
Europeanisation and LGBT Activism in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Bertinoro Workshop Report

The 20th CEI International Summer School for students enrolled in the Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe Master's Programme (ERMA), jointly offered by the University of Bologna and the University of Sarajevo, provided the framework for a one-day academic-activist workshop on the relationship between Europeanisation and LGBT activism in the post-Yugoslav Space. The workshop took place at the University of Bologna Residential Centre in Bertinoro, Italy, on 5 September 2014. For the purposes of this event, Europeanisation was not understood, as it is frequently the case, solely in terms of conditioning and social learning, but it was approached as an unstable discursive meta-frame which – while embracing populism, neoliberal capitalism, ethnicised nationalism, poverty, unemployment, strong de-industrialisation, and high levels of homophobia – creates or perpetuates economic and cultural disparities both between the European Union and the post-Yugoslav space as well as within the post-Yugoslav space itself.

Following the welcoming remarks of Professor **Stefano Bianchini**, co-director of ERMA, in the first in a series of innovative papers, **Andrew Hodges** (Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb) drew upon his experience as a queer identified, anti-fascist activist in the left wing ultras group White Angels Zagreb, to analyse differences and points of common ground between activists in the ultras scene with LGBT activist currents in the post-Yugoslav context. Andrew examined positive insights that LGBT activists might gain from a deeper understanding of and engagement with the ultras scene, focusing on their different orientations towards 'the local' and 'cosmopolitan'. Ultras stress the importance of local belonging and traditions, whilst mainstream LGBT activist groups in the region draw heavily on images of a globally similar LGBT movement. **Nicole Butterfield** (University of

Szeged) presented her research on the professionalization in sexual politics and activism in Croatia and argued that some Croatian activists and the organizations with which they collaborated focused their efforts and resources towards lobbying for legislative protection against discrimination by utilizing the external pressure imposed by European Union institutions on the Croatian government and the government's aim to become an EU member state. By doing so, some activists constructed a hierarchical differentiation between a professionalised sphere of civil society consisting of "serious" types of activism vs. amateur, cultural-based activism and embraced similar lobbying strategies used by transnational LGBT organizations in Europe. These professionalised lobbying strategies reproduce certain discourses of human rights and European identity that can foreclose recognition of difference within the larger, diverse LGBT community and its needs. **Adelita Selmić** (University of Bologna/University of Sarajevo) discussed the developmental dynamics of Bosnian and Herzegovinian (BiH) LGBT activism in the context of the European integration process. Although the official orientation of the BiH authorities is – at least declaratively – European, the country's political deadlock ensures that activism operates with financial support of various European organizations and institutions while having very limited impact on local policies and practices. In this set-up, LGBT activism and non-heterosexual sexualities are placed between the specific local context and the Western European narratives of LGBT rights and liberation. **Sanja Kajinić** (University of Bologna) drew upon her fieldwork at the 2010 Ljubljana Gay and Lesbian Film Festival to analyse the tensions on the Slovenian LGBT activist scene in terms of how the discourse of Europeanness is used to either ground the legitimacy of minoritarian organisations and practices or, on the other hand, to question the assumptions implicit in such claims to belonging. She showed that the discourses of Europeanness as voiced in Slovenian LGBT activism are used in a similarly ambivalent ways as those in official Slovenian politics: for political and institutional legitimisation that also performs a distancing from the post-Yugoslav region, while attempting to hide the lively processes of negotiation of belonging and practical cooperation both with the EU and the region. In his presentation via Skype, **Piro Rexhepi** (New York University) examined how queer social formations are incorporated in the Europeanisation discourse in Kosovo. He argued that through Orientalist representations of Kosovo as the space of ambiguous particularity, neither East nor West, queer identities are depoliticised and constructed as vulnerable victims of the 'transition' who can only be liberated either by going West or bringing the West home. In both instances, they are represented as outsiders to their immediate geographies. Their representation renders them "already modern and European" in

contrast to the rest of their communities who are depicted as traditional, backwards and religious. Queers in Kosovo then come to emblematised Europe in the Balkans under siege that must be liberated. The presented papers were discussed by **Bojan Bilić** (University of Amsterdam), **Čarna Brković** (University of Graz), **Irene Dioli** (University of Bologna) and **Fabio Giomi** (École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris) before the floor was open for a discussion with the audience.

In the second part of the workshop, five LGBT activists from the region addressed some of the most pressing issues in the respective national contexts in which their activist groups operate. **Franko Dota** (Zagreb Pride) provided an overview of the challenges that Croatian LGBT activism faces from both the political left and right. He claimed that a network of right-wing and clerical associations and groups, closely tied to the Catholic church in Croatia, appropriated the discourse of a “need to protect the social and economic rights of the common folk” and initiated a referendum in December 2013 which constitutionalised the definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. This clerical political movement bases its mobilising rhetoric on examples from “more advanced European states”, trying to legitimise their actions through European models and standards. On the other hand, there has been an increasing amount of criticism coming from the academic and non-parliamentary radical Left addressing the LGBT movement in Croatia. These tend to aim at the process of professionalisation and NGO-isation, the prevalence of an identity-based LGBT politics uncritically transferred or copied from Western patterns. While he shares some of these concerns, Dota thinks that they are conditioned by similar critiques proposed by Western academic and political Left and stemming from an overreliance on Western theoretical models that are not compatible with the regional context(s). **Dušan Maljković** (Centre for Queer Studies, Belgrade) claimed that the process of “Europeanisation” has been generally accepted by the mainstream civil sector in Serbia as something *positive* and *historically necessary*, and thus without a valid political alternative. According to him, the former stance neglects even the liberal/democratic (Habermas) or human rights critiques (“Fortress Europe”), whereas the latter leads to a sort of *Denkverbot*, where history is seen as something “fixed” and influenced only by “great” political projects. Such an attitude stands in contrast to Foucault's theory of power which was also inspired by the appearance of gay movement in the 1970s as a horizontally distributed system of various power-knowledge relations complementing Marxist theory of vertical class power distribution, thus making it impossible for a queer movement to emerge. Such political mobilisation would take

responsibility for its own platform and assume a critical position towards the ideology of “the end of history” (Fukuyama) which constitutes the basis for many (if not all) LGBT organisations in Serbia that do not question the paradigm of dominant liberal democracy embodied – from their point of view – in the EU. **Jovana Ananievska** (LGBTI Support Centre, Skopje) said that the Macedonian LGBT movement is still weak and poorly organised while nationalism is reaching alarming levels as the authorities, represented by the declaratively EU-oriented demo-Christian party VMRO DPMNE, are becoming increasingly concerned about the “health of the nation” to which the LGBT community is the most pernicious “threat”. She claimed that although homophobia has always been present in public life, there has been a recent upsurge in homophobically motivated violence. Research conducted by the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation in 2011 found that 77.9% of the interviewees would not like to have gay neighbours, while 89.6% do not approve of homosexuality. **Danijel Kalezić** (Queer Montenegro, Podgorica) provided a historical overview of LGBT organising in Montenegro, saying that the LGBT movement in that post-Yugoslav country was preceded by human rights-oriented NGOs, such as, *Juventas*, for example. *Queer Montenegro* was founded in October 2012 with the aim to promote LGBT human rights and address practical, everyday needs and problems of LGBT people. Although very young, the movement is rather fragmented, but LGBT organising is actively supported by the authorities, as a part of their strategy to lead the country towards European Union membership. In that regard, this activist organisation cooperates with state institutions on the organisation of Pride Parades in Podgorica. **Lepa Mladenović**, a well-known anti-war and LGBT activist from Belgrade gave a personal account of her 25-year-long activist engagement in the context of high levels of homophobia/lesbophobia and strong patriarchy that conditions family and war violence. She said that as a lesbian, she cannot enjoy a whole spectrum of civil rights that the state normally grants to heterosexual citizens and couples, and that the LGBT population in Serbia is constantly exposed to a language full of hatred and intolerance. Public statements of the Serbian Orthodox Church leaders regarding non-normative sexualities are particularly problematic as they incite fear and discrimination without legal consequences.

The workshop ended with the concluding remarks of **Paul Stubbs** (Institute of Economics, Zagreb) who said that it was a rich, inspiring and timely event which offered a new wave of studies on an underexplored set of issues, bringing together work on LGBT/sexual politics, activism and Europeanisation. Some of the presented papers are forthcoming in a special

issue of the journal *Southeastern Europe*, which will serve as a basis for an edited volume examining the history and politics of LGBT organising in the post-Yugoslav space.

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