

review: Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia

Robert Kulpa

For some time, there has been a great need for books about sexuality and gender in our region. And by "our region" I mean Central and East Europe. This specification of geo-political terms is important, as the usage of these categorizations is often slightly different in countries within this region compared to within Western communities. We have all probably become used to the fact that there is no such thing as "Central Europe". There are Slavonic issues and Balkan issues, but the division which is set up outside the region is clear: Eastern Europe and Southern Europe, the Balkans, juxtaposed against Western Europe.

For some observers it may be an acceptable division, but it is considered differently inside the region. If someone stated that "Poland is an Eastern European country" in a discussion with a Pole, I would not want to be in their shoes. Worse still, would be making such a statement to a Pole when in Poland. The outburst of anger and emotions in response to such an idea can indeed be

surprising. It is questionable as to why we Poles (although I am not sure, after the recent elections, if I am or want to be a member of this nation any more), always emphasize that Poland is a Central European country so ferociously. Why is the East a place just a bit more to the right on the map, where the Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are? Is it because of our national complex of being the "poorer brother" of the West (which is by definition better than the East, which we look down on)? Is it because we feel that being a "Western" country means being a "better" (in whatever dimension) country? While not necessarily reasonable, this might suggest that our national mythology needs to resolve some internal problems of national identity first, before we become able to take part in a more open international political debate. However, there might be another reason behind such national attitudes. What if Poland truly is a Central European country, balancing between west and east, democracy and authoritarianism, innovation and tradition, transformation and stagnation?

It is not necessarily important to make one final choice, to debate artificially created options, that restrict us to just two possibilities. Each of the aforementioned factors, as well as many others, play an important role in the formation of an attitude; in creating a rage and fear of being categorised as an Eastern country.

Moreover, it is not just Polish attitudes that should be scrutinised. The western mode of using the terms is as important, if not even more so. Dualisms are specific to a wider scope of cultures, and they are particularly strong and effective when seeded in the ground of patriarchal societies. The West has its own sins of dividing world between the good and the bad, as they did in political terms: "We, the West" vs. "They, the communists". After 1989 and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the reality changed. But has it transformed significantly enough to dissolve the older divisions? Does the new nomenclature of "post-communist countries" and "East Europeans" bring in a new order of words or is it just a new name for old power relations? Although interesting, these questions need a separate overview and detailed analysis, which is not a primary aim of this text. It may be useful for those who would be interested in this subject, to read the book "Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia".

One might ask how the subjects of national identity and nations facing EU enlargement are connected to gender and sexuality, the most personal and intimate dimensions of one's being. Even if we are familiar with the development of the feminist movement and its success in challenging social thinking, proving that the private spheres of our lives are as political as anything else concerning the public dimension, the link may still look unclear or imprecise. Let's

then simply say that by proliferating our knowledge on those two dimensions of life, we create an awareness of the important processes in the region. Such an awareness should encourage better understanding of such phenomena as national identity formation. The book also offers something else, which cannot be simply underestimated or forgotten. A rich and empirically supported data about the various dimensions of social life in the region, is definitely one of the best aspects of the book. Wide and well-documented sources enable and support further reading - an extremely important feature when considering the probable readers: western academics, activists or social workers. I would suggest that this book is also important for readers in the region, as we do not possess as good a knowledge about our neighbours, as we do about French or Anglo-Saxon cultures and histories. Moreover, if we agree that Poles almost totally neglect the Balkans and Central-Southern Europe and exclude them from socio-political interests, we will find "Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia" one of the crucial books to discontinue this poor knowledge.

Let's then look into the contents of this book and consider in detail what it offers. The book consists of four parts. The first one is entitled "Postcommunist constructions of gender and sexuality", and with such a title it fires up great expectations. Four chapters discuss

cases of social formation under the transition process through lenses of gender, the labour market, sexuality and civil rights in Serbia, Romania, Yugoslavia and Croatia. Of those four, and in fact of all the articles in the book, only Kevin Moss' "From Sworn Virgins to Transvestite Prostitutes" concerns films, thus art. As such, it is a complete mystery for me why this text found its place in this compilation. The other fifteen texts are based on sociology, psychology, economic and political science. Even if Moss's essay shows an element of "performing gender and sexuality" in Yugoslavia, the editors should stick to the more obvious and coherent methodological approach that dominates the book. It is not clear if the aim of this essay was to present four new developing ways of social life in the aspects of gender and sexuality. If that was the aim, it is not convincing, especially since the second part "Sexual politics and sexual identities" seems to consist of some text that could be placed within the first part.

The second part seems to be more structured and coherent, as it is purely dedicated to description of politics of identity. I was interested in Tatjana Greif's "The Social Status of Lesbian Women in Slovenia in the 1990s" because I find it useful and interesting to know more about this country. Slovenia is in many ways the most developed of all post-soviet countries, considering its ability to cope with a new, pan-European, stance on values and ethics, but still, as author

argues, lags far behind what we would like to see in terms of its adherence to the "norm". Despite the focus on Slovenia, readers will find out in this chapter more about Russia, will continue to scrutinise Serbia and come across Belarus.

Chapters ten to twelve paint the sad picture of Russia as they all refer to new economies, the sex industry and trafficking women as one of the main factors and effects of the transition from totalitarian communism into authoritarian rule of Yeltsin and Putin.

The last part of the book is based on a comparative study of empirical cases conducted in Slovakia, Estonia, Finland, Russia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, Yugoslavia, Croatia and Slovenia. This diversity is mostly achieved by the comparative work of Ivan Bernik and Valentina Hlebec, who describe the "first time" experiences of adolescent youths in most of these countries. It is also the only text referring in any way to Poland. Here is the place for another word of critique for the editors. The lack of information about some countries is very clear and the explanation of it is not very convincing. In the preface we can find information that the book is an outcome of the conference that took place in Dubrovnik, 2001 (thus it would be understandable why there is no text about some countries, simply because there was no participants willing to scrutinise the area). But it is also said that the content of it was enlarged by ordering a few other

texts. If this is the case, it is surprising that the editors haven't thought about the particular countries missing in this volume.

Summing up, "Sexual politics and sexual identities" is a valuable and important publication. Although the book could be better constructed, it covers a wide angle of aspects concerning gender and sexuality issues in Russia and some of the Eastern European countries. It is "must have" for all those who are interested in the region, as it dismantles the old taboos and socially stigmatised parts of our own lives. Being outrageous and frank (Poland has had already its own lesson it this subject), is a crucial position that we have to recognise and appreciate. Otherwise, we will be nothing but a reification of those powers that so effectively gag our mouths with "Christian values", "family roots" and trying to force us to believe that there is only one sign under which we can be Poles.

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