by others at a 2015 meeting at the Central European University in Budapest where the volume took its final shape. It contains nine chapters by nine different contributors – activists, anthropologists, gender scholars, sociologists, political scientists – all of whom come and/or are based in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, with each of the latter being covered by one of the chapters. Bilić, a Serbian sociologist known for his earlier work on post-Yugoslav anti-war activism, wrote the introduction and one of the chapters while co-authoring the conclusions with the British Zagreb-based sociologist Paul Stubbs.

Bilić opens with an evocative account of his visit to the second Montenegro Pride Parade in 2014. His conversation with a disgruntled middle-aged taxi driver on the way from the airport, who interpreted his intention to participate in the event through a ‘binary reference system’ (pp. 3) combining sexuality and geopolitics, brings home the master problem of the collection: the ways in which LGBT activism in former Yugoslavia has been enabled, constrained and shaped by the discourses and processes of European integration and the broader political, economic and social transformations of the past 25 years to which they were so central. At the same time, the experience provokes intriguing questions of a more political and activist nature: about what might be the ‘most adequate – the least intrusive – strategy’ for LGBT rights advocacy in this deeply patriarchal setting; one that would not be seen as threatening and that would also avoid reproducing the debilitating reduction of the issue to an EU integration condition.

Defining for the approach of the collection is the ambition to go beyond the conventional policy science assessments of the impact of EU conditionality on laws and institutions in prospective member states towards a critical questioning of the idea of ‘Europeanisation’ itself. The authors see this not as a one-way and inherently benevolent transfer of Western European modernity to the backward East but as a dynamic and power-laden process of translation and negotiation, which is in the case of Yugoslavia refracted by the variety of the successor states’ relationships with the EU. The contributors mobilise especially the critiques of Europeanisation and the EU’s ‘eastern expansion’ as informed by Orientalist/Balkanist hierarchies and

discourses about Western and Eastern Europe (Kuus, 2004; Petrović, 2014; Todorova, 2009). Bringing these arguments to bear on its particular focus, the key contribution of the volume is to document the mechanisms through which EU actors, national policy makers, and LGBT activists reproduced the hegemonic framing of former Yugoslavia as a 'homophobic Other'. Most importantly, this framing has led to the tendency to discuss and conceive LGBT rights advocacy and non-straight sexualities themselves as 'European', imported/imposed, and wholly dependent on the benevolent EU power. As a consequence, local traditions of tolerance and the transformative potential of local forms of sociality, as well as the ambiguous effects of EU integration on LGBT rights, were rendered insignificant or invisible altogether. To varying degrees, the chapters also provide information on the development of LGBT rights and activism in post-Yugoslav states, some of which have been covered by little scholarly literature so far (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia).

Nicole Butterfield shows how the efforts of Croatian LGBT activists to leverage EU conditionality in the pre-accession stage resulted in the emergence of a hierarchy of activism with a division between 'serious', professionalised NGO work oriented to legal change and advocacy and presumably less serious grassroots activism and community involvement. Also, the focus was on achieving legal changes of the kind expected in the pre-accession changes, which reproduced the 'catching-up' framework and limited the activists' capacity to define and pursue indigenous agendas, such as those to do with social and economic issues. In response, however, debates have recently intensified about the need for a more diverse range of LGBT activist practices.

Sanja Kajinić dissects the ambiguous manner in which the organisers of the Festival of Gay and Lesbian Films in Ljubljana engaged with its roots in socialist Yugoslavia as the first such festival in Europe. This fact is often obscured by the organisers' effort to legitimate the festival and the LGBT movement within the Europeanisation framework, which assumes that Slovenia could have been tolerant to sexual diversity only since its entry into the EU. This is consistent with the broader Slovene strategy of claiming an advanced status through distancing from the rest of former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, facing a conservative backlash *after* EU accession, the organisers sometimes did mobilise the Yugoslav beginnings of the festival, thus putting in question the idea of Europeanisation as a unilinear movement from non-European homophobia to European tolerance.

Ana Miškovska Kajevska demonstrates particularly well how little LGBT activists can achieve by leveraging EU accession if the conditions at the national level are not propitious. Her chapter, which reconstructs the development of LGBT activism in Macedonia, describes how NGOs advocating for LGBT rights struggled with the state-sponsored homophobia of the VMRO-DPMNE government, which has even managed to delete a mention of sexual orientation in the antidiscrimination law adopted as a condition for receiving the status of an EU membership candidate. What progress there was seems to have been achieved rather by media initiatives that increased the visibility of LGBT Macedonians, though this was not without negative side effects: the increase in homophobic violence.

Bojan Bilić's chapter focuses on the relationship of Europeanisation and the Pride Parade in Serbia. He shows how the government's narrow concern with delivering the Pride in order to please the EU has turned the event into a heavily

securitised and sterile performance. Largely limited to the legalistic paradigm of rights that often proves quite ineffective in practice, it does little to promote the equality and wellbeing of the Serbian LGBT community that has come to experience it as rather irrelevant. A lot of energy and resources has been spent on the organisation of the Pride at the expense of other possible forms of activism while also heightening antagonisms within the already fairly fragmented activist scene.

Danijel Kalezić and Čarna Brković, Montenegrin activist and anthropologist respectively, draw on ethnographic vignettes of the lives of several gay men in Podgorica to make similar observations about the dominant form of activism oriented to the leveraging of European integration and lobbying for legal rights. In a context characterised by pervasive homophobia that LGBT people have to navigate to go about their everyday lives, strategies oriented to their visibility (such as, indeed, the Pride) are easily seen as incomprehensible or even harmful. Kalezić and Brković point to the growing awareness of LGBT activists about the risks of reproducing the association between non-heteronormative sexualities and Europeaness and their attempts to undermine this by playful representations that instead link the former to Montenegrin tradition. Ultimately, however, this was insufficient to transform the hegemonic framework of LGBT politics.

The chapter by Piro Rexhepi leaves the impression that this framework might have been most rigid in Kosovo. The presence of Islam has added another crucial facet to the general tendency on the part of the EU and some activists to orientalise the country and to present it as inherently intolerant and hostile to sexual diversity. This has reduced LGBT people to perpetual victims in need of the protection of the EU, separating them from the wider Kosovar society (including other marginalised groups) and constraining their capacity to occupy more polyvalent, complex and situationally varied identifications.

Adelita Selmić points to the growing scepticism about EU integration generated by the seemingly eternal status of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a potential candidate. However, given the severity and complexity of the country's problems, the deadlock was not enough to stop citizens from looking up to EU accession as the prospect, however feeble, of a better future. LGBT activism has been no exception, resulting in the usual focus on legal rights and NGO work. Nevertheless, Selmić gestures to a potential for a more political LGBT activism. While the growing social unrest suggests that the dominant ethnocratic and clientelistic logics of BiH politics came to a breaking point, most LGBT people identify as 'other' in ethnic terms, presumably reflecting the complete disinterest of ethnocratic elites in their very existence. Selmić thus hazards the hopeful question of whether LGBT people could become a symbolically crucial building bloc of a new, civic political platform in BiH.

Alongside the consistent critique of Europeanisation, a range of conceptual frameworks crops up at various points of the volume. In Bilić's introduction alone, we encounter: aesthetics of postsocialism (pp. 3), citizenship (pp. 4), policy translation (pp. 6), social movements theory (pp. 7-8), and homonationalism/sexual nationalism (pp. 10). Unfortunately, some are mentioned far too briefly for their relevance to the main focus and their mutual fit to be sufficiently developed, leaving one with a sense of theoretical bricolage. In addition, the grounding of the volume's approach in the paradigm of Orientalism seems to lead to a preference for ideational and symbolic rather than materialist and pragmatic considerations. For instance, while the

antagonisms within the national LGBT activist scenes are relatively well accounted for in some chapters, it would be interesting to learn more about social relations between EU and national policy makers, officials, activists, and other relevant actors that presumably also conditioned the ways in which particular discourses, policies or bureaucratic practices selectively privileged some activist agendas and agencies.

Perhaps it was the relative lack of such analyses that has created a room for slightly conspiratorial suggestions of a monolithic and rather malicious intentionality on the part of the EU and its domestic allies as the driver of the orientalisising treatment of homophobia: 'The protection and promotion of queer rights serves as an appropriate tool to then "contain and eliminate" the new enemy [radical Islam in Kosovo] as a necessary measure if Kosovo wants to fully integrate into the EU' (pp. 190); 'After aggressive post-Yugoslav ethno-nationalisms that shocked the continent, homophobia has provided fertile ground for survival, even reinvigoration, of a Western/European orientalist approach to the region, keeping the long-term and asymmetrical power relations intact' (pp. 237). At some points, this occasions a subtly nationalist and not necessarily convincing implication that the states would deal with LGBT issues better if just left on their own, such as when Rexhepi observes: 'Proving *Europeanness* then becomes the sine qua non of not only EU integration processes, but constitutes a disciplinary measure that allows the EU to intervene in the internal affairs of Kosovo' (pp. 185). But are we sure that there is indeed an intention to use LGBT rights in this particular manner, instead of this being a consequence of policy makers and activists simply approaching the issue – one on the long laundry list of issues addressed, often quite formalistically, during the integration process – through their pre-existing folk models?

I would also welcome reading more suggestions about what should be done – perhaps by the EU itself? – to address the problems of LGBT people in these countries. Selmić's forward-looking thoughts are particularly inspiring in this respect. In their conclusions, Bilić and Stubbs suggest another possible answer when they elaborate on the relationship between LGBT politics and the revitalisation of the radical left in former Yugoslavia. This is not without problems precisely due to the capture of LGBT issues by the hegemonic liberal politics of globalisation and postsocialist 'transition', but Bilić and Stubbs nevertheless point to signs of possible convergence. And yet, as much as I am sympathetic to the inclusion of LGBT politics in broader leftist projects, I find this a somewhat narrow manner in which to consider potential future strategies of LGBT activists. The new left might be gaining strength but it is currently still fairly marginal, which begs the sobering question of whether it is truly the best or only bet for a better future for LGBT people in the short and medium run. Perhaps it would be strategically more productive to define the challenge more broadly as transforming the relationships of LGBT people and these societies such as to release the issue from the instrumental straightjacket of EU integration and bring it to the agendas of various, not necessarily only radical leftist parties.

Mikuš Marek (mikus@eth.mpg.de)

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany

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