

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of International Studies

M. A. DISSERTATION MARK SHEET
(Opponent's Review)

Student: Christian Kjaelder Vinther

Program: Balkan, Eurasian and Central European Studies

Title: *Between Liberal Policies and Conservative Values: The Role of the EU in Improving Sexual Minority Rights in Albania*, Prague 2015, 85 pp.

Reviewed by:

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1. CONTENT AND AIM OF THE THESIS:

As a main aim of his thesis Christian Vinther has chosen an interesting but very complicated issue. In general, he decided to analyse the status of homosexual groups in Albanian society. More specifically he tries to explore why the LGBT-community has been under persistent pressure in Albania since the end of Hoxha's era. Vinther was inspired in his analysis by a contradictory reality. From one point of view the Albanian government has implemented very liberal policies (especially in comparison with the policies of other Balkan states) in recent years aiming to legalize gay marriages. On the other side Albanian society remains one of the most homophobic cultures in Europe.

By reviewing and analyzing the homosexual history of Albania and its political LGBT movement the author has hoped not only to find an explanation of the cause of this strong homophobia, but also a definition of this changing governmental policy. The other important factors in this dissertation are the roles of the European Union, NGOs and delegations in addressing and combating homophobia in the Post-Communist Albania. The aforementioned mismatch between the conservative values in Albania, and its emerging liberal policies, has been his main research topic.

2. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

As it has been already said, Albania with its really conservative society falls into a group of European countries which are considered the most homophobic areas in Europe. Due to this fact, it is obvious that the survey of homosexual communities – still sort of a taboo in Albanian society – will be really complicated. The main limits of this kind of research are undoubtedly lack of diversity in data, absence of relevant primary sources, insufficient number of documents of Human Rights/LGBT NGOs and other surveys and statistics published in journals and reports from the EU regarding this topic. Additionally, this statement is valid even for sources in Albanian language irrespective of very poor records concerning homosexual problems in Albania in English. It seems that the only possible way how to research this issue in-depth and from a broad perspective, is to conduct field research. Due to the very difficult and delicate topic and an unfamiliarity with Albanian language Vinther has decided to analyse homophobia in Albania from available primary sources and literature concerning LGBT problems in English. Because the author was restricted to really scarce primary sources his argumentation is at times relatively superficial. Although Vinther often uses the word “analysis“ in his diploma thesis, he does not analyse his statements or locate them in a more detailed understanding of the context. Due to these limitations Vinther's dissertation looks more like a deceptive compilation of gathered materials than genuine analysis.

This type of thesis which is based on the collection of various materials should also have more thorough discussion of the literature and other primary sources. This is not the case for Vinther's thesis, because there is no complex analysis or critical assessment of different sources. An attentive

reader could observe that whole extracts are taken from documents of NGO's without critical evaluation and numerous generalizations are created on the basis of one quoted source.

3. PRESENTATION AND STYLE:

Although the style of Vinther's dissertation is clear in general, the overall impression of the text is negatively influenced by frequent repetition of some facts or comments. These repetitions decrease the general readability of the text. On pages 33–34 and 42 he states not only the same thoughts or facts but also exactly same phrases. Also, there is no clear definition of his abbreviations. The author does not work with them consistently; e.g. he uses a common shortcut LGBT which is clear, but e.g. on page 23 he mentioned the acronym once LGBTQ without defining it and the same thing occurs on page 34 with LGBTI. The literature review is missing specific parenthetical citations (name and publication date). Some references (e.g. COWI) have no quoted publication date (e.g. p. 23) and the same trouble is with references of authors (e. g. Tani, Kadi, Lleshaj, Jovanović, Snider, Tafili). When he explains the reasons for choosing to analyse the LGBT's topic in Albania, he refers to the more recent survey which listed this state as the most homophobic country in Europe /abstract; s. 8/ without quoting a specific parenthetical citation. Although he returns to this reference on page 23 where he finally quotes the source, he does not refer under which methodology this survey was conducted, nor how broad was the sample of respondents.

4. COMMENTS:

I have several critical remarks. Firstly, although I consider his account for choosing Albania as relatively intelligible and logical, there is no thorough explanation of his comparison of Serbia and Romania. It is true that Albania was deeply isolated during the communistic era. Also, religious communities in Albanian society play a much smaller part than the other selected countries [p. 8]. But the author does not give clear reasons for choosing just these two countries and not the others, e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bulgaria, or Kosovo. Moreover the content of chapter 9 – „Comparison with Serbia and Romania“ – is not balanced. Vinther is focused especially on Serbia and the situation in Romania is included only in an extensive generalization.

Although Vinther, in his explanation of reasons for choosing Albania for his research topic, distances himself from the orientalist attitude to the Balkan area, he does not offer any different interpretation of this region. With the exception of mentioning Marija Todorova he presents only „classic“ writers (Rebecca West, Robert Kaplan) who interpret the Balkans as violent, backward, and uncivilized [p. 7]. In this case he should at least add the other influential works from Vesna Goldsworthy or Milica and Robert Hayden to create more complex context.

There are a few mistakes in the text which should be pointed out. When Vinther writes about theories about the origins of the Albanian people, i.e. “but one view is that they descended on one side from the Scythians and on the other from the ancient Macedonians“ [p. 14], he does not mention the most common theory that Albanians are descendants of an ancient Illyrians. This group of Indo-European tribes in antiquity is crucial in Albanian national mythology and the name Illyr (Ilir) is the most frequent male's name in Albania. The author gives an example of “boy-love” among Geges describing them as Albanian Muslims [p. 14]. The characterization of Geges as Albanian Muslims is misleading because they can also be Orthodox or Catholics.

My last critical point relates to the abstract, which should present a brief summary of a thesis outlining several elements (the research focus, methods, findings and main conclusions). Vinther's abstract looks more like a brief introduction to the main topic or an opening contextualization than a genuine abstract.

5. QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:

The author states that homosexuality is still highly stigmatized and Albanian gays are forced to retreat into silence and invisibility [p. 19]. In this context it was really surprising that Sali Berisha announced in 2009 that Albania should become the first country in the Balkans to legalize gay marriages [p. 36].

This decision of the then leader of conservative Democratic party of Albania Berisha whose political base sympathises with Muslim organizations was unexpected. Vinther correctly supposes that Berisha's suggestion has certain economical and foreign policy agendas – especially in relation to the EU [p. 63]. But can we explain this new fashioned liberal approach to the LGBT-community only by reference to an effort to get into the EU, when in the Albanian countryside until recently same sex relationships were completely unknown?

Vinther also elaborates on the changes during the Socialist regime. According to him, migrations from rural areas of Albania to the cities have disturbed the patriarchal structure of Albanian society although it is still widespread [p. 13]. The author should also ask in his study, how the patriarchal structure was influenced by era of transition in 90's when men were leaving the country by the thousand? And how much have these new migration patterns (return of diaspora, transmigration etc.) affected the LGBT issues?

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Although Vinther's text does not present much original analysis, it could be considered a respectable summarizing compilation of perspectives on the LGBT-community in Albania which could serve as an initial base for future research. I recommend Christian K. Vinther's MA Dissertation "Between Liberal Policies and Conservative Values: The Role of the EU in Improving Sexual Minority Rights in Albania" to oral defense with a proposed assessment of very good (velmi dobře, 2).

Date: Prague, June 1, 2015

Signature: