Transformations of gender, sexuality and citizenship in South East Europe

Introduction

This collection of essays was conceived gradually and in many phases, between Scotland and different parts of the former Yugoslavia, during the course of 2012 and 2013. The bulk of the work has been carried out within the research project “The Europeanisation of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia” (CITSEE) at the University of Edinburgh. This ERC-funded project led by Professor Jo Shaw and Dr. Igor Štiks has been established to explore changes in citizenship regimes which occurred after the break-up of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, with special attention being paid to the influences of the EU accession process on the new states of South East Europe. The editors of this special issue – Oliwia Berdak, Chiara Bonfiglioli, Katja Kahlina and Adriana Zaharijević – were members of a cluster of researchers focused on issues of gender and sexuality within the project, which had the aim of investigating transformations in gender and citizenship regimes from a comparative perspective. We wanted to shed light on the different ways in which the categories of gender and sexuality at the same time inform and draw on larger socio-political processes. The processes of democratisation, post-conflict reconstruction, and transformation from socialist to capitalist political economy, which have influenced shifting notions of citizenship in the post-Yugoslav space, were especially under scrutiny.

Our different and multiple inter-disciplinary backgrounds, as well as our different personal locations and engagements, have led to various understandings and perspectives on gendered and sexual citizenship in Yugoslavia and its successor states. On many occasions we had the opportunity to discuss the interconnectedness, but also the differences between our approaches. Rather than trying to define a common framework of analysis, we decided to open up a platform of discussion, and to test to what extent the framework of citizenship can be productive in understanding post-Yugoslav gender and sexuality regimes. In order to strengthen our contributions, we organised a preparatory workshop at the University of Edinburgh in June 2013 as part of the annual CITSEE conference, which brought together all the contributors to this special issue. We have presented our work at two further panels on transformations of gender, sexuality and citizenship in post-Yugoslav space (Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) conference, April 2013; Conference of Europeanists (CES), June 2013). The public presentations of the earlier drafts of the special issues contributions enabled us to receive constructive comments on our work in progress from the discussants and the audience alike, many of which are reflected in the articles comprising the issue.

Revisiting feminist debates on gender and sexuality in South East Europe

Feminist scholars have early sought to introduce the categories of gender and sexuality into the wider debates on the social changes related to the emerging nationalisms and armed conflicts associated with the disintegration of SFR Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s. Many studies discussed the ways in which gender relations were reshaped by nationalistic politics and war, repositioning women in relation to the state as mothers of soldiers and national heroes, homemakers rather than equal participants in social and political life, or appropriating women’s bodies as markers of the nation through gendered and ethnic violence (Allen, 1996; Batinić, 2001; Engle, 2005; Iveković, 1993; Iveković & Mostov, 2002; Kesić, 2001; Mostov, 1995; Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000; Papić, 1994, 1999; Salecl, 1992; Stiglmayer, 1994; Žarkov 1995, 2001, 2007). However, with the notable exception of an anthology on Gender Politics in the Western Balkans (Ramet, 1997), the concept of citizenship has been largely left out of these discussions. Rather, it has been addressed only implicitly through the more general concept of inequality, emphasising the changing position of women within the new nation-states. In the more recent comparative thematizations of gendered citizenship in post-socialist Europe, the former Yugoslavia is generally incorporated within analyses of citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe without an in-depth analysis of its specificities (Einhorn, 2010; Gal & Kligman, 2000; Lukić, Regulska, & Zavišić, 2006; Regulska & Smith, 2012; Wingfield & Bucur, 2006). Often, edited volumes include case studies based on one single post-Yugoslav state (Blagojević, 2006; Bokovoy, 2012; Duhaček, 2006; Lukić, 2000; Mršević, 2000; Zavišić, 2006), making it difficult to assess common historical legacies and interconnections – but also variations – between different post-Yugoslav states. In this way, many important issues arising from the complex relationship between gender, sexuality, and newly emerging citizenship regimes in this region

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were left unaddressed. This void in the existing literature has fuelled the impetus and inspiration for this issue.

Transnational influences are another important aspect that has been largely overlooked in existing studies of gender and sexuality in the region. Gender regimes in South East Europe have been deeply affected by transnational flows and transformations related to economic and political globalisation, including the process of European enlargement in post-socialist Europe. Thus we believe that important new insights could be gained by considering the increased political and economic impact of global processes stemming from EU enlargement and global neoliberal restructuring. By bringing together the notions of citizenship and globalisation as important theoretical and analytical tools, we wanted to elucidate the particularity of this post-conflict and post-socialist context, and also to account for possible similarities with the developments taking place in the wider European and global context.

Finally, what we also aspire through the concept of citizenship, is to break out from the essentialist image of “the Balkans” and of “gender” in the Balkans (Kersten-Prehanić, Rajlić, & Voč, 2012). Way too often, in Western popular culture as well as in the media, the region of South East Europe has been subject to Orientalisation, linked especially with Balkanisation (Naimark & Case, 2003; Todorowa, 1997). Gender relations in the region, notably since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, have often been read through naturalising Orientalist lenses, which tend to reinforce essentialist conceptions of masculinity and femininity that had been fostered by gendered and ethnicised warfare. A victimised image of Balkan femininity and a violent image of Balkan masculinity were conveyed through these Orientalist/Balkanist discourses (Engle, 2005; Helms, 2013; Žarkov, 2007). Building upon existing critical assessments of gender and ethnicity in the region, all contributions strive to go beyond essentialist representations, stressing the complexity of ongoing post-socialist and post-conflict transformations.

All contributions in this special issue deal with key questions such as citizens’ relation to the state, individual and collective agency, and gender and sexuality as normative mechanisms through which citizenship is constructed, managed and reproduced. All contributions tend to address this by highlighting the interrelation of local, national, European and global processes. Nevertheless, they also stress the fragmented and differential access to resources and rights experienced by citizens in South Eastern European states, by underlining the similarities and the differences between post-Yugoslav states (and Greece), when it comes to, for instance, social citizenship (i.e. the position of women workers and war veterans) or sexual citizenship (the status of sexual minorities). In so doing, the papers address intersecting patterns of social inequality and privilege through the axis of gender, sexuality, class, nationality and ethnicity within the specifically post-socialist and post-conflict citizenship regimes.

In view of recent social and political transformations, the concept of citizenship also allows us to consider the common legacy of socialism and of the multi-ethnic Yugoslav federation, which continue to create a cultural and linguistic space of commonality and interdependence between different post-Yugoslav states. By considering the Yugoslav legacy, we attempt to make sense of the changing relations between citizens and the state(s), and of the ways in which political, historical, social and economic transformations affected different groups of citizens in different post-Yugoslav states. The comparative approach of the series provides us with tools to assess both the common Yugoslav legacy and the process of differentiation, fragmentation and individualisation occurring in the last twenty years, looking not only at changes in economic conditions and social rights, but also at transformations in identity and belonging.

**Citizenship in South East Europe: promises and paradoxes**

The concept of citizenship which consists of political, economic, and social dimensions, as defined by T.H. Marshall in the late 1940s and taken as the point of departure in the subsequent discussions on citizenship, has generally been used in relation to capitalist democracies, rather than in relation to socialist and post-socialist countries. This absence of citizenship framework was largely surmounted by the use of the prevailing approach to the changing social and political relations caused by the dissolution of Yugoslavia, that of ethnicity and nationalism. “Top-down” political and historical analyses of nationalism have also generally been disconnected from ethnographic accounts of everyday life in the region (Bougarel, Helms, & Duijzings, 2007; Jansen, 2013). However, if we assume nationalism to be the main, or at times, the only interpretative framework for the socio-political processes in the South-Eastern European states, we run the risk of obscuring different complexities, such as the non-coincidence between state borders and ethno-national identities, the importance of other social factors of differentiation such as class and gender, or the impact of the transnational economic and political processes mentioned earlier. The role of “ordinary people” in processes of nationalisation also risks to be silenced (Jansen, 2013).

As noted above, feminist studies of the region have also been largely concerned with the issues of war and nationalism. This is to a great extent due to the fact that anti-war and anti-nationalist activism has been a prominent factor of mobilisation among local feminists and LGBT activists, becoming at a certain point even its distinctive feature. It was also a field of transnational activist intervention, notably when it came to mobilisations around war rapes in Bosnia–Herzegovina and Croatia (Engle, 2005; Hansen, 2001; Mladjenovic, 2001; Žarkov, 2007). The wealth of literature available on the post-Yugoslav space has been recently complemented by new research relating to women’s grassroots mobilisation through feminist groups and NGOs across the former Yugoslavia (Cockburn, 2013; Dejana, 2013; Helms, 2013; Miškovska Kajevska, 2014), showing that scholarly and activist debates on gender, nationalism and ethnic identities are still relevant, and need renewed critical examination.

This special issue represents the first comparative assessment of the transformations in gender relations taking place in the last twenty years that would encompass different post-Yugoslav states. The only comprehensive anthology on the subject to date, Gender Politics in the Western Balkans, dates from 1997 (Ramet, 1997). As the contributions in this special issue make clear, much has changed since then, and new empirical data is needed to make sense of the wide-ranging processes of globalisation and Europeanisation that have affected the region, transforming it into a “semi-periphery”, as Blagojević (2009) has defined it. Other authors have stressed how the former Yugoslavia underwent a process of re-peripheralisation (Schierup, 1992) and...
de-development (Meurs & Ranasinghe, 2003) in the 1980s and 1990s. New empirical data is also needed to understand new social inequalities that have emerged beside and alongside the creation of new nation-states and new national and ethnic identities. In this sense, while taking into account the ongoing and omnipresent legacy of wars and nationalism, this issue reflects new concerns, such as the impact of the world economic crisis, the effects of regional deindustrialisation, the question of welfare redistribution to different groups of citizens (Bonfiglioli; Dimova), the precarious position of war veterans (Berdak), the changing citizenship position of sexual minorities within the framework of European integration (Kahlina), the opposition of religious groups to gender and sexual equality (Kuhr), and the changing relation between generations of feminist activists and the different nation-states that emerged out of the Yugoslav break-up (Zaharijević).

The question of citizenship present in all contributions allows us to address these broader issues of power, belonging and redistribution, focusing on the discussion about rights and responsibilities that have followed the violent break-up of Yugoslavia and the nation-building processes of the 1990s. In the official nationalist discourses, especially immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, new nation-states were supposed to bring greater freedom, autonomy and national rights. But what really happened in the last twenty years, and how can we problematize seemingly homogeneous entities such as nations and national identities? What the contributions to this issue bring to light is the ways in which the category of nation obscures the persistence of inequalities related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class within a given community, and the responsibility of the state towards its citizens.

Another important point that is stressed in this issue is the one of political agency, and the existence of supra-national or non-nationalist actors (ex, workers, feminists, LGBT groups), who express themselves by creating cross-border solidarity, appealing to the EU, and actively undermining the supposed homogeneity of the nation. As the contributions show, citizenship rights started to play a more prominent role as a terrain of contestation and mobilisation, a space where inequalities are reinstated but where citizens are also claiming more rights and recognition. Contestations on the terrain of citizenship have been particularly evident in recent times, for example in terms of sexual citizenship debates and the emerging LGBT politics of visibility, but also when it comes to protests against factory closures, unemployment, austerity measures and political corruption that have manifested themselves all over South East Europe, and particularly lately in Slovenia and Bosnia–Herzegovina. The heightened importance of grassroots movements across the region, organised in non-national vein, should not be neglected. As we wrote, devastating floods were affecting Bosnia–Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, and an unprecedented solidarity campaign has been organised across national borders to provide immediate relief to the affected areas.

**New perspectives on gendered, sexual and feminist citizenship in South East Europe**

In a recent anthology on gendered citizenship, Sasha Roseneil noted the paradoxical character of the concept of citizenship for feminist scholarship: “Intensely luring in its expansive, inclusionary promise, yet inherently rejecting in its restrictive, exclusionary reality, it is an ambivalent object for those of use committed to radical projects of social transformation” (2013:1). While feminism has exposed “the limitations, restrictions and violence enacted by states through constructions of citizenship”, the concept of citizenship, both “analytical and aspirational”, has been very important to “articulate and theorizes demands for social, political, economic and cultural change” (2013:1). The contributions in this issue indeed make use of the concept of citizenship as an analytical and aspirational tool to unravel transformations attending to gender, sexuality and feminism. They use a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary research methods and a variety of sources to account for these transformations: diaries, ethnographic observations, discourse analysis, legal and policy analysis, oral histories and interviews are taken into account across the volume. Most of the contributions also adopt a specific comparative approach between distinct nation-states, thus accounting for both similarities and differences in the formation and working of the particular gender and sexual orders.

In her contribution on “Reintegrating Veterans in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia: Citizenship and Gender Effects”, Olivia Berdak explores the policies of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) that followed the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, looking at the ways in which they have affected gender relations and citizenship in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Berdak analyses how the war and post-war politics have created a highly gendered social citizenship, privileging men as fighters and as war veterans of the conflict. Berdak argues that DDR policies have become a tool of nationalist politics, entrenching a hierarchical distribution of state resources that penalises civilian victims of war, and particularly women war victims. The contribution highlights the interconnection between conflict, nationalism and unequal gendered constructions of citizenship, materialized in the uneven distribution of welfare rights.

The gendered character of social citizenship is also explored in the essay by Chiara Bonfiglioli on “Gendered citizenship in the global European periphery: Textile workers in post-Yugoslav states”. The essay analyses the parallel transformations of citizenship regimes and gender regimes in post-Yugoslav states, on the basis of the case study of women textile workers. Bonfiglioli argues that the overall deterioration of labour and welfare rights in the region had major consequences on women’s position as workers and citizens, producing the demise of the “working mother” gender contract which existed during socialist times, and fostering a “retraditionalisation” of gender relations rooted not only in nationalist discourse, but also in economic transformations determining the devaluation of women’s labour. The contribution also emphasises the connection with global processes affecting local workers, notably the global “race to the bottom” in the garment industry and the dependency of the South Eastern European semi-periphery from Western European economies.

The material effects of geopolitical inequalities are also addressed in the contribution by Rozita Dimova on “Between Borderlines, Betwixt Citizenship: Gender, Agency and the Crisis in Macedonia/Greece Border Region”. By following the monthly escapades of women who cross the Greek–Macedonian border in a quest for cheaper food, cosmetics and health treatments, the paper shows how Greek citizens negotiate and contest their precarity and vulnerability after the financial crisis. The process of border crossing and the reinstatement of gender norms of
beauty and health allow women to exercise their agency, feeling in charge of their lives and contesting the deterioration of living standards that affected Greek citizens as a result of global and European economic policies. The case of Greece, somehow cast out from being a full-fledged EU and eurozone member to being part of a European semi-periphery, points at the contingency of historical and geopolitical change, and at on-going processes of peripheralisation and uneven citizenship rights within European borders.

The interplay between European and national processes is also at stake in Katja Kahlina’s essay on “Local histories, European LGBT designs: Sexual citizenship, nationalism, and ‘Europeanisation’ in post-Yugoslav Croatia and Serbia”. Kahlina’s article looks at processes of European Union enlargement in Croatia and Serbia, assessing how European homonationalist discourses related to the protection of sexual minorities are received in accession countries, particularly by local political elites. The author concludes that global and European homonationalism produces uneven, differential, and heterogeneous effects on sexual citizenship in the locations and within communities that are objects of its “othering.” In particular, while contributing to positive transformations of national legal frameworks, homonationalist discourses and practices present in the EU enlargement process at the same time facilitate the increased resistance to struggles for sexual equality.

Sexual citizenship is also considered in the essay by Roman Kuhar on “Playing with Science: Intimate/Sexual Citizenship and the Roman Catholic Church counternarratives”. The author addresses the process of the “secularization” of the Roman Catholic Church and its attempts to secure exclusionary patriarchal and traditional values in discussion related to intimate citizenship. Taking the recent debates on the Family Code in Slovenia and Health Education in Croatia as examples, Kuhar shows how the Church and its satellite civil society organisations increasingly refrain from using “biblical discourse”, substituting it with what appears as a rational, scientific discourse. In such a way, the Church is secularizing its discourse in order to “clericise” society. Issues of family and marriage, in this way, are reframed as an ideological battleground of contemporary cultural wars in post-socialist societies, constituting gays and lesbians as outsiders of the nation.

Feminists, too, were often constituted as outsider of the nation during the 1990s, when they took an active stance against war and nationalism. In her contribution on “Dissidents, Disloyal Citizens and Partisans of Emancipation: Feminist Citizenship in Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav spaces”, Adriana Zaharijević analyses the history of feminism in the region of former Yugoslavia from the perspective of activist citizenship. Assuming the existence of three different citizenship regimes – the first framed by the socialist self-management state, the second by the nation-building processes and violent disintegration of the former state, and the last one by post-socialist, post-conflict transitional circumstances – the paper explores how feminists’ relation to the state changed over time, leading to different forms of feminist activist citizenship.

Overall, the articles provide new perspectives on gender, sexual and feminist citizenship in South East Europe, and point out the relevance of the South East European case study for ongoing transnational discussions on gender and citizenship. This special issue aims to create a cross-disciplinary dialogue with scholars of gender studies and area studies within and beyond the region, indicating new directions of research through the lens of political, economic, social and cultural citizenship.

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