

2016

Review of Sremac and Ganzervoort's "Religious and Sexual Nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe: Gods, Gays and Governments"

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Recommended Citation

Močnik, Nena (2016) "Review of Sremac and Ganzervoort's "Religious and Sexual Nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe: Gods, Gays and Governments"," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss1/7>

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***Religious and Sexual Nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe: Gods, Gays and Governments.* Edited by Srdjan Sremac and R. Ruud Ganzervoort, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2015. 188 pp. \$120 (hardcover), ISBN: 9789004297470.**

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A rich compilation and somehow overarching portrayal of the intersections among nationalism, religion, and sexual diversity, *Religious and Sexual Nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe: Gods, Gays and Governments*, appears on the scene exactly at a time when regulations of so-called alternative sexualities have stoked the region again. Most recently in Slovenia, the majority overwhelmingly rejected the right to gay marriage: already a second referendum and the public ballot were called after a conservative group called “Children Are At Stake” gathered the 40,000 signatures needed to call a referendum. Either on purpose, accidentally, or for its supposedly more “Europeanized” gay culture, Slovenia has been mentioned in this edition rather as a good example, perhaps even among the most progressive post-communist member states of the European Union (besides Czech Republic, Croatia, and Hungary). Hence, the release of the book coincides with highly populist and bi-polarized events in this country, which are bringing to the front lines the same stakeholders as the edition is dealing with: religious and national/state authorities, protectors of the ‘real’ and ‘natural’ motherhood and fatherhood, and particularly their control over what they call ‘child’s healthy development in healthy heterosexual environment.’ The interest of the book lies not only in intersections of homosexuality and religio-political/nationalistic configurations but also in how sexuality, previously mainly as a matter of very individualized, privatized consideration, now becomes crucial in the cultural and political context of identity formation all over in the Central and Eastern European region. The authors cover all different aspects and topics: from a bottom-up, community-informed, and social media analysis approach to top-down investigation of the roles played by different authorities and institutions and how mass media supports the hegemonic narrative. But let us point out some of the most aspiring and perhaps controversial points.

The first topic discussed in depth or at least mentioned in almost every chapter is *homosexuality as a new threat* in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. In the introduction, Sremac and Ganzevoort summarize how mainstream discourse in the region interprets homosexuality as “a threat to the traditional values of national and religious identity” (p. 12). Because homosexuality may endanger patriarchal norms and thus destroy the family, tradition, and a nation state, religious groups feel they are called to jump in as moral protector and guardian angel of the established social norms. In Serbia, organizers of Pride in 2010 were seen not only as “those who threaten public morality” (Mikuš, p. 23), but their focus on individualized inequalities and particularistic rights (including LGBT) in liberalizing Serbia ‘threatened’ the post-socialist rebirth of a Saint-Savaist fusion of Orthodoxy and ethnonational statehood. Similarly, in Romania and Poland, the churches tirelessly relied on the “European Christian heritage” (Tarta, p. 48,) claiming that “deviant sexuality and sexual libertinisms pose the greatest threat to the nation—to the nation’s continuity, moral health, and survival” (ibid). “In post-communist Poland,” adds Dorota Hall in her chapter, “World Pride has come to be perceived as a ‘gay totalitarian threat to the world’” (Hall, p. 80). The arguments on how homosexuality presents *a threat* either to nation or to the religion repeat as the main motif in almost every chapter of the book: all across the region, homosexuality is perceived as a “threat to the nation” (for instance pp. 48, 160, 173) or at least the “morality of the nation” (p. 172); generally speaking, it “threatens the ethical being of entire nations” (Pavasović Trošt and Sloomaeckers, p. 172) or, when specifically applied, “the healthy, Serbian, traditional family” (Pavasović Trošt and Sloomaeckers, p. 166) and “heteronormative character of contemporary Russian state.” (Sremac and Ganzevoort, p. 11). It is, besides, a threat to “true Christianity”, (Dolinska Rydzek and Van Der Berg, p. 144) to “identity and dignity” (Pavasović Trošt and Sloomaeckers, p. 171) or humanity in general. On the top of this great collection is the 2008 Christmas speech, mentioned in the chapter by Van den Berg and Popov Momčinović, where Benedict XVI stated that “homosexuality is a greater threat to humanity than rain forest destruction.” (Van den Berg in Popov Momčinović, p. 103).

Another focal point in the book is the analysis of the discursive practice of seeing homosexuality as something *European and Western*, supposedly imposed in parts of Eastern and Central Europe with

integration processes to the EU. Even though the editors in the introduction expose its problematic notion, authors contribute massive evidence of Central and Eastern Europe as the “European homophobic Other” (Sremac and Ganzevoort, p. 2). In the editors’ words, such discourse empowers the Western moral and cultural superiority over the supposedly “premodern and religiously and sexually conservative” East (ibid). Hence, what the reader misses is the actual deconstruction of this very first hypothesis. Instead, chapter after chapter, authors give in-depth materials proving the thesis. As expected, this narrative is critically observed and not taken for granted, but still, there is no contribution that would offer an alternative narrative. This *sexual colonialization*-- “imposing” the right for sexual diversity coming from the West-- could easily be deconstructed by a brief footnote or text on the history of LGBT struggles and ‘heteronormative’ resistance in the West. The West is obviously not the topic here, but without critical reading, the West, in fact, ends up being represented as the ultimate goal for the development of the East. Mihai Tarta (p. 33–51), for instance, dedicates the whole chapter to the understanding of the relationship between the Eastern and Central European countries as states in transition, liberalization, and secularization. Like some other authors, he describes the processes of EU integration and their impact on the perception of homosexuality. While EU membership requires respecting minority rights, including those of sexual minorities, he states that his field data suggests that Romanians explicitly oppose homosexuality and are not “Europeans” by this measure. Opposing homosexuality equals opposing Western ideologies, because homosexuality is nothing but Western “conspiracy” (see for instance pp. 2, 7, 23, 146) against nations, religions, and tradition. All chapters that take into consideration the perceptions and acceptance of Gay Pride Parades, in one way or another, offer evidence that the parades were usually perceived as “imposed”—“sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, by the West, the EU, the U.S., ‘international gay lobbies,’ or NGOs” (Pavasović Trošt and Sloodmaeckers p. 166). The book, therefore, provides rather the confirmation of this East–West ideological division, where in the subtext “European values,” by opposing ethno-nationalisms and religious influence in politics, means acceptance of human rights that could bring more freedom and diversity in sexual expression. At this level, the reader sometimes craves for a stronger and more activist attitude that in other respects is so distinctive in the

history of the LGBT movements. The book follows a silent consensus against the ultra-heteronormative discourse, directed by religious authorities and blessed by nationalistically-oriented political bodies and governments. Mikuš, for instance, describes the case of Gay Pride Parade in Serbia, where the whole design and content were supposedly only “imported” from the West and thus “little attempt was made to evoke local traditions of diversity and tolerance” (p. 22). But these positive, optimistic, and maybe progressive local traditions are, in fact, never adequately addressed and elaborated, while many authors’ critical support for this ideological East-West, primitive-progressive, and traditional-liberal binaries is often present in the book.

Nevertheless, *Religious and Sexual Nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe: Gods, Gays and Governments*, with its substantial collection of discourse analysis, contributes rich insight that intertwines religion, nationalism, and homosexuality in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Its cross-regional perspective and comparative level of analysis remarkably unpacks the mainstream narratives on (still) marginalized topics. With no real exception, roles and connections among all three of them—nationalism, religion, and homosexuality—play by the rule two against the one, meaning nothing but nationalism and religion united against homosexuality. The perception of homosexuality in Eastern and Central Europe in this context can be framed into a more or less unified discourse: discourse of fear, resistance, and threat. The evidence is very clear since the editors collected the whole variety of texts very thoughtfully: not only do they include regionally diverse cases—from the Baltics to the Balkans—but they also base the collection from the bottom-up (including social media analysis, for instance) to a top-down approach. This makes the book one of the most valuable contributions to the field; at some points it is encyclopedic, too. What is needed now is volume two: for sure, we would like to read about emerging new practices and local engagements that attempt to beat these big ideologies and institutions. Exposing good practices in addition to the criticism would contribute to the empowerment of alternative sexualities and, step-by-step, to visibility, recognition and acceptance by the communities.