

### **M. A. Thesis Assessment**

Christian K. Vinther: *Between Liberal Policies and Conservative Values: The Role of the EU in Improving Sexual Minority Rights in Albania*, (M. A. Thesis) Prague: IMS – FSV UK, June 2015, 85 pgs.

**Reviewer: František Šístek, M. A., Ph. D.**

The M. A. thesis of Christian K. Vinther focuses on the development of sexual minority rights in post-Communist Albania. Special attention is paid to the most recent period. Certain information on the historical background as well as selected information on the regional context (comparison with Serbia and Romania) is also included. In 2009, ombudsman Igli Totozani, who received support from Prime Minister Sali Berisha, proposed that Albania should become the first Balkan country to legalize same-sex marriages. At the same time, the country remains very conservative, patriarchal and homophobic according to most surveys and observers. Moreover, the grass-roots movement for liberalization of sexual minority rights has been quite limited. In his thesis, Vinther highlights the obvious contradiction between this and other liberal initiatives, which are clearly tied to Albania's long-term efforts to join the EU on the one side and the traditional, predominantly homophobic society on the other with the aim of identifying the main driving forces behind the changes in policies and practices affecting sexual minorities. His preliminary hypothesis identifies the EU institutions and foreign NGOs as the main driving forces behind these changes.

The thesis is based on a compilation of mostly secondary sources – books, articles and news reports, along with laws and information from NGOs. The author himself admits that his method of research has several limitations. The issue he has chosen is certainly relevant, but insufficiently researched, the sources scattered. His thesis is based exclusively on English language sources. Due to the language barrier, Vinther was unable to consult the sources in Albanian. Sources in other European languages are also lacking. Moreover, he has written the thesis without conducting a field research or undertaking at least a short trip to Albania. The author is not trying to hide these limitations but it is still regrettable that he did not make an effort to overcome them. Even without visiting the country, he could have probably conducted some interviews with members of local NGO's and journalists. As he himself reveals elsewhere in the thesis, people who are openly involved with sexual minority issues in Albania usually belong to the urban and educated segment of the population. Therefore, such research could have been most likely conducted in English despite the language barrier.

At times, I cannot escape the impression that the thesis was turned in somewhat prematurely before the final stage of proof-reading and editing process. It seems that certain

sections were written earlier and when additional information was discovered, the author just added a new section instead of integrating all related information in one place. The inevitable result is a frequent repetition and return of the same or similar topics throughout the thesis (e. g. the issue of homophobic statements by politicians and public figures, historical background, context of the 2009-10 initiative to legalize same-sex marriages etc.). A better, more coherent structure and more logical organization would improve the thesis and make it more reader-friendly. More attention should have been paid to the temporal, chronological framework: the author frequently jumps back and forth in time and this sometimes obscures the overall narrative and linear sense of development.

Given the fact that the issue is not well-researched, Vinther has managed to gather and present a sufficient number of sources. Certain objectives, however, could be raised against his treatment of these sources in the thesis. In some passages, the author does not sufficiently contrast the different sources and does not use a wider range of references. Instead, his own text tends to be based on a single source, which is then succeeded by another single source. Typical examples of this strategy can be found in the subsections on Albania and religion, the material on Romania in the comparative (contextual) chapter and elsewhere. Extensive quotes and paraphrases (see for example pg. 58) from a single sources represent a closely related problem. To sum up the criticism, despite its merits and the fact that most important questions are indeed addressed, the thesis should have been better organized, less repetitive, more chronological and better structured, some parts more thoroughly researched, elaborated and supported by a wider range of sources.

In the opening part of the thesis, Vinther turns his attention to negative representations and stereotypes of the Balkans. His treatment of the issue is fragmental and incomplete, with insufficient references to several authors who have been accused of stereotypical textual representation (Rebecca West, Robert D. Kaplan) and then Maria Todorova as the only, though arguably most important example of a scholar who aims to deconstruct these stereotypes. The topic of images and stereotypes has been generally well researched and currently belongs to the core cannon of Balkan studies. However, this topic seems only vaguely (if at all) connected with the main focus of Vinther's dissertation. A brief incursion into this field, especially in such a fragmentary and insufficient form, therefore seems quite unnecessary and counterproductive.

In the beginning of the section devoted to the "Homosexual History of Albania", we encounter another widely discussed problem of historiography which is very remote from the topic of Vinther's thesis – the ethnogenesis of the Albanians. The author went unnecessarily far back in time in order to mention the problem more or less in passing, providing a questionable digression at best. It is well known that there have been several contested theories on the origin of the Albanians. Most Albanians themselves and somewhat more reluctantly also most scholars believe that the so-called Illyrian theory is most credible. Vinther instead mentions a marginal and far less credible

explanation which claims that the ancestors of present-day Albanian were “Scythians“ and “ancient Macedonians“. Similarly to my previous objection, I believe that he unnecessarily attracts attention to a questionable and insufficiently developed topic which in fact does not even deserve to be mentioned in his work.

According to some surveys, Albania ranks as the most homophobic country in Europe. Vinther partly explains this tendency by pointing to the historical and social background. He pays some attention to the ruthless Communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, which clasified “pederasty“ as a crime against social morality and officially penalized homosexuality by legislature which was lifted only in 1995. Apart from the Communist legacy, he pays attention to the traditional patriarchal and tribal society and its values, which partly still persists. What he describes (especially in the chapter Cultural Tradition and Patriarchy) is in fact the tribal world of Northern Albanian Ghegs (“High Albania“), most poignantly depicted by the British traveller, ethnographer and pro-Albanian activist Edith Durham in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (her works are conspicuously absent among Vinther’s sources on this subtopic). From Western perspective, this area has been most attractive, most radically different and exotic, however, we would committ a mistake by presenting its value system as representative and typical for the entire country. Different social structures and traditions developed in the Ottoman-influenced cities, different again among the south Albanian Tosks exposed to multiple Greek influences, not talking about the Albanian diaspora and its considerable impact since the national awakening. The patriarchal and tribal highlands of the North have been predominantly inhabited by Catholic tribes, however, Catholics represent the smallest of the 3 (or perhaps 4, if we count the Bektashi as a separate group) major religious communities of Albania. The tribe (*fis*) as a social unit, the concept of honor (*besa*), *kanun* and even the phenomenon of sworn virgins do deserve to be mentioned, and Vinther does mention them. Nevertheless, current Albania was shaped by a far greater number of traditions and influences. From this point of view, Vinther’s portrayal of Albanian society and its historical background is somewhat one-sided.

Apart from the focus on traditional society, Vinther also discusses the higly interesting but elusive topic of the “homosexual history of Albania“ (in the section of the same name and partly also in earlier passages). The author rightly acknowledges that many historical sources cannot be considered as reliable. The evidence is often dubious, fragmentary and marked by Orientalist stereotypes. The controversial question of projecting present categories into the past and constructing “gay histories“ is a recurrent theme of recent scholarship on the history of sexual minorities. Some of the sources concerning Albania might be easily misread – they might speak of some ideal, platonic love or describe institutions of honorary male brotherhood common in the Western Balkans. Some might just be misinformed – this is for example the case Edward Gibbon.

His claims concerning homosexuality among Albanians might easily be dismissed as Gibbon never actually visited the area. Sworn virgins, mentioned by Vinther in a passage devoted to transgendered persons and lesbians, belong here only superficially – their performance of a male role in public lacked all sexual aspects. What I lack in this section is a clear and convincing conclusion. Can we dismiss these sources as irrelevant? If not, how representative are they? Can we speak of a certain tradition of toleration, running counter to the traditional “macho“ culture? If so, what happened to this (counter)tradition, how relevant or irrelevant is it today?

One important question which has been answered only partially is the role of religion and religious leaders. In comparison with some other countries of the region, religion has played a less prominent role in Albanian public life. Nevertheless, the tendency towards neotraditionalism and clericalization of public life has affected post-Communist Albania as well as its Southeast European neighbors. Vinther mentions that religious leaders of Albania’s traditional denominations labeled homosexuality as abnormal and successfully lobbied against the idea of legalizing same-sex marriages. He also points to the fact that active extremist groups (comparable, for example, to similar anti-gay groups in Serbia) cannot be identified as organised opponents of sexual minorities, their rights and lifestyle. Vinther repeatedly speaks of conservative tradition and mentality. However, when it comes to organized, identifiable opponents, it seems that he has not paid sufficient attention to religious organizations, leaders and laic supporters. Could we label them as major and most successful opponents of LGBT activists and their (EU-backed and sponsored) efforts? From the point of view of the government and political parties, it is quite obvious that they represent a more respectable interest group than the far less numerous and influential advocates of LGBT rights.

The attempt at comparison with other countries of the region (Serbia and Romania) is a step in the right direction. Contextualization of the topic shows that the case of Albania, despite specific local features and unique elements of historical background, shares basic characteristics with similar developments in the neighboring states. At the same time, this attempt remains partial and limited when it comes to both the number of countries (the neighboring republics of Kosovo and Montenegro, with their equally tribal and patriarchal traditions, might have provided some interesting parallels) and sources (as already mentioned, the case of Romania is based exclusively on one source).

Despite a certain degree of disorganisation, the main part of the thesis devoted to different aspects of sexual minority policies represents a solid overview and includes many relevant observations. One of them is the obvious link between open homosexuality and activities in favor of sexual minorities (most typically in the NGO sector) with financial and educational status. As Vinther states, open homosexuals are primarily people with higher education “which indicates that

it takes not only self-esteem, but also financial security to live openly as gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual in Albanian society.“ For these segments of Albanian society, overcoming the social stigma is far easier than for the rural and underprivileged. Moreover, the organised LGBT scene and NGOs is largely supported by EU institutions and foreign NGOs. In my opinion, these findings represent very important clues and signals of possible further developments – in a more affluent and urbanized society, more people might eventually be able to “buy“ their freedom in a similar way and press for public opinion changes. Vinther’s work has also managed to document that the 2009-2010 discussions about possible legalization of same-sex marriages, which coincided with the first televised coming-out in Albanian history during the Big Brother contest, opened a new chapter in the liberalization and public discussion of these sensitive issues despite the fact that the proposition to change the legislature was dropped from the final draft of the anti-discrimination bill. The chapter on the LGBT movement in Albania is sometimes too dependent on extensive quotes from the documents published by NGOs, nevertheless, it provides a useful overview. Vinther is successful in pointing to the ambivalent attitude of Albanian politicians between open homophobia on the one hand and certain assistance and understanding on the other, the opposition of the churches and continued prevalence of conservative attitudes in much of Albanian society. Still, he manages to document a certain progress evident in the growing awareness of LGBT issues, signs of tolerance and support from some institutions of the state apparatus and active protests against cases of homophobia led by NGO activists in recent years. He also quite convincingly confirmed the introductory hypothesis that the EU plays a key role in the struggle for sexual minority rights.

**I recommend the M. A. thesis of Christian K. Vinther for oral defence. Proposed grade: 2 (*velmi dobře*).**

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June 11, 2015