
MARIA MAYERCHYK,* OLGA PLAKHOTNIK**
& JENNIFER RAMME***

Unsettling gender, sexuality, and the European East/West divisions

Intersections. EEJSP

10(3): 1–6.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1444>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

* [\[maria.mayerchyk@hochschule-rhein-waal.de\]](mailto:maria.mayerchyk@hochschule-rhein-waal.de) (Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences)

** [\[olga.plakhotnik@uni-greifswald.de\]](mailto:olga.plakhotnik@uni-greifswald.de) (University of Greifswald)

*** [\[jennifer.ramme@uni-graz.at\]](mailto:jennifer.ramme@uni-graz.at) (University of Graz)

The East/West division paradigm has a long history in Europe and was particularly influential during and after the Cold War. While acknowledging its relevance and analytic productivity in some cases, it is also crucial to account for its deficiency in contemporary times. At the very least, this approach is ineffective in explaining the power relations within Eastern Europe and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Conceived as an attempt to critically re-examine the limitations of the East/West divide paradigm, this special issue seeks to explore new analytical possibilities in theorizing European East and West, as well as scrutinize what has been obscured by the very perspective of the East/West division. Working with gender and sexuality as our primary area of investigation, we prioritized two major directions of the debates.

The first one concerns the ongoing discussions on gender and sexuality underlying the discourse of East/West divisions. This includes the debates regarding which part of Europe – western or eastern – has been more advanced regarding gender and sexuality politics. Where did the sexual revolution first take place – in the 1920s Soviet Union or the 1960s Western countries? Where were the legislative regulations for abortions and access to contraception more favorable? Who had more progressive family planning and reproductive rights? In which part of the world did feminism first occur, or did gender equality start being discussed? Where did women first get access to education, the labour market, and political participation? How was homosexuality regulated, and what were the transsexual politics?

These kinds of debates, however profound, have rarely addressed that both Eastern and Western Europe often shared similar – modern – notions of gender, sexuality and emancipation, which can be seen as problematic and have been questioned in both West and East. Drawing on the scholarship that scrutinized the connection of the modern regime of gender and sexuality with nationalism (Mosse, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Kuntsman, 2009; Janion, 2006), colonialism (Lugones, 2007) and the emergence of the modern forms of homophobia and transphobia (Rao, 2020; Rasa Navickaitė in this volume), we aimed to unsettle the modus of competition for the status of the more progressive political system between European East and West. We believe that focusing on the debates of division,

pioneering, and progressing, the very issue of gender and sexuality as ‘body-geo-politics’ (Mignolo, 2016) remains obscure, and, even more importantly, interconnectedness as well as strategies of solidarity are often neglected or omitted.

The second direction of investigation focuses on the very concept of ‘Eastern Europe’. Even though the paradigm of ‘Eastern Europe as a project of the West’ got extensive academic attention over the last decades (Adamovsky, 2005; Confino, 1994; Krastev & Holmes, 2018), it has also been pointed out that lately ‘Eastern Europe’ has become a rather loose concept without concrete meaning (Grob, 2015; Lucas, 2023). We can see how the notions of what constitutes Eastern Europe and where the border between East and West is to be drawn shift and change over time, depending also on the actors and the context in which the division is made. Nowadays, for example, Eastern Europe is perceived by some as consisting of the eastern members of the EU, including Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Baltic countries, while Ukraine and Belarus quite often remain outside the scope of investigation of Eastern Europe at large.

By stating that Eastern Europe today is a rather vague concept and, again, either *terra incognita* or overloaded with projected meanings, we want to stress that while there is a lack of a clear definition of what constitutes Eastern Europe, there is also a scarcity of alternative categories capable of grasping the peculiarities of these localities. Our readers can still come across expressions such as Eastern Block, post-Communist, or post-Soviet countries in this special issue. The authors reflect on these descriptive statements and the analytical work these statements can or cannot do.

While critically focusing on the European East/West divisions and the notion or the very phenomenon of Eastern Europe, this special issue also seeks to address the problem that the production of legitimate knowledge on the region is typically being done through the lens of the Anglo-American scholarship. This is also true for the most cited literature on gender and sexuality, as well as feminist and LGBTQ+ movements and politics. Hence, already from the late 1990s, a critique was raised about the role of academics and activists in the East of Europe and Central Asia being reduced to an ‘empirical’ base for Western scholars to build theory on (see, e.g., Havelková, 1997; Kassymbekova, 2022). Although more scholarship from these regions is being recognized today internationally, it is still striking that many of the scholars cited have gained recognition through their training in and links with Western academia and by publishing in English. It seems that the knowledge production on Eastern Europe continues to rely on paying homage to Western academia to be considered worthy not only internationally but even locally.

Against this background, we would like to raise awareness of what Annabel L. Kim (2020) calls the ‘politics of citation’: how particular modes of intellectual legitimacy are reproduced by the same citation sets and reference models over and over again. One way forward to problematize the reinforcement of hierarchies is a citation practice that recognizes innovative and critical authors (possibly writing in languages other than English) from the regions with which the research is concerned. This approach would also include knowledge production beyond academia, as activist and artistic communities are often at the forefront of theoretical reflections on the problems of intra- and extra-Eastern European power dynamics. By practicing such politics of citation, the authors of this special issue made an additional valuable contribution to the critical dismantling of European East/West divisions.

All the articles of this special issue contribute to the ongoing critical debates on how gender and sexuality underly the discursive construction of East/West divides (Barát & Annus, 2012; Blagojević, 2009; Edenborg, 2018; Frunzã & Văcărescu, 2004; Kampichler, 2012; Kulawik & Kravchenko, 2019; Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2016; Pitoňák, 2019; Plakhotnik & Mayerchik, 2023; Wiedlack et al., 2022; and many others) question this division and its common tropes in one way or another.

The article by Olena S. Dmytryk explores the interrelation between the lives and politics of trans* people in former Soviet countries and the development of the Internet. Working at the intersection of digital humanities, trans* studies and cultural studies, and building on media archeology as a methodology, Dmytryk starts a conversation on how the lives and politics of trans* people in ex-Soviet countries responded to, informed and shaped the development of the Internet. Based on an analysis of early digital trans* cultures, the author argues that while the Internet was ‘spreading’ from the West to the East, and the ex-Soviet states were integrating into the global information network, trans* people in the region were not just ‘integrating’ into globalized trans* identity discourses. Focusing on a case study from Ukraine, the article highlights how trans* Internet users were (and continue to be) active contributors to global knowledge production and medical/technological innovations, fostering a collective ethos vital for trans* communities.

Analysing the late Soviet expert and pedagogical texts in the Lithuanian SSR from a feminist and queer historical perspective, the study by Rasa Navickaitė challenges the popular perception of the USSR as a paragon of women’s emancipation and gender equality, where the ‘return to traditional gender roles’ allegedly happened only within the post-1991 conservative turn. On the contrary, Navickaitė shows how the ‘gender complementarity’ paradigm in the expert and pedagogical texts published in Soviet Lithuania echoed similar ideas in Western contexts, such as those in the United States. The article shows how the adoption of complimentary yet strongly differentiated gender roles by men and women was seen as key to marital happiness and a healthy Communist society; how the emphasis on the need to foster traditional gender roles with homophobia, as homosexuality was seen to pose a threat to the proper functioning of masculinity and femininity, and a reason for the fading attraction between the ‘opposite’ sexes.

Anna Shadrina’s paper critically questions the East/West divide while working with the intersection of gender and age in the contemporary Belarusian political narratives: how the persistent logic of Cold War geopolitics animates social hierarchies in territories positioned between Western and Russian influences. Analysing narratives of the official national project and the oppositional ethnocentric concept of Belarusianness regarding the place of older citizens, particularly women, in society, Shadrina shows their paradoxical similarity: both share a discursive construction of ‘pensioners’ as an inferior Other. Importantly, exploring the alternative discourse of ‘in-between-ness’, which champions a democratic Belarus that belongs neither to the Soviet past/Russia nor to the West but is connected to both, the article shows how rejecting binary logic in national self-determination can open the avenue for intergroup solidarity.

Two articles in this special issue explore the lived experiences of non-heterosexual people in Eastern Europe during the socialist time. In doing so, they seek to grasp the peculiarities of the social reality, typically marginalized in the West-centred discourse as homo- and transphobic peripheries of the ‘progressive’ centres of the ‘sexual revolution’.

The paper by Kristina Millona looks at the cruising past of men seeking same-sex desire under the communist regime in Albania with the aim to challenge the totalizing historical discourses of non-normative sexualities under state socialism, limited to the narratives of oppression, criminalization, and persecution of homosexuality. Millona shows that in contrast to such essentialist representations, which in turn are juxtaposed with representations of the West as a homoerotic paradise, there was also sexual political resistance in the state-socialist countries that differed from the West-centered conventional forms of political organizing. Conceptualizing urban spaces not only as areas of sexual encounter but as grounds for political resistance, the article seeks to ‘queer’ the forms of grassroots politics within the geo-temporality of state-socialism in Albania.

Antonina Tosiek, Błażej Warkocki and Lucyna Marzec analyse the first comprehensive volume of memoirs of LGBTQ+ people in Poland *All the Power I Draw for Life* (2022). Looking at first glance as a continuation of the long Polish tradition of diaries written for a competition announced by state institutions, the collection is, in fact, exceptionally important. It was published at a politically sensitive moment, when homophobia became an element of global politics, including the construction of the East/West European divide. Thus, the collection of diaries becomes a unique, autonomous and empowered voice of the LGBTQ+ community from Central and Eastern Europe in a contemporary geopolitical context.

The articles of the special issue are published in alphabetical order by the authors’ names, aiming to avoid building hierarchies of topics, regions, or author statuses.

Acknowledgements

We, the guest editors, are thankful to all the authors and reviewers for their input and inspiring work together on this special issue. Jennifer Ramme acknowledges that this project has received funding from the European Union’s Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon Europe (2021-2027) under the Marie Skłodowska Curie Grant Agreement No. 101152829. She would also like to thank the Faculty of Cultural and Social Sciences at the European University Viadrina for hosting and funding the lecture series ‘Gender and Sexuality in (Post) Socialist Europe and the Validity of East/West Divides’ (2022/2023), which inspired the idea for this special issue. Olga Plakhotnik acknowledges funding from the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under the funding line for Ukrainian Studies as a ‘small discipline’ (UNDIPUS project, 2022–2026).

References

- Adamovsky, E. (2005). Euro-Orientalism and the Making of the Concept of Eastern Europe in France, 1810–1880. *The Journal of Modern History*, 77(3), 591–628. <https://doi.org/10.1086/497718>
- Barát, E. & Annus, I. (2012). Travelling Concepts of Feminist Scholarship: The East/West Divide. *TNTeF*, 2(1), 119–123.
- Blagojević, M. (2009). *Knowledge Production at the Semiperiphery: A Gender Perspective*. Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja.

- Confino, M. (1994). Re-Inventing the Enlightenment: Western Images of Eastern Realities in the Eighteenth Century [book review]. *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes*, 36(3/4), 505–522.
- Edenborg, E. (2018). Homophobia as geopolitics: ‘Traditional values’ and the negotiation of Russia’s place in the world. In J. Mulholland, N. Montagna & E. Sanders-McDonagh (Eds.), *Gendering nationalism: Intersections of nation, gender and sexuality* (pp. 67–87). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frunză, M., & Văcărescu, T.-E. (2004). *Gender and the (Post) “East”/“West” Divide*. Limes.
- Grob, T. (2015). The concept of “Eastern Europe” in past and present. *UNI NOVA – Research Magazine of the University of Basel*. <https://www.unibas.ch/en/News-Events/Uni-Nova/Uni-Nova-126/Uni-Nova-126-The-concept-of-Eastern-Europe-in-past-and-present.html>
- Havelková, H. (1997). Transitory and Persistent Differences: Feminism East and West. In J. W. Scott, C. Kaplan & D. Keates (Eds.), *Transitions, Environments, Translations. Feminism in International Politics* (pp. 56–62). Routledge.
- Janion, M. (2006). *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna: Fantazmaty Literatury* [Uncanny Slavs: Phantasms of Literature]. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Kampichler M (2012) Za hranice feministických diskusí mezi Východem a Západem [Beyond Feminist East/West Debates]. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, 13(2), 4–17.
- Kassymbekova, B. (2022). On decentering Soviet Studies and launching new conversations. *Ab Imperio*, 1, 115–120. <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2022.0011>
- Kim, A. L. (2020). The Politics of Citation. *Diacritics*, 48(3), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2020.0016>
- Krastev, I., & Holmes, S. (2018). Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3), 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0049>
- Kulawik, T., & Kravchenko, Z. (Eds.). (2019). *Borderlands in European Gender Studies: Beyond the East–West Frontier*. Routledge.
- Kulpa, R. & Mizelińska, J. (Eds.). (2016). *De-centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European perspectives*. Routledge.
- Kuntsman, A. (2009). *Figurations of Violence and Belonging: Queerness, Migrant-hood and Nationalism in Cyberspace and Beyond*. Peter Lang.
- Lucas, E. (2023, September 24). Lazy Categories: East, West, North, South. *CEPA*. <https://cepa.org/article/lazy-categories-east-west-north-south/>
- Lugones, M. (2007). Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 186–209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01156.x>
- Mignolo, W. D. (2016). Decolonial Body-Geo-Politics at Large [Foreword]. In S. Bakshi, S. Jivraj & S. Posocco (Eds.), *Decolonizing Sexualities* (pp. vii–xviii). Counterpress.
- Mosse, G. L. (1985). *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*. University of Wisconsin Press.

- Plakhotnik, O. & Mayerchik, M. (2023). Pride Contested: Geopolitics of Liberation at the Buffer Periphery of Europe. *Lambda Nordica*, 28(2–3), 25–53. <https://doi.org/10.34041/ln.v.874>
- Pitoňák, M. (2019). Lliçons des de la «perifèria»: contrarestar l'hegemonia anglogeogràfica de les geografies de la sexualitat i de gènere [Lessons from the “periphery”: countering the Anglo-geographical hegemony of the geographies of sexuality and gender]. *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica*, 65(3), 563–585. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/dag.573>
- Rao, R. (2020). *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190865511.001.0001>
- Wiedlack, K., Dmytryk, O., Syaivo, & Belorusova L. (Eds.). (2022). Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts on/from a Post-Soviet Perspective [Special issue]. *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies* 5. <https://doi.org/10.52323/fc5>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. SAGE.