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# On Nation, Gender, and Class formation in Belarus... and elsewhere in the Post-Soviet world

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“Liberal democracy, in truth, is the political arrangement under which capital thrives best.” Slavoj Zizek<sup>1</sup>

“It’s the economy, stupid!” (Slogan on the wall of Bill Clinton’s headquarters during his presidential campaign in 1992).<sup>2</sup>

On 9 September 2001 presidential elections were held in Belarus for the first time since Alexander Lukashenka became the president in 1994. To remain in power for seven years instead of the four for which he had been elected, he changed the constitution. Held in an undemocratic manner, with falsification of voting results, repression of political opponents, and blocking access to most media for opposition candidates, the 2001 elections became the acme of the confrontation between the authoritarian executive power and the opposition, labeled either democratic or nationalist, depending on one’s perspective. The voting situation and how Westernized urban intelligentsia perceived it can best be illustrated by the following submission to the Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures electronic bulletin board. The message was sent by a list subscriber from Minsk (reproduced exactly as it appeared, the sender’s name omitted):

Sorry for a bit off-topic, but I want the world to know before I may be switched off. Today we are having presidential elections. It is already completely obvious that they are going to be falsified on large scales. Observers are beaten and thrown out, ballot boxes are opened during the night, many many other things. Security council deleted from DNS server the

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Zizek, “Seize the Day: Lenin’s Legacy,” *The Guardian*, 23 July 2002, available at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> See for instance [www.stentorian.com/politics/economy.html](http://www.stentorian.com/politics/economy.html)

records for opposition sites: dt.home.by (dzied Talasz), www.bdg.by (live 24hr coverage) www.barcnews.by and many others. Also from inside Belarus we can NOT see www.svaboda.org (RFE/RL), www.charter97.org (live coverage) and a dozen other sites. Beltelecom (the sole state-run ISP provider that controls all other providers) blocks their IP addresses. We are under siege. People get their phones turned off. I hope mine will still be operational. At that same time Russian tv media reports that elections in Belarus are taking place as planned without any falsification. Please, spread the word. There are several trucks with soldier with machine guns that were unloaded next to us (Rusijanava street).<sup>3</sup>

The opposition candidate, Vladimir Goncharik, appealed to his supporters to come in the evening to October Square, where, in the Trade Unions Palace, his headquarters were situated, and remain there until the voting results were announced in the morning. The idea of bringing people to some public space was driven by several goals. One might have been the visualization of people's support by presenting a certain number of "live bodies", which would have indicated to the international media that offered extensive coverage of the election, that this struggle was a people's cause. A more practical, but unrealistic, aim was to prevent the falsification of voting results with a threat of a protest strike, which supposedly could spread nationwide from October Square.

At the end of the day about 3,000 people gathered at a plaza in front of the Trade Unions Palace. The opposition leaders evidently did not know what to do with them and after a short meeting it was suggested that the crowd simply "stay there." Still, the mood

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<sup>3</sup> This mailing list can be accessed at seelangs@listserv.cuny.edu. Domains *home.by*, *minsk.by*, *org.by*, *unibel.by* and *nsys.by* ("by" stands for Belarus) were blocked.

of the 24-hour live coverage of the events at the electronic Charter 97 bulletin board, whose server is located outside Belarus, was that of reporting from a battlefield. Just after midnight the following message appeared:

00.50: Vladimir Goncharik called the people standing this night in October Square in Minsk to come again at 7 a.m. to find out the voting results. *As for the men [chto kasaetsya muzhchin]* [my italics], he asked them to stay in the streets till the morning.

Eventually, people began leaving the streets, since nothing was happening, and the next message, an hour later, reported,

1.45: At the present moment there are about 200 people left at the Trade Unions Palace: women and minors have been driven out from the building after Vladimir Goncharik's request. The men who stayed are now barricading the doors. The law-enforcement contingent is being drawn to the Palace. Vladimir Goncharik left the place but will return there in one hour time. His trustee Mikhail Chigir is there with the protesters.

No action was taken against the protesters that night, who badly needed some sign from the authorities that they were noticed, i.e. that they were political actors:

2.45: 200 courageous men [*otvazhnyh muzhchin*] who locked themselves this night in the Trade Unions Palace are currently trying to get ready for a possible police attack: they clasp their hands together with full might, so that if the law-enforcers break in, they couldn't disperse them. The people are regu-

out, for private property—since there is nothing else around which to build democracy as we have known it so far. And then it is only natural that in the new government that was formed no women were present.

calls for an improvement.<sup>2</sup> In other words, for a different social hierarchy. Everywhere, in the subsequent process of class formation, the elites were eventually rewarded better than those rank and file who flooded the streets of East European and some Central Asian capitals in the late 1980s. The history of Polish Solidarity is a good case in point.

Moreover, these democratically elected governments invoke and recreate patriarchal gender systems as a means of creating a “democracy” (much in the same way as the Belarusian anti-authoritarian and anti-communist, i.e. “democratic” opposition), or, rather, patriarchal gender systems recreate themselves under these governments.

It would be too simplistic, however, to explain the status changes in terms of the straightforward economic interests of certain groups. The system, which includes a big symbolic element—the construction of new meaning, an introduction, through a discourse, of particular images and repression of others—is more complicated, but in fighting for freedom people inevitably end up with a new hierarchy. Preparing this article, I lost a friend (metaphorically speaking). His research focuses on Polish Solidarity, and he believes that the workers who started the first strikes were in the end betrayed by intellectuals, and as a result many of them are worse off than they used to be. When I told him my version of post-communist transformation, he was genuinely appalled. “How could you even think,” he asked, “that those several hundred shipyard workers in Gdansk who were first standing up against the huge Soviet machine in 1980 were thinking of any personal gain?” I do not think this at all. I am sure that those brave men and women were standing up for freedom. For a new Poland. For human dignity. For better pay. And, it turned

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Kennedy, “The Liabilities of Liberalism and Nationalism after Communism: Polish Businessman in the Articulation of the Nation,” *Working Papers*, Center for Research on Social Organization, University of Michigan, No. 561, 1998.

larly brought coffee and food. Vladimir Goncharik is supposed to join their ranks shortly.<sup>4</sup>

“*Quelle noblesse!*” as regards the women, who had generally supported themselves and their children throughout the twentieth century and done what men did. Why suddenly this noblesse and courtesy? What are its immediate causes and what larger social anxiety does it represent? What major societal restratification does this dislocation of women from public space at a moment of national emergency signal and what purpose does it serve?

This article intends to go beyond the multiple variations of the popular statement that women were potentially the greatest losers in post-socialist restructuring,<sup>5</sup> which much of the writing on women in the region insists. My intention is to illuminate and explain this transformation as it embraces class, nation, and gender as centerpieces of the post-1991 democratization project. I argue that the major social process in the post-Soviet world is the formation of class distinctions (through income inequality, i.e. through the working of the market), and class necessarily includes the emergence, or, rather, the reconfiguration, of masculine privilege. National projects serve the purpose of justifying the new social order by providing a “noble national goal.” National issues, in their various incarnations (be they demands for autonomy or independence, controversy over language or disputed territories or some other argument) are mostly manifestations of a class issue. This does not imply the absence of national feeling on the part of actors involved, but rather suggests that the roots of the projects are located in the group (class or “corporate”) interests of those disproportionately represented in the articulation of the

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<sup>4</sup> All these messages could be found at [www.charter97.org/r/index/phtml](http://www.charter97.org/r/index/phtml); the translation into English is mine.

<sup>5</sup> Tarja Cronberg, “The Feeling of Home: Russian Women in the Defense Industry and the Transformation of Their Identities,” *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1997, pp.263-281.

national cause, the intellectuals. National projects, as well as class ones, demand specific gender arrangements and invoke particular symbolic representations of men and women.

Methodologically, the article will focus on analyzing the post-1991 discourses of nationhood and how class and a certain gender order are incorporated into its rethinking, not just in terms of contents, but also, as Edward Said suggests, in the form of the debate: “how it is said, by whom, where, and for whom.”<sup>6</sup> The analysis of the debate as a “symbolic product” built into the cultural semantics of the political moment (which is overtly about reaching democracy through national statehood) reveals that class liberation happens through nationalism; and articulation of a certain mode of gender relations works for the legitimization of the national “imagined community.” Though the focus of the paper is on a particular country, the social and cultural pattern it represents is common throughout the whole post-communist space. Works of scholars such as Katherine Verdery demonstrate the same pattern of social stratification and similar ideologies—modified according to the local situation—across the region.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, several points need to be made. The first one relates to the “nationalism as class” generalization and, hence, to the question as to what extent the suggested critique can be applied to the entire region. Many scholars argue that anticommunist nationalism was often a part of the struggle for democracy, a “people’s cause,” and a source of solidarity against totalitarianism.<sup>1</sup> The policy of many foundations and American government agencies working in my part of the world is constructed on the support for this ideology: they normally see “national sentiment” as a kind of a democracy tool.

Furthermore, some might add, in many formerly socialist countries, unlike in Belarus, the governments that came to power in the past decade were democratic, pursuing liberal values and truly elected by the people. While recognizing that the actual social tapestry of the transition is more complicated than that which has been presented in this article—groups, actors, and interests are more diverse—I would still argue that post-communist nation building is a “class” project, pursuing the goal of changing not so much the form of ownership, but the control of resource allocation. Everywhere, the “independence” struggle has been initiated by intellectuals (later, *apparatchiks* would join) for whom, as Michael Kennedy puts it, the state of the nation is never what it should be and always

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, “Intellectuals in the Post-colonial World,” in Diana Brydon, ed., *Postcolonialism. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 31.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Nationalism and Democracy,” in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p.15.

During the 2001 elections, members of the opposition, who were losing as citizens, attempted to win as strong males: by “protecting” their women (by sending them home), but, in fact, silencing them. A “nation” arises in response to the urge to construct a new social hierarchy that is seen by the community members as fair, but in which redomestication of women is a necessary element, for it is on this foundation that the assertion of masculine class is expressed. The question of what was at the core of human civilization—class stratification or gender inequality—has so far not been solved by social science.

## What the Nation Wants

Contemporary Belarusian political and cultural discourse is rotating around two ideas: of a “return to Europe” as an independent and awakened nation (preached by the opposition) and of integration with Russia, the big Slavic brother (the government plan, which has undergone certain modifications throughout the independence period). Each idea is accompanied by a specific set of economic and political assumptions and claims.

The first idea is portrayed as a nostalgic myth in the national memory of an identity allegedly interrupted but not fully destroyed by the Soviet experience. Patriotic historians looking for a point of departure for a contemporary Belarusian nation state view the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the biggest country of medieval Europe, parts of which were eventually incorporated into different empires, as the “Golden Age” of Belarusian statehood.<sup>1</sup> They believe that Belarus as an “entity” existed throughout recorded history. In 1517 Francisk Skorina, a physician and a writer, translated the Bible into Belarusian and published it.<sup>2</sup> In 1588 subchancellor Leu Sapiega published in Belarusian the third *Statut* (Law Code) of the Grand Duchy, with his own preface, in which he engraved the issues of rule of law and “national” language with grave importance. Both these facts are interpreted as evidence of how Belarus has always belonged to Europe. Radical literati, searching for historical continuity of the nation, think of Adam Mickiewicz, the creator of the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this point of view is contested by Lithuania, Poland, and even Russia, who have their own claims on that land and time.

<sup>2</sup> This is also a contested issue: Russian history textbooks have it that the language used by Skorina was ancient Russian.

Polish literary canon, as a Belarusian, or, rather, a Litwin (Litvan). The word “Belarus” only began to be regularly used in the mid nineteenth century, and before that the territories were called Litwa (Lithuania) and its people Litwini. Mickiewicz began his poem *Pan Tadeusz* with the exclamation “Oh, Lithuania, my fatherland!” (*O Litwo, ojczyzna moja*), used local folklore in his work, and was generally conscious of his Belarusian (Litvan) roots. So, too, contemporary intellectuals believe, were many other recognized pillars of other nations’ heritage. Rediscovering Polish or Russian writers, scholars or artists as Belarusian is a popular topic for many intellectuals. Among those most commonly “revealed” are, besides Mickiewicz, Polish composers Mikhal Oginski (author of the famous *Polonaise*) and Stanislaw Moniuszka, Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, and Feodor Dostoevsky, whose ancestors were statesmen in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.<sup>3</sup>

In 1897 the government of the Russian Empire, in its pursuit of enlightened modernity and effective administration, conducted the First General Census. The metropolity’s aim was to scientifically classify imperial subjects, with native tongue being the basis for their categorization. The choice of this criterion resulted from the German-born idea of identifying the nation with the language. The census in the North-West Province of the Empire (which included Belarusian territories) revealed that from 70% to 95% of those who named Belarusian as their native language lived in the countryside, while city dwellers were mostly Jews (up to 60% in some towns), Russians or Poles.<sup>4</sup> If one were to illustrate Ernest Gellner’s “Ruritania” as a territory with elites speaking a recognized language of the far-away court, the church(s) using (an)other one(s) for liturgy, multiple Jews (this was part of the Pale of Settlement) wrapped in their despised jargon, and peasantry confined to their vernacular

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<sup>3</sup> Shiryayev, *Belarus. Rus’ Belaya, Rus’ Chernaya I Litva v kartah* (Minsk: Navuka I tehnika, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-81.

which leads to an objectification of women in the process. Limiting women’s access to resources and marking them as non-productive and “retailable” is built into class formation.

The process of re-domesticating women is normally not made overtly, but takes place inside various processes of imagining the nation. The national idea provides a justification for the emerging system of class and gender inequality by veiling its true goals with more noble ones (those of national freedom). I argue that, in the long run, women are marginalized through an economic process, not through nationalism, which has no mechanism—in European culture—to make this happen. However, nationalism veils the true workings of the system.

But alongside the new rich, post-socialist restructuring produced other groups. In the journey from status to class a big part of the intelligentsia was left outside. While it had certain status privileges under the Soviet regime or, if not, then at least symbolic authority, in the new world, intellectuals lost their former symbolic status, as poets and writers ceased being national oracles even in Russia, and were not able to join the ranks of the new powerful. The highly emotional rhetoric of the nationalist vision is a way to justify a different social hierarchy, to return to the group some of the “old glory,” to keep the sense of distinction. Various national projects serve as a legitimization of the intellectuals’ corporate (class) interests: “Ideally, Belarusian youth organization should form future Belarusian elite: these people, the friends of this organization, should eventually become members of parliament, ministers, CEOs, headmasters, and presidents of universities.”<sup>19</sup> This purely economic goal is veiled through a discursive construction of new masculinity. Intellectuals articulate the nation to bestow upon themselves, at least symbolically, the (masculine) status they lack under other arrangements.

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<sup>19</sup> *Nasha niva*, 26 June 2000, p. 3. The phenomenon was described by Alexey Yurchak in a paper on the male character of the new private economy.



“Mafia” representations of the new class result from their drive for economic accumulation, which “symbolically excludes the new rich from the ranks of the cultured, whatever their ‘objective’ cultural attainments.”<sup>15</sup> Even if not necessarily physically strong, they are seen as manly nevertheless. Their manliness, though built on possession or control of resources, necessarily includes control of women: on the one hand, intensive sexual consumption of women, on the other, protection of women, their “redomestication,” and placing them within the private. These trends seem to oppose each other, but they are really the same thing, just utilized differently in various situations and in regard to different groups of women.

Emphasizing male sexual potency is a spectacular way to articulate class belonging. It is for the affluent that new men’s magazines publish high-end pornography, and the whole industry of high-class sexual services emerged.<sup>16</sup> A trend visible among the new rich is the disposal of old wives and taking on new young ones instead, as a way to demonstrate their status publicly.<sup>17</sup> The wealthy consume women alongside clothes, food and travel: “It is so much better, when you are tired of it all, to throw into a bag a dinner jacket, several shirts, half a dozen bright T-shirts, a pullover and a pair of white slacks, to take the best girl in town and to fly away to the remote island of Barbados.”<sup>18</sup>

Possession and consumption of women, as a class marker, has become an important way to reclaim masculinity as part of a Western-type, middle-class formation, defined through possession of resources, opportunities of income, and mode of consumption. Essentially, “you are a man, because you can afford a woman,”

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<sup>15</sup> George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot Borenstein, “About That: Deploying and Deploring Sex in Postsoviet Russia”, *Studies in XX Century Literature*, Winter 2000, pp. 51-75.

<sup>17</sup> Alexey Yurchak, “Muzhskaya ekonomika: ne do glupostey, kogda kar’eru kuesh,” in Oushakin, ed., *I muzhestvennosti*, p. 257.

<sup>18</sup> No author, “Na ottyhe,” *GQ*, April 2002, p. 151.

Belarusian-Lithuanian language territory would fit the description.<sup>5</sup> Simple folk who lived there called themselves *tuteishyja*, which literally means “people from here,” unable to define in any other way who they were (and probably not interested in a name as they had no political project of their own).

Regional culture could, under the processes of modernization, become a kind of raw material for future nation building, if embraced in one package with a clear-cut class issue (inequality) as another resource. For this to happen, though, for the community of the nation to be imagined, the work of certain human agents is necessary. Intellectuals articulate the cause, and it is fascinating to see how a cultural and a political project breed on one another. In the Belarusian women’s journal, *Zhanotskaya sprava*, that was published in 1931 in Wilno (then in Poland) an essay on the life and work of woman writer of the turn of the century Elaiza Pazhkewicz, or “Tetka” as she was known, specifically targeted national self-definition through language as a marker of national difference and thus standing for nationhood. According to the paper, Tetka “finally understood that the person who speaks as they speak here [*patuteishamu*]—he, in fact, speaks Belarusian and, hence, he is Belarusian. From that moment all hesitation about what nation (people) to belong to were over for her.”<sup>6</sup>

As with other peasant and subordinate communities, the turn-of-the-century national cultural idea emerged as a means of political empowerment, and its goals were defined as the freedom to use a people’s tongue in institutions and be educated in it, to get recognition for national culture, to get rid of backwardness, illiteracy, poverty, and to join the project of modernity that other European nations had been enjoying. Teachers, ethnographers, historians, and linguists, many of whom later went into actual politics,

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<sup>5</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Zhanotskaya sprava*, No. 1, 1931, p. 3.

sought to awaken the people, to give them a name, to tell them who they were and, possibly, to achieve some autonomy or even create a state. Contemporary promoters of political independence, as well as those politicized intellectuals who at the turn of the twentieth century tried to legitimize the Belarusian nation and its presence in European civilization for the first time in modern history, consider Belarusian ethnic lands, i.e. those where the peasantry spoke Belarusian, to have been “for several centuries an arena of political, national, religious and cultural struggle” between Russia and Poland.<sup>7</sup>

Statehood-as a republic within U.S.S.R.-was achieved in 1921, after several years of fighting and negotiations among the Russian Provisional Government, communists, nationalists, Germans who were occupying the country, Poles who were advancing and retreating, and the Western powers that were attempting to establish “true” ethnographic frontiers in the region after the First World War, based on the right of people for self-determination as proclaimed by both Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin. The 70 Soviet years are now both a subject of major controversy for national historians and a line of political divide. The Canadian scholar David Marples argues that communists both built and destroyed the country.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, there were tremendous modernization achievements: by the end of the Soviet period Belarus had become an urbanized territory with multiple universities and advanced industries. On the other, patriotic historians argue, the national intelligentsia nurtured on the turn-of-the-century ideals fell victim to the purges of the 1930s, and the new intelligentsia that emerged did not see itself outside of the Soviet context and after the Second World War almost lost the national language. Educated people-except a number of intellectuals promoting the national lan-

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> David Marples, *Belarus: From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 79-114.

for their supposed strength: they are often portrayed in films, anecdotes, fiction, and caricatures as armed buttheads with huge muscles and heavy golden chains on hairy chests. But in fact, Boris Berezovsky of Russia, whose assets are enormous, does not look physically strong. The question of whether the rich are really “like you and me” has been a captivating one for many; as social research testifies, they are definitely not the drunken banditry of urban folklore.

The new really rich and powerful, who are almost exclusively male, are usually well educated and connected. In a paper on income inequality in new Russia, Eric Shiraev mentions that “most young entrepreneurs, bankers, and real estate brokers ... had a jump-start within the old Soviet social and political establishment,” where they were members of Soviet nomenclatura and Communist Party or *komsomol* leaders (that group comprised very few women).<sup>13</sup>

When was it that Soviet elite and nomenclatura started feeling that for them the Soviet system of resource allocation was too tight? The power and resources, i.e. the social capital they had, owed to their status, not to anything they owned; furthermore, that status could not be passed on to their children. They came to believe that with the resources, connections, and education they had they would be better off in the market. This was the emergence of a class-based instead of status-based stratification. Bulgarian sociologist Dimitrina Petrova mentioned in 1994 that what actually happened in 1991 was not democratization, but liberation of class.<sup>14</sup> For the new powerful male class the market (and liberal democracy with it) symbolizes social justice.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Shiraev, “The New Nomenclature and Increasing Income Inequality,” in Betty Glad and Shiraev, eds., *The Russian Transformation. Political, Sociological and Psychological Aspects* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> Dimitrina Petrova, “What Can Women Do to Change the Totalitarian Cultural Context?” *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 17, Nos 2-3, 1994, pp. 267-269.

live in one state with them. This is not true. Belarusians respected the neighboring people ... but they never wanted to be under Russian tsars. They remembered only too well how Ivan the Terrible killed and imprisoned inhabitants of Polatsk. They also remembered how a hundred years later Russian *voivodes* ordered killed all the inhabitants of the Belarusian town of Mstislau ... It has forever remained in people's memory that soldiers of Peter the Great exploded the chief temple of our country, Sofia's cathedral in Polatsk.<sup>11</sup>

The quote comes from a 1996 book that renders an earlier impossible version of national history for children. The adult vision of the poem eroticizes the conquest and makes the woman crucial for the nation's honor.

As the sex and conquest imagery reveals, producers of the nationalist discourse construct their collective identity very much through opposition to the "colonizing other" (at this time, Russia) who, as the poem suggests, is threatening to rape the womanation. The political message given through a sexual metaphor calls for potency and "manhood" as the precondition of independence, for in the cultural constructions of communities that rethink their self-definitions versus powerful others, emasculated native males are the idiom for disempowerment in relations with the oppressor. A poster at the Women's March Against Poverty in Minsk in 1997, imploring men to fight Lukashenka's regime, appealed, "Men! Get off your knees! We love heroes, not slaves!"<sup>12</sup> Male strength equals the nation's strength, but in the long run it equals male class position.

The workings of post-Soviet society have already resulted in some proportion of strong men or, rather, men never accused of weakness: the "new rich." Popular culture has created a metaphor

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<sup>11</sup> Uladzimir Arlou, *Adkul' nash rod* (Minsk: Bat'kaushchyna, 1996), p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Svaboda*, 23 February 1997, p. 1.

guage cause—speak Russian and the less educated a mix of two languages called *trasyanka* (mostly Russian vocabulary and Belarusian phonetics), an equivalent of Ukrainian *surzhik*. (There is state-supported book publishing and newspapers in Belarusian.)

When during *perestroika* a national idea (encompassing language, history, ecological disasters and Stalin's purges) re-emerged after almost a century, those who were articulating its goal, defined it, again, as freedom: freedom to speak one's native tongue—though by that time the "native tongue" in the sense that intellectuals understood it did not exist—to read native literature, to discover the truth about national history; and thus political freedom, human rights and democracy would be achieved through national independence. Political demands were preceded by cultural awakening:

The best possible form then was traditional holidays and shows: *Kalyady* [Christmas celebration involving singing carols wearing special costumes, for which listeners are supposed to award singers with food, traditionally pork sausage], *gukanne vvasny* [calling for spring] and *Kupalle* [mid-summer night celebration].<sup>9</sup>

Younger people would create an "informal association," which became allowed under Gorbachev, though some existed informally several years before him. They traveled to ancient Belarusian towns, assisted archeologists who were exploring the remains of a Dominican monastery in downtown Minsk or the wooden pavements of the tenth-century settlement, sang folk songs or imitated ancient rituals, like "Calling for spring, right in our city streets." Supposedly our pagan ancestors performed this ritual when they thought the time had come for the sun to shine brighter.

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<sup>9</sup> *Nasha niva*, 3 January 2000, p. 7.

The Soviet period had been rich in folk performances, which were a must in every festive gala. The public considered these the price that had to be paid for access to some high culture later in the concert, and to imagine that young people would come to such a concert was impossible. Their enormous contempt for everything peasant and peasant was associated with Belarusian—was often expressed in one word: “countryside,” i.e. backwardness. Still, young city dwellers sang peasant songs right in the streets of a city of two million, but these songs, as well as the peasant outfits that they wore on such occasions, were in some crucial way different from those of state-supported choirs and dance groups. The difference, clear to anyone, was explained as “authentic folklore.” The authenticity was discovered by the performers themselves, mostly ethnographers and linguists, many of whom currently are leaders in the opposition nationalist movement. The process in which they participated with great enthusiasm could definitely be labeled “the invention of a tradition,” ritualized in a new way and for a new purpose.

At the beginning of *perestroika* such groups, outfits and street performances were considered anti-Soviet (which they were) and several “callings for spring” were dispersed by the militia as nationalist gatherings, to the outrage of the intelligentsia. The performers were raised on a special diet, as a participant now testifies:

Our blood was Western rock music which was filling us with protest and resistance to indoctrination. Our information world was shaped by foreign radio stations. In addition to all that, there was local colouring: the proximity of Poland, the rise of interest in local history intertwined with the romanticism of castle and church architecture, frequent visits to the under-Soviet-regime Baltic republics, which made us ask why we were not like them. All that was making some kind of an explosive mix, and an occasional catalyzer was all that

Look with whom your motherland slept!<sup>10</sup>

The emotional impact of the poem is extraordinary, as well as the powerful way it engenders national self-definition. The intellectuals’ turmoil over proving the nation’s legitimacy (neither Poles nor Russians, but people in ourselves) becomes the issue of female purity within the context of the “national mythology.” The image of the woman-nation who does not give herself to the rapist-colonizer is related to the outstanding figure in the national pantheon: that of Ragneda, the daughter of the tenth-century prince of Polatsk. When, as the legend goes, she rejected Kievan Prince Vladimir, he captured and burnt the town, killed Ragneda’s father and brother, raped the girl and took her away to Kiev. It is believed that later Ragneda returned to her homeland with a son, her protector against the brutal father (who meanwhile turned ancient Rus to Christianity) and founded the town of Zaslav’je, where her grave supposedly is located. The story of Ragneda is part of the cultural battle with the idea of Rus as the cradle of Eastern Slavic civilization and, through this, the Russian Empire, and so this is the battle about today’s sovereignty and nation-state. The story is taken as an evidence of the equally strong and ancient state in Belarusian lands (to which Mikola Ermalovich referred when speaking of the “state which is 1000 years old”), which was not willing to submit to Rus either then or later. In contrast to the term “reunification” in historical books of the Soviet period, writings of the 1990s identify the incorporation of Belarus into Russia at the end of the eighteenth century as invasion and conquest.

For many years our school textbooks and other publications had it that for centuries Belarusians had been trying to unite with the fraternal Russian people and to

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<sup>10</sup> Tatar-Mongolian Khan, a symbol of cruelty. Anatol’ Sys, “Vershni,” *Krynitsa*, No. 9, 1993. The poems are published in English translation (mine with Bradley R. Strahan) in *Eastern Visions/Visions International*, No. 52, 1996.

are in danger and need protection.<sup>9</sup> The following poem published in 1993, amidst the heated debates on Belarusian independence versus integration with Russia, metaphorically represents Belarus as a suffering woman and powerfully articulates the female body as the national battlefield:

#### Song About the Wife

The Russians have slanting sabers,  
The Russians have the eyes of Batyi,  
Horse tails behind their backs,  
The motherland is a sweating mare.  
Do not get beneath sharp sabers,  
Do not believe Batyi's eyes,  
Do not saddle the mare;  
She will take you to a dark grave.  
And I have my own grave,  
And she loves me.  
She has loved me as a son and a husband,  
Though I beat her with my whip,  
Asking as the lash falls:  
Did you sleep with others before me?  
I slept with the Muscovite;  
Slept with the Pole,  
But the executioner's bloc was my bed.  
I slept with your father the Litsvin [Litvan],  
And now I sleep with you—my son.  
Look into the forest rivers,  
Do you have the eyes of Batyi?  
Do you have a horse's tail behind your  
back?

<sup>9</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 39-67.

was needed to yield the inevitable result—the feeling of belonging with “Belarusian bourgeois nationalists” ... And what elation it was to feel that all that filthy Brezhnevian sovietism, that pseudo-Belarusian BSSRshchina—all that is not what is yours, you do not belong to that and are not responsible for that. And that which is yours—it is here, under your very feet: your land, your history, your grandparents in the countryside with their local tongue, habits, songs and excellent home-brewed rye vodka.<sup>10</sup>

With time, since these folklore and artistic groups could not be stopped, the authorities learned to incorporate them into state-supported festivals of national culture that became outlets for non-Soviet esthetics by the late 1980s.

Eventually, the folk revival, alongside with ecological (Chernobyl) and anti-Stalinist discourses, gave way to political debate. To make legitimate political claims something more substantial than folk culture is normally needed, and history moved into the center of patriotic discourse as an “objective source,” as hard science based on “facts” that could serve as a legitimization of an independent nation-state. Historian Ales' Kazhadub, responding to the publication of ancient Belarusian chronicles, wrote that they “will forever remain a treasury from which Belarusians will draw and draw when they need to pay the bills of history. Only these chronicles truly confirm that we were, we are, that we can pay both a friend and a foe. Every nation [*narod*] has their own friends and enemies, and Belarusians ... are a nation.”<sup>11</sup> The demand for non-Soviet historical knowledge was so great that when a newspaper published “100 Questions and Answers about the

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ales Kazhadub. “Belarusy: ‘legalizatsia’ u susvetnai historyi,” *Litaratura i mastatstva*, 14 June 1996, p. 5.

History of Belarus,” people saved these pieces, which were later published as a brochure.

At that time, only an alternative (non-Soviet) version of history, i.e. that which could be used in appeals to independence, seemed to be visible and legitimate. Independent scholar Mikola Ermalovich, who finally was able to publish his book *Ancient Belarus*, based on thirty years of archival work, argued that the most terrible thesis that ruined the nation’s ideology was the one of Belarusian statelessness, “that we received statehood only in 1919 [through the Soviets], and that before that we had been conquered by Kiev, then Lithuania, then Poland and, finally, liberated by Russia ... But we have a history which is 1,000 years old!”<sup>12</sup> He made a suggestion that, ethnically, Belarusians are Slavized Baits rather than Balticized Slavs<sup>13</sup>, which fitted the search for a reference point that tied Belarus to the European, and not Soviet, project of modernity.

The connection is that the contemporary national revival, which serves as the basis for democratization, and the creation of a life patterned on that of developed Europe, is derived from the discovery of the true national history, the one that placed medieval Belarusian statehood within the European renaissance project and was later interrupted “from the East.” Thus, the contemporary national movement supposedly established a continuity with the authentic past, which would suggest a Belarusian return to its true European self. Scholars argued with pride that Belarus had a European history, which included Renaissance, Reformation, baroque culture, professional armies (while in Russia serfs were recruited into the military), and a notion of the rule of law. “The European Comeback” became a frequent media headline, whether the topic was a festival of baroque music or political ideas of the Popular

<sup>12</sup> *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 4 September 1992, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> For more detail of the debate, see Rainer Lindner, “Besieged Past: National and Court Historians in Lukashenka’s Belarus,” *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1999, pp. 631-648.

To construct moral authority and win, nationalists have to persuade their voters that their group is under threat from another group.<sup>6</sup> The political leader of the opposition (who had to flee the country for fear of repression and thus became a symbol of martyrdom for democracy’s sake) equates the nation’s military casualties throughout history with losses from abortion and contraception: both are parts of anti-Belarusian genocide for which Russian imperialism is responsible.

Russians used the war and even military operations with the goal of genocide of the Belarusian nation ... Then, continuing medical genocide, they worked out the harmful policy of restraining Belarusian fertility and murdering the human fetus inside the woman’s womb ... If Belarusian polity does not get rid of the Russian imperialist aggression and does not do something about Chernobyl’s legacy, then in the twenty-first century there will not be a single Belarusian left. The whole nation will be wiped out, to the last man.<sup>7</sup>

The nationalist position (the cited view is considered extreme) combines patriarchal views on reproduction with liberal, “European” views in overtly political matters. While freedom of press is an undeniable value, women’s reproductive rights are not, for a complex (class and national) hierarchy builds on their subordination. Liberty and equality are attributes of the fraternity from which women are excluded:<sup>8</sup> it is easier to persuade the public that women, as bearers and reproducers of national culture and signifiers of the symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them,”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Zyanon Paz’nyak, “Phyzychnae znishchenne belaruskai natsii,” *Narodnaya volya*, 18 July 2001, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 114.

social justice, but the motive had to be something with which people could identify, and some mechanism was needed that would help to present it as such. To mobilize people, an idea is needed for which people would go out into the streets. Such an idea happened to be nationalism, another powerful arrangement based on certain notions of masculinity.

By “nationalism,” I mean sentiments and movements related to the status and rights of groups that define themselves through national terms: perceived common history, origin, culture, destiny, language, national oppression, etc. At the end of the 1980s, in every country of East Central Europe or the former Soviet Union there was a package of issues which related socialism to imagined national injustice: Soviet occupation in the Baltics and East Central Europe, absence of independent statehood and language controversies in Ukraine and Belarus, nostalgia for imperial greatness in Russia (lost great culture, devastated nature, uprooted peasantry, annihilated nobility), disputed territories in the Caucasus, exhaustion of natural resources in Kazakhstan, and Stalinist crimes against the people everywhere. On the basis of all these different concerns societies opted for national independence from “others” who “occupied,” “exhausted resources,” “hampered the use of national language,” “killed national poets,” “ruined national sacred places,” “used our territory as bases for their army,” etc. I am not interested whether the injustice was “real” or “imagined;” my point is that at that particular time national issues, in their various incarnations, began to be perceived as important, for “nationalities” were the only organizational forms that were already present. As Verdery points out, “When a system of that sort begins to decentralize and to encourage more initiative from low-level units, the only units having the organizational history and experience are nationalities.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 85.

Front leader Zyanon Paznyak (now living in exile); it was later transformed into the famous anti-government slogan: “Belarus into Europe, Lukashenka into ass.” In the spring of 2001 I received in the mail a poster of “The Young Front,” a youth organization within the Popular Front *Adradzenne* (Revival), listing the priorities around which the opposition was seeking to unite the nation during the forthcoming presidential elections:

1. Belarus is an independent, democratic, rule-of-law state [*pravavaya dzyarzhava*].
3. The main task of Belarusian domestic policy is national and spiritual revival.
4. The priorities in foreign policy are building relationship with other European nations [as opposed to the Russian connection].
5. Belarus is a market economy. Freedom of enterprise and European level of life are guaranteed in Belarus.
6. Belarusian youth have the right for the European level of education and healthcare, including the right to foreign travel for work and study. ...

Europe, equated with prosperity and capitalism, became embraced as the model for the future political project, which is historically justified, since “we used to be there before.” I have difficulty believing, though, that the enlightened ideal of European travel could be an attractive option for some impoverished *babushka* or countryside dweller who came to the polling station on 9 September. To them, the voyage is completely unrealistic and probably not even an object of desire; instead, it represents what the new rich can afford and do, at the expense of poor folks. The European idea and what it encompasses is not the common people’s project, and they have no “European self” to “recollect.” As was illustrated on

the night after the elections, the regime largely ignores the dissidents as political subjects, because they are disregarded by their compatriots.

The concept of “Europe,” defined by intellectuals as a prosperity project, began to be increasingly rejected, since for most people this project is highly unrealistic. However, the rejection has adopted a national form, since it took place through the rejection of some European connections that were socially unacceptable for many Belarusian citizens. The most important of these connections is “The War” (the Second World War), since a belonging to Europe and victory over fascism cannot be accepted together. The victory has to be Soviet. In Belarus, Nazi occupation lasted for three years and the proportional casualty rate was the highest of all European states, with one of every four citizens killed. In some areas, the number was one in three. Moreover, several hundred villages were burnt along with their inhabitants, Jews were driven into ghettos (some rescued by partisans, but most killed), and cities were ruined. There was a powerful partisan movement, which Soviet history presented as heroic freedom fighters organized by communists. However, new evidence indicates that in the initial stages the resistance movement was of grassroots character, and that the commissars appeared only later. Rumors have also been circulating concerning armed people who came out of the woods and took away the last cattle from peasant households because the partisan army had to be fed.<sup>14</sup> We do not know the whole truth of the war. It is not as straightforward as we previously thought and these stories, if published, provoke extreme anger, for the ethos of the war in Belarus became a basis for constructing the history of the nation-and the national identity.

Members of my generation have heard the oral history of that period, stories of deprivation, of starvation, of the last slice of bread,

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<sup>14</sup> According to some data, the number of partisans in 1943, at the peak of the resistance, was 400,000.

with a possibility of not working in order to be better mothers) as one of the priorities, he was expressing that societal concern: “That is why we are now holding heated debate in the press, in public organizations, at work and at home, about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission.”<sup>4</sup> Other issues of the day were *glasnost* and political reform, and “liberation of women” (a euphemism for sending them home, making them private) became tied to those and was socially acceptable with other bourgeois class values (though we honestly did not see them as such then).

Having said this, a common trend of a “rise of masculinity”, which has been evident during the last decade in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, gets an explanation in the reconfiguration of power, i.e. in the construction of new forms of domination and subordination. My contention is what numerous scholars registered during *perestroika*: that the emergence of a new discourse in which men are subjects and agents, and women are redefined as sexualized or private objects stems from a class formation that is derived from income inequality. The emergence of a middle, bourgeois, entrepreneurial, and business class includes certain gender arrangements and ideas of appropriate masculinity and femininity, in which the latter category is constructed through abortion and reproduction debates, sexualization and objectification of female bodies, displacement of women from public life (e.g. sending them home on election day in Minsk), and relocation of childcare back into “women’s hands” from state agencies.

But the story is more complicated, for people cannot be mobilized for change (and during *perestroika* the whole society was mobilized) by saying, “Hey, we are now working on the construction of inequality, would you like to join us?” The reason for change was a different system of resource allocation, based on a different idea of

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<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika. New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 117.



ered to be physically weak, more prone to disease than women and having shorter life expectancy. Besides, they were irresponsible, unable to take care of themselves, engaged in self-destructive practices such as smoking and drinking, and in need of supervision and guidance in health and food issues by wives and mothers who were supposed to feed their men with healthy food, arrange regular medical checkups, etc.<sup>2</sup>

The skill of arranging appointments with doctors has hardly anything to do with male biology, however weak or strong this might be, and the real reason for the perception of men as weak was the lack of venues in which traditional masculinity could be built. Anna Natalia Malakhovskaya, a famous dissident expelled from the U.S.S.R. in 1980 for starting the feminist journal *Maria*, mentions that the journal had published an article arguing that the Soviet way of life was disrupting the very domains where men could behave in a manly way, and thus channeled them into being unmanly or weak.<sup>3</sup> Another way of saying this is that Soviet gender order made it difficult to confirm masculinity as constructed through access to and exclusive control of resources. Thus, masculinity turns out to be part of class. Class is mostly about resources, and Soviet "lack of masculinity" was a clear-cut class issue, or, rather, the issue of their absence. In that particular classless society, men did not have traditional systemic superiority over women in their resources. Of course, they had some, but, in general, power relationships were structured differently, and women were more dependent on the state than on singular males for their livelihood. At some point the society started feeling uneasy about this arrangement. When Mikhail Gorbachev in one of his *perestroika* speeches named liberation of women from their dual role (providing them

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<sup>2</sup> On Soviet masculinity, see E. Zdravomyslova and A. Temkina, "Krisis maskulinnosti v pozdnesovetskom diskurse," in S. Oushakin, ed., *I muzhestvennosti* (Moscow: NLO, 2002), pp.432-451.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Natalia Malakhovskaya, "20 let tomu nazad v Lenigrade zarodilos' zhenskoe dvizhenie," *We/My: Dialog zhenshchin*, No 9. 1999, p. 28.

of weeds used for food, of children killed, of bodies hanging along the streets to scare the population away from any protest against the Nazi regime, of refugee women with babies in their arms trying to flee the invading German army on foot (they were heavily bombed; a woman told me once that she had thrown stones at German aircraft-out of hatred and despair), but also stories of courage and sharing. This oral history has been passed on in families and mostly by women, and children born to my generation, i.e. grandchildren of war veterans, know much less of it than we did.

But there was also another history of the war. A state, or male, version was constructed around the glorification of the Soviet way of life, which stressed that the Soviet Union, the proletarian, communist state, had defeated fascism and protected the world from the Nazi plague. Belarus became "the partisan republic" (*respublika-partisanka*) that was shielding Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Motherland, and, finally, together with other socialist nations, defeated the inhuman enemy. This version did not allow for any other, or "outside" history. Thus, it is the loss of every fourth person and the immense common suffering that became the shared historical experience, which was turned into a clear differentiation from "others" and used as a characteristic of identity. When a powerful monument, a symbolic cemetery of burnt villages and their inhabitants, was created in Khatyn' (destroyed in 1943) in the early 1970s, its representation on posters, books, pictures, badges, etc. became emblematic of Belarus in the same way as the Eiffel Tower visually represents Paris. That symbolic cemetery contains three birches growing out of black granite, and where a fourth tree should be located a flame is burning. A patriotic song included a line "In every family, with us there are the dead children of Khatyn" (*V kazhdoi nashei sem'e s nami malye deti Hatyni*). "We are as proud of our 'every fourth' as other nations are proud of their achievements," an opposition journalist bitterly remarked in 2001, uneasy of how to rethink the tragedy

now (when Soviet ideology is gone) and unaware of how Jews have dealt with the Holocaust symbolically and politically.

Many post-war communist leaders of the republic were former partisans, and some of them had immense moral authority based on their antifascist past. During rapid post-war modernization, as Belarus was turning into the “workshop of the Soviet Union,” another object of national idealization appeared: 120-ton lorries, the biggest in the world (a powerful bison became their emblem), and industrial development in general. As the state’s technology of power was working for a unified culture (through school, media, etc.) and a sense of common destiny, it was a socialist culture that emerged. If Belarusians ever had a legitimate feeling of distinctiveness, it happened under the Soviet project. Many older people associate the communist era with general well-being, respect, and their own positions of authority. The head of a veterans’ caucus explains the post-1991 choices of his generation: “We are now voting for the Soviet Union because it was the best we ever saw.”<sup>15</sup> “For the Soviet Union,” in this case, implies closer ties with Russia, not Europe, and support for president Alyxandar Lukashenka, who won the 2001 elections largely by selling “denationalization” (as unification with Russia is often presented) in one package with socialist-type welfare and resource distribution.

At some point, promoters of national independence made an attempt to incorporate the war, the cornerstone of contemporary Belarusian identity, into their project, mostly appealing to huge and arguably unnecessary casualties, resulting from Stalin’s military incompetence, but primarily attempting to present the war as a fight between two criminals, Hitler and Stalin. Referring to the event as the “German-Soviet war,” they intentionally excluded the Belarusian people, who supposedly did not have a cause in it.<sup>16</sup> The effort failed, since it demanded a deconstruction of the concept of

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<sup>15</sup> *Narodnaya volya*, 23 June 2001, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Nasha niva*, 19 June 2000, p. 2.

## Beyond 1991: Gender, Nation, and Class

Women can be poor while men cannot. What I mean is that, when poor, women still remain women (and even feminine): they are women “by the virtue of their bodies,” and hardly anything can change this perception of what they are. Not so with men: manhood is not about their bodies (or not only about their bodies), and those lacking affluence lack a big part of what constitutes masculinity. I refer here to the social construction of normative masculinity, which explains why the man pays for dinner at the restaurant. The reverse would also be true, i.e. paying for dinner makes him a man (a woman paying for dinner does not prove her femininity). Opposition newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* presents this view of what masculinity should be like as discontent with the lack of resources experienced by post-Soviet impoverished men: “To be a man. And this means, to be a husband, a father, a master in one’s house, one’s family, one’s destiny, after all. But is it easy nowadays ... to be a man? With a miserable wage of a farmer or a worker? A tiny welfare ration which for some reason is called a salary.”<sup>1</sup>

It is not now, though, but at some point in the Soviet era that masculinity first started to be perceived as something of a problem. Societal concerns over the emasculation of males were first expressed in the 1960s, when a certain level of prosperity was becoming a social norm. Overtly, gender debates were spurred by the popular article by Boris Ulanis, “Spare the Men!” in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and never stopped after that. Men were discov-

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<sup>1</sup> *Narodnaya Volya*, No. 166, 1997.

about gender itself.<sup>29</sup> It is through gender as a category that describes the most elementary level of social stratification that one can understand how class and nation are intertwined.

Soviets as victors over fascism, and with that, of the identities of people who trace their collective origin to that victory. From the early to mid 1990s war veterans initiated several widely publicized law cases against opposition newspapers, journalists, NGOs, and even against the famous author Svetlana Alexievich, whose books are based on personal narratives and oral history. In their publications, appeals, and campaigns, these groups were creating a history of the war, and of the country that won it, which the veterans could not accept and with which they did not identify. The younger democratic community concluded that veterans had been brainwashed by Soviet propaganda and were simply unable to understand the new truth that these non-participants were presenting.

The government, on the other hand, has been very successful in using the war as a propaganda tool against “independents.” They argue that “independent” state symbols such as the coat of arms and the red-white-red flag, which had been recovered from the period of the Grand Duchy as national ones (and used as such in 1991-1995, before Lukashenka reinstalled the slightly modified Soviet ones) are forever soiled, for Belarusian fascist collaborators (promoters of Belarusian autonomy under Nazi occupation) “were using them when doing their dirty job.”<sup>17</sup>

A pro-president propaganda film of 1996, *Children of Lies*, aired before the referendum on unification with Russia, directly portrayed supporters of independence as fascist followers.

Thus, two patriotic, but antagonistic, historical discourses were formed. One was based on Soviet patriotism and produced by the communist-era elite and their historians. The other emerged from anti-communist intellectuals and was based on “Belarusian independence” patriotism. Both discourses appealed to the “nation,” though their producers viewed the Belarusian national project very differently, and to both “the language” became the symbolic representation of their struggle and a tool for social mobilization.

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<sup>29</sup> *Idem.*, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 28-53.

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<sup>17</sup> *Zvyazda*, 18 August 1988, p. 3.

For independents, the language constitutes the basis of the nation, which is a sacred and rather mystical unity, whose meaning is beyond us and which, like God, is “everywhere.” They claim that the “national idea—this is the mission, the fate, the meaning of existence of the people. The recognition of this absolutely superior fate, given by God, the understanding of one’s uniqueness, one’s mission at this very land and at this time is our national idea.”<sup>18</sup> The nation’s “maturity” inevitably yields a nation-state, and a prominent opposition member (who for a period of time was the speaker of the parliament), believes that “every ‘adult’ [*daroslaya*] nation should flourish in its own state.”<sup>19</sup>

Scholars of nineteenth-century German romanticism would have no difficulty recognizing the pathos of the quotes above, and in the same way the connection between national metaphysics and political options lies in the language: which language is used (or how it is classified) is directly related to the possibility of a nation-state. Since the mid-1960s, an anxiety that *mova hine* (the Belarusian language is dying) has been growing among some intellectual groups. The strongest concern was voiced by the members of the Belurussian Writers’ Union, whose books, published through state support in dozens of thousands of copies, often remained on the store shelves for years and then went into recycling.

A language’s status is related to the legitimacy of a group in a system, and in the 1980s national intellectuals, concerned with the language issue and/or with their own status, brought the concept of “native tongue” into the public debate. They demanded that the government stop the decline and secure the Belarusian language by returning it to schools and universities (against which common folks protested), but mostly into administration, thereby making it the language of power. The issue, in this case, is who will be the

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<sup>18</sup> *Nasha niva*, 26 June 2000, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1999, p. 2.

spective). Stratification takes place as “the life chances accessible to different groups of the population are distributed unevenly as a collective outcome of the activity of individual economic agents who differ with regard to power in the market.”<sup>27</sup> The national discourse is about urban intellectuals (and the language they speak, the version of history they construct, i.e. the symbolic means they use) and the societal arrangement from which they benefit best (or think they do) versus the have-nots who lost more than they found in the brave new world that was supposed to emerge after 1991. At the present moment, it is beyond the point whether or not “the language” and “the history” were “stolen” from “the people”: the issue is who would benefit from their “recovery.”

Still, I believe, those who were chanting for freedom in front of the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Byelorussia in August 1991 were sincere about their democratic intentions. A young man from the crowd told me (I was pregnant at the time), “We’ll take these buildings away from ‘them’ and give them to you—turn them into the best of maternity hospitals.” Now the building (which, I think, was not designed as a hospital in the first place) houses the president’s administration. The point is, though, that for the young man—and for the crowd around us—the whole thing was about social justice.

To explain what eventually happened to “justice,” I need to introduce one more variable—that of gender. Gender, as Joan Scott defines it, constitutes “the social organization of sexual difference;” the way male/female domination and subordination is constructed and legitimized and is therefore a primary way of signifying relationships of power.<sup>28</sup> The meanings of sexual difference are contested (or reconstructed) as parts of many kinds of struggles for power. These struggles, though they build on gender, may not be

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<sup>27</sup> Timo Piirainen, *Towards a New Social Order in Russia. Transforming Structures and Everyday Life* (Hanover: Dartmouth University Press, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Joan Scott, “Introduction,” *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 2.

common folks who do not see the glittering beauty of the brave new world ahead, they believe that “our people [*narod nash*] are not enemies of the opposition at all; we should just make our truth known to them.”<sup>24</sup>

The problem, then, seems to be in the technicality of word usage, rhetorical devices, images, propaganda, and government-controlled media. Pondering on how to make themselves heard by the people they claim to represent, intellectuals suggest, “One more fruitful step by the opposition could be the change of political rhetoric and vocabulary. For example, instead of saying ‘independent’ (i.e. opposition) media, one could use the phrase ‘progressive media’.”<sup>25</sup> The vice-chairman of the main opposition movement, Popular Front, gives a piece of advice on how to use the technology of power: “We are sure that the opposition should go into the midst of the people [*isti u narod*], changing their political platform, making it more understandable ... You also do not want to forget that a politician must be saying what people want to hear and do something else-what national interests make him do.”<sup>26</sup> Questioning where else “national interests” can come from, if not from the people, I argue that the root of “misunderstanding” is not in the rhetorical form but in the fundamentally different interests of intellectuals and the common people.

In the post-Soviet world, market economy (and liberal democracy) versus socialism (and political coercion) as different methods of resource allocation became wrapped up in the discourse on national issues. This discourse serves as a manifestation of class discontent, since it is not so much about national belonging as about class interests. Here, I define class as not about one’s place in production (as in Marxism), but about the distribution of life chances through the workings of the market (a Weberian per-

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Nasha niva*, 26 June 2000.

people representing and implementing power: the change of language implies a change of the ruling group, and this, at least in the Belarusian case, is not a question about ethnicity.

Some newspapers introduced a special headline, “Prestige of the Native Tongue,” to discuss language matters. “Why is it necessary to make Belarusian the state language?” a journalist would ask some public figure. “To give it back some prestige,” the figure would reply.<sup>20</sup> Never did I see the response “to let the subaltern speak,” to give voice to those, mostly villagers, who supposedly were the repository of the ancient language, culture, and nationhood—for they were not. The language became the symbol of revolt against the Soviet regime, and, as the main justification for independence (a language equals a nation), it became an issue of democracy. Newspapers published letters of support—primarily from urban intellectuals—and examples of restrictions on Belarusian schooling and the absence of opportunity to get a university education in that language. The editor-in-chief of an opposition newspaper recalls that “I was publishing *Svaboda* in Belarusian completely, and even in Taraszkewitsa [turn-of-the-century orthography], and the circulation was dozens of thousands. It was the beginning of the 1990s, when the societal attitude to the Belarusian language was favorable.”<sup>21</sup> Some city folk switched to Belarusian at work and at home, a political act that demanded considerable effort and self-discipline.

But newspapers were also full of other voices, disregarded by the new democracy as representing the Soviet or the “Russian imperialist.” “During the Tatar invasion ancient Rus was divided into several principalities. It would be reasonable now to recognize Belarusian towns as Russian towns, Belarusian culture as Russian

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<sup>20</sup> *Zvyazda*, 15 September 1989, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Nasha niva*, No. 21, 2001, p. 2.

culture and Belarusian language as Russian language, just victimized by the Polish boot.”<sup>22</sup>

Not all those who relocated to the cities became linguists or ethnographers. Many who ended up being truck drivers, or plumbers, or low-level Communist Party functionaries (i.e. had their authority based in the Soviet regime) retained some of their rural speech, which is very different from the literary Belarusian on which intellectuals insist, and did not acquire the standard Russian of the educated city dwellers. They speak *trasyanka*, which, nationalists believe, is “the Soviet monster that began to jump out of Belarusian bodies destroyed and ragged by Soviet experiments.”<sup>23</sup> Belarusian people, unfortunately, do not stand up to the exquisite ideal defined by the nation’s intellectuals.

*Trasyanka* is what Alexander Lukashenka, a countryside dweller, spoke when he was elected president in 1994 (after seven years of presidency his speech had changed to a degree, and recently he has started making speeches in Belarusian), and people immediately recognized him as “one of our own.” Government media began calling him “the people’s president.” Many of his supporters did claim that “our tongue” is backward, outdated, uncivilized, rough, unrefined, peasant, and does not cover contemporary notions. In other words, it cannot express the (post)modern world and we do not want our children to be schooled in it. Russian (and English) is so much better, said the president in a 1995 speech—and won the referendum on national symbols and languages, and also by his uncontested power (and political coercion). The referendum made the Belarusian and Russian languages of equal status, whereas the intellectuals insisted that Belarusian should be the only state language.

Apparently, though, Lukashenka’s victory resulted not from the style of speech, but from what he said, for the Belarusian contro-

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<sup>22</sup> *Zvyazda*, 23 August 1990, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Nasha niva*, 19 June 2000, p. 2.

versy, as well as national disputes elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, is only overtly about different types of nationhood, or, as many political scientists, and journalists put it about ancient nations versus Soviet “denationalization.” In essence, it is about different methods of resource allocation: through market or policy.

If one analyzes the economic and structural policies that the two parties advocate, it is evident that Lukashenka’s main points were a non-withdrawal of the state (and him personally, as an incarnation of a “l’etat c’est moi” case) from the social policy arena and control of resource allocation in general. Capitalizing on fatherly concern for the people, he tries to save the centralized, repression-based system that gives him control over resource allocation. What he really did—at least how he preached it and how it is presented in the government media—was to pay wages, pensions and allowances, however small, resist unemployment by forbidding the firing of “surplus” workers or the closing down of bankrupt factories, insist on fixed prices, and “preserve” free healthcare, paid maternity leave and the socialist welfare structure. He distributed resources, and having a need was reason enough for getting at least something. For the proponents of Western-type restructuring, these values look anti-market and anti-democratic. For those who vote for them, though, they entail social justice, including an overtly egalitarian agenda by using centrally planned allocation of resources to provide citizens with important assets that had been taken for granted.

The opposition—neoliberal and/or nationalist intellectuals—celebrated national independence, freedom, human rights, market economy, free prices and competition, which they regarded as universal values. Believing that through the market the nation would reach a Western-type prosperity (there is just no other way-see the luxury of the affluent West, stupid?), they could not understand why the people who had lost most of what they had after the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. rejected the project by voting for Lukashenka. But being, as mature adults, indulgent to