Europeanization, LGBT Activism, and Non-Heteronormativity in the Post-Yugoslav Space: An Introduction

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For Europe is not only a place where we have always been, but also an aim towards which we are moving. Its presence in us is experienced just as powerfully as its absence. It is the territory of the most sublime values of justice, liberty and equality, but at the same time the place where these values are perverted. It is as much the object of our adoration and desire as the object of disillusion and abomination. As its chosen people who save it now from its fiercest enemies, now from itself, we are more European than Europe, but also more anti-European. For not only do we sacrifice ourselves for it, we are also its victim. As the altar of our sacrifice, it is the gleaming monument of our glory, but also a festering sewer down which our hopes ebb away like illusions.

Boris Buden (1996: 139)

This special issue interrogates the multiple forms and implications of the increasingly potent symbolic nexus that has developed between non-heterosexual sexualities, LGBT activism(s) and Europeanization(s) in the post-Yugoslav space. Various overlapping actors related to LGBT activist politics – including European Union officials, state authorities, activist groups, the LGBT population, activist-researchers as well as the general public – repeatedly demonstrate the relevance that the EU and processes of European integration have for the way in which non-heteronormative sexualities in the post-Yugoslav countries are articulated and configured. While we, as authors of this issue, understand that the EU still “shines like a light in the dark” (Hekma 2007: 8) for many people, we
argue that this supranational entity uses the long and troubled accession process to disseminate discursive tools employed in LGBT activist struggles for human rights and equality. This creates a linkage between “Europeanness” and “gay emancipation” which elevates certain forms of gay activist engagement and, perhaps also non-heterosexuality more generally, to a measure of democracy, progress and modernity. At the same time, practices of intolerance to gays are associated with a non-European primitive Other who is inevitably positioned in the turbulent past that should be left behind. Such a link has a negative influence on the way in which the “European project”, originally based on the ideals of peace, trust and cooperation, can be applied as a leverage tool for improving LGBT-related rights and deepening social acceptance of non-heteronormativity in the post-Yugoslav space.

Moreover, the “crowded playground” (Arandarenko and Golicin 2007) of the Yugoslav region has again and again been treated as a kind of imperialist “laboratory” for contemporary social, economic and political engineering. In that sense, it offers us an important, but understudied, perspective for exploring both the affinities and the tensions between “new” social movements and EU accession. Stubbs and I (Bilić and Stubbs 2015) have already noted the conspicuous marginalization of this space in the theoretical literature on activist organizing as well as in scholarship on social movements in the post-communist transition context of Central and Eastern Europe. Mainstream (post-)Yugoslav scholarship has for at least two decades focused almost exclusively on the primacy of ethnic divisions, which has pushed it out of post-socialist analytic frames that can perhaps better capture the dynamics between enduring, structural configurations and present-day processes (Gilbert et al. 2008). This pervasive scholarly insistence on the instrumentalized and politically manipulated nationalist sentiments has diminished scholars’ sensitivity towards intense and heterogeneous civic initiatives that both preceded and accompanied the wars of the Yugoslav succession (Bilić 2012). As authors of this issue we engage in a reflexive practice that folds together activism and research and tries to rescue activism from academic neglect as well as reject simplistic binary oppositions of which there is no shortage in the pile of books that could, for better or worse, fill up a library of post-Yugoslav studies.

In other words, we are here concerned with the possibility that some of the epistemological and methodological dimensions of the scholarship on the Yugoslav wars and the post-war period conflate together to effectively deny the agency of local activist actors. Stubbs (2007: 228) has claimed that “whilst room for manoeuvre [is] limited […] the trajectories of diverse activists in NGOs cannot be reduced to notions of selling out or being rendered ineffective”. Thus, we believe that detecting and being repeatedly surprised by instances of profound and often institutionalized homophobia of which there are already