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INTRODUCTION

Female symbolism and metaphors are frequently resorted to in the portrayals of nations. Consequently, ‘gendering’ of a nation consists, most frequently, in ascribing to it certain characteristics culturally associated with the female sex, and in perceiving it - in a metaphorical sense - as a woman, or having woman experience. But at the same time, what is frequently neglected, ‘engendering’ may mean nation’s re-masculinisation via references to ethnicity, or attempts to (re)gain hegemonic control over the reproduction sphere.

Thus, nations are always gendered, although not everywhere in the same way (Yuval-Davis:., 1997:3). Even if we observe that nation is predominately represented as female, we need to acknowledge that this representation is possible only if there exists a contrasting male principle, against which ‘femaleness’ is compared. This reflects a general tendency of human beings to organize their experiences in terms of binary oppositions, the theme explored by Levi-Strauss, Saussure and Jacques Derrida.

‘Masculine-feminine’ is the most powerful and most basic pair of oppositions and all other values such as light/dark, up/down, reason/emotion, culture/nature tend to reinforce one or the other pole of it. Characteristically, one of the opposites is always seen as ‘positive’ (the one associated with male pole) and the other as a ‘negative’, or lacking (female). At the same time, oppositions, as the whole deconstructive work of Derrida points out, are not stable and there is always a space for ‘play’ within them (Derrida, 1976). ‘Femininity’ is therefore an
overdetermined category, in the sense that it can be characterized in several plausible ways that do not exclude one another.

Thus, the very ‘engendering’ process may take many forms as there exist multiple options within the ‘femaleness’ category (e.g. the one of passivity and subservience, as well as the one of untamed natural energy and destructiveness). Although we see the internal ambiguity of ‘femaleness’ and the impossibility to ascribe stable features to it, and we realize that an overarching category of ‘woman’ does not exist, we appreciate the fact that imagining nation as predominantly female is of huge consequence. It contributes to the creation of concrete individual subjectivities that orient people’s behavior in specific situations (Verdery, 1994: 226). In other words, due to the symbolism through which nation is constructed, people may be deployed in a particular way in the world, prone to take certain actions and reluctant to take others. Thus, ‘Nation’ and ‘Gender’, although both culturally constructed, are responsible for very powerful every day realities that control attitudes and preferences, influence decisions and make some things natural, while labeling others as deviant, or not allowing them even to be imagined.

As mentioned before, within the post-soviet universe of nation-states we have witnessed a specific gendering tendency of re-masculinisation via national/ethnic ideology. Ethnically-informed accentuation of differences between the male and the female aspects leads, among other things, to anti-abortion debates. Typically, in the post-socialist space of a nation-state, femininity has been linked with derided socialist ideology and women were ‘othered’ as main beneficiaries and, therefore, implicitly supporters of communism. Efforts were made to discipline them and reduce them to their traditional roles. (Verdery, 1994: 251).

Quite untypical are the cases that did not experience the revival of an ethnic form of nationalism or, alternatively, as Belarus, did not give broad support to it. In the Belarusian case, it was frequently surmised that (i.) the national sentiment was not at all present there, and therefore the country commenced a re-unification process with Russia. Within this paper I would

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1 E.g. both associated with ‘nature’, and transmitting ‘culture’, both docile and aggressive in an animalistic way, both birth-giving and destructive.
2 ‘No-identity’ claim is one of the most frequent explanations of the Belarusian specificity. It consists in stating that the international orientation of Belarus is a result of the fact that Belarusians have no national identity. E.g. Kathleen J. Mikhalisko, ‘Belarus Retreat to Authoritarism” in K. Dawisha and Bruce Parrot, Democratic Changes and Authoritarian Reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 223-282. As well in David Marples, Belarus: a Denationalised Nation, (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1999).
attempt to address this question looking closer at Belarus’ discourse. The analysis of the Belarusian construct will also allow me to see (ii.) how the feminizing or gendering principles were incorporated into it, and how they may have contributed to the production of a concrete subjectivities that orient Belarusians in everyday life.

I will start my analysis by contextualising Belarus, followed by an introduction of the selected methodology (discourse analysis of extended, semi structured, in-depth interviews with both Russian and Belarusian-speaking elite) and the researcher’s background. The part which presents my findings will be divided into two sections: one will refer to the issue of ‘gendering’ at the level of scientific models, language and terminology that describes Belarus; the other will look at the way Belarusians perceive themselves and if/how they ascribe certain values, stereotypically marked as ‘female’, to their identity.

By this study of the Belarusian case I intend to contribute to bigger self-reflexivity of both scientists, politicians and citizens and see how the definitions and chains of opposing values implicitly reproducing the female–male dichotomy may lead to discriminative definitions and self(perceptions).

Belarus as a ‘deviant’ case

Belarus, in spite of its long and troubled history and its location at the heart of the continent, is poorly known to the world. In the Middle Ages the territories of present Belarus belonged to the potent political organism known as the Great Duchy of Lithuania which contained as well today’s Poland, Lithuania, and partly Ukraine. Together with the partitions of Poland in the 18th century, the majority of Belarusians became the Czar’s subjects. The Bolshevik Revolution brought about the creation of the Belarusian Soviet Republic, one year after the failed attempt to declare independence in 1918.

Belarus has been heavily experienced by history: it suffered from the WW2, when 25% of the population lost their lives, as well as from the Stalinist purges of inteligencia starting in the late 1920s. Furthermore, the country was severely polluted by the fallout of the 1986 Chernobyl tragedy, and the quality of its soil is considerably diminished by the prolonged use of pesticide.

The country came into being as a fully independent state only in August 1991, following in the steps of the Baltic States and Ukraine. Unlike other countries – it was unwilling to engage in market reforms, and since 1995 it has been described by its President, Aleksandr Lukashenka,
as a country introducing ‘market socialism’. The state has controlled prices and currency exchange rates, and intervenes in private business via frequent inspections, changes regulations without any public consultation and suffocates freedom of expression.

In foreign policy the country has been oriented – again atypically for this region - towards Russia, signing with it a number of agreements that were designed to lead to the creation of a common political organism, replicating, as Belarusian government claims, the experience of the European Union. In the early 1990s Belarus was a docile subject in the international arena – it gave away nuclear power without any negotiations, before all the deadlines, and displayed considerable passivity epitomized by such statements as the one authored by S. Sushkievich, speaker of the Parliament; "We are a small country, we will accept whatever Russia and Ukraine agree on".

What is highly important for this paper, is that Belarus’ national opposition has never succeeded in garnering popular support for the ethnic vision of the country. The attempt at a re-masculanisation of the national identity via ethnic rhetoric and return to pre-socialist traditions failed in Belarus. Instead, another interesting phenomenon took place there: Communist state paternalism was replaced by the authoritarian leader’s paternalism.

**The method**

Attempting to address two questions mentioned above: to what degree Belarus possesses a specific national identity and if/how it is being feminized/gendered, I analyze material collected during a series of extended, semi-structured interviews with about 40 elite members, Belarusian and Russian speakers, females and males, representing different age groups (from 19-54). The group included artists, (former) businessmen and people involved in various ways in

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3 Skak argues that generally post-soviet states reject non-alignment strategies and tend to engage into what she called 'Einbindung'. This happens because they fear abandonment and staying outside of European co-operation. Mette Skak, From Empire to Anarchy. Postcommunist Foreign Policy and International Relations (London: Hurst and Company, 1996): 282. The difference, then, not the willingness to ally, and diminish sovereignty, but rather the direction of 'Einbindung'.


6 By 'elite' I understood people who may have some influence (official or not) on the formation of the views of general public (like politicians, artists); people whose opinions are in some way prominent and may influence the discussion in the public sphere. Therefore, elite for me included both members of the official
politics. All the interviews were conducted between August 2000 and October 2001. In order to triangulate my results, I compared them against press material analyses (both my own and conducted by Efimova\(^7\)), samples of textbooks from primary and secondary schools (starting from the 1950s and finishing with the late 1990s), excerpts from poetry and fiction, radio broadcasts, opinion polls conducted by foreign and local independent institutes (mainly NISEPI and ‘Novak’), and officially published texts of Lukashenka’s speeches.

Theoretically, I am using propositions developed outside of my own discipline (International Relations) and am drawing on the intellectual heritage of literary studies and anthropology. The latter is visible in my research techniques: the extended interviews, and repeated field trips to Belarus. The former is present in my analysis of the material: in the sensitivity to metaphorical constructs, and the stress on representation and signification, attempts at ‘estrangement’ i.e. seeing concepts used by the interviewed as new and unknown to me, and acknowledging the tendency described by Derrida, to perceive the world in terms of binary oppositions, profoundly imbued with value (Johnson, 1997:52-56).

My decision to step out of the International Relations canon was dictated by the observation that the traditional theoretical approaches and methods connected with them, do not address many important issues and tend, instead, to interfere in the world, trying to discipline and order it. The methods I proposed, here, in turn, reflected in a better way, the fluidity of the world and its ‘production’ through people’s utterances. Moreover, they allowed me to point to the importance of the ‘immaterial’ world, and the invisible structures constructed by human verbal (but not only) practices.

**Findings**

1. **SCIENTIFIC DESCRIPTION**

**National Identity: Gendering at the level of a concept**

If we perceive identity as constructed and possessing no essence or core, we will, consequently, appreciate that it is open to modifications and re-statements. These are feasible apparatus (many Belarusian were protesting this inclusion as they claimed that those people did not represent adequate intellectual level to be called ‘elite’) and the people working in opposition.

\(^7\) For example later in the text I claim that Belarusians value undisturbed life due to their nature which they describe as: calm tolerant, patient and mild, avoiding conflict and confrontations. Similar results were obtained by Nadiezhda Efimova (content analysis of Belarusian press), see: ‘Sredstva massovoi informatsii
due to the nature of the discursive field in which identity is called into being. Furthermore, if identity is, following the propositions of feminists' criticism, an effect of language (Talbot, 1998: 144), then we need to see gender not as possessed but as what a person 'does' (Wodak, 1996:13) or says. Thus, people and organizations become what they are also as a result of the utterances they make and the gendering of language can be transmitted into a gendered behavior.

The existence of the 'gendered discourse' has been generally acknowledged, at least since the beginning of the last century, and there is a plethora of studies on the gendering of everyday language. What has been noted more recently is the gendering of scientific concepts, and, more generally, of so called ‘objective’ and quantifiable knowledge.

As stated in the beginning, it is quite frequently claimed that the lack of national feeling is responsible for the unusual behavior of Belarus on the international stage and their will to unite with Russia. Indeed, this country presents an interesting case as it cannot be denied that the dissident movement was very weak there and that independence and sovereignty did surprise it. This, however, is not a strong enough argument to raise the claim that there is no such thing as a Belarusian identity. The problem may consist rather in the fact that Belarusian identity is specific and cannot be simply pushed into an available compartment. In other words, it is the way of defining ‘national identity’ that may be responsible for the diagnosis of the ‘lack’ of national feeling in Belarus.

Classifications are usually contestable and the definition of what constitutes 'national identity' is a particularly difficult one. One needs to define two concepts, ‘nation’ and ‘identity’, each of them problematic enough. While it is hard to catalogue the characteristics of nations, definitions of nationality predominately embrace the element of political will, the highest form of which is the creation of the nation state. Even if the political element is not explicitly
mentioned, it is more or less assumed that the nation is either the creator or the creation of the state (Buzan, 1996:37). This understanding leads, however, to a conflation of the concepts of state and nation and the loyalties developed vis-a-vis these two elements. State and nation may be closely interrelated as in the French case, the two may be thought of independently, like in the German case (Weaver, 1999: 59), but I would like to claim that it is equally possible to imagine a nation that does not aspire (apart from a small part of the elite) to a separate statehood, as happens in the case of the nations within the United Kingdom.

The problem of equating nationalism with the feeling of loyalty to the state rather than the nation has been commented upon in literature (Connor, 1994:91). Similarly, Greenfield derives national identity from the feeling of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 19). Abundant literature points to the ideational character of the nation, negating any tangible characteristics and celebrating, instead, people's self-perception.11

Sensitive to these arguments, I was convinced by the accumulated interview data that the Belarusians possess this sense of common belonging and the self-perception of being 'other' than the neighboring nations.12 In their responses, Belarusians refer to stereotypes and present their national characteristics in series of binary oppositions, where the other pole is predominantly ‘Russia’. Thus, if Belarusians are described as patient, Russians are portrayed as violent. While Belarusians focus on their neighborhood, cultivate their land and care for their belongings, Russians are nomads who are always ready to leave, to ‘mount a horse, set fire to their own house and the one of their neighbor’s’13 and risk everything. There is no problem with stating the boundaries between the two nations, but the certitude that we are ‘simply different, we a

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12 If anything, we may speak of competing versions of the national identity, one of which is represented by the anti-Soviet group and the other embracing the Soviet, pan-Slavic tradition. Both groups, however, display the decisiveness in stating their difference vis-à-vis other nations. Moreover, the distinctiveness of Belarusians from both the groups mentioned is felt and reproduced in stereotypes about the world. It is, however, predominately a-political.
13 Interview, TaM, September 2000, Minsk.
Belarusians\textsuperscript{14} is, in most cases, not charged with a strong political element, which consequently, has led to the classification of Belarus as ‘denationalized’.

Thus, it is not the presence or absence of self-identification that decides if Belarus is described as possessing no national identity, but rather a rigid definition stressing the indispensability of the political = ‘male’ element (Yuval-Davis, 1994) that is used to classify Belarus. This insistence on the political dimension may be analytically limiting, though. There are, after all, nations that do not entertain excessive political and separatist ambitions like the Welsh and the Scottish and nobody questions their right to being called ‘nations’ or having ‘national feelings’.

Moreover, while we observe that Belarusians did not, indeed, fight for their independence, we need to consider that the legal claim to a territory does not necessarily have to coincide with the moral one. The latter is, in Belarus, quite strong and transpires in the interviews and the references to lands which were originally ‘theirs’, and then ‘taken away’.\textsuperscript{15}

Consequently, the understanding of ‘nation’ that I propose to embrace and defend here is built on the arguments developed by Oommen (Oommen, 1997) and on his differentiation between ‘ethnie’ and ‘nation’. The latter is characterized by simultaneous cultural and territorial belonging, while the former lacks the territorial element. Thus, this understanding relies on the presupposition that there is a clear difference between the concepts of the state as a political entity and of the nation as a cultural (moral) one. Belarusians repeatedly demonstrate throughout the interviews that they constitute a unique entity, and that this is accompanied by a strong feeling of territorial belonging.

\textit{Masculinisation of concepts via ‘Power’ component}

I was claiming that the classification of Belarusians as possessing ‘no national identity’ is the effect of scientific language gendering. In this section I would like to expand this claim.

Speaking of the gendered discourse we perceive the existence of multiple feminities\textsuperscript{16} and masculinities functioning respectively in different discourses. In this text, acknowledging the social and cultural construction of ‘femaleness’ and ‘maleness’ and comprehending the internal

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Interview, Vladimir Dorohov, journalist, Russian background, originally in Lukashenka's camp, Minsk May 2001.
\item \textsuperscript{15} This is the opinion frequently voiced in the interviews e.g. V.M, Irina (August 2001) or M.A. and W.A. (May 2001, December 2000), Minsk.
\end{itemize}
ambiguity inherent in each of them, we refer, nevertheless to some mainstream, mythologized and **naturalized schemata** which are organized in two chains of opposing characteristics. We discuss **stereotypes** as the prism via which people perceive, interpret, and order the world. Not assuming any essential or given features of ‘femaleness/maleness’ we observe at the same time how the stereotypical views of what constitutes the feminine-masculine **coincide with and reinforce** contrasting values of weakness-strength, passivity-agency\(^{17}\), and decide on the evaluation of certain persons, units or abstract notions.

Nancy Hirshmann, speaking of the knowledge construction, proposes that the presence or absence of power has been the essential difference between the masculine and feminine constructs\(^{18}\). The power of the state, for example, mimicking the masculine individual consists in the autonomy, singularity, ability to defend the inside sphere and expand through the military or cultural imposition on the outside. As this male-female dualism inscribed in epistemology deeply permeates the perceptions of reality, the possible alternatives of state behavior (in the international arena) that are not designated as 'male' are automatically excluded. The dominant paradigms in IR realism and liberal institutionalism competing over the attributes of bigger 'realism' and 'objectivity' reflect this engendered character of the construction of the knowledge about the world.\(^{19}\)

To sum up, I would like to claim that Belarus is represented as not having a feature of national identity because it is devoid of ‘aggressiveness’. Active behavior, on the other hand is stereotypically associated with masculinity, and contrasted with passivity. Feminist critical texts\(^{20}\) see this binary opposition as constituting just one in the long list of dichotomized categories of objectivity/subjectivity, reason/emotion, knowing/being and public/private, that replicate male/female opposition\(^{21}\). This, (along with Hishman’s definition), allows us to see the

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\(^{16}\) On the construction of different feminities Jennifer Coates, 'Thank God I am a Woman' in Wodak, Gender and Discourse (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 232:263  
\(^{17}\) For example, in adventure narratives even if ‘active’, women are described in adventure narratives as ‘acting in subordinate capacity’ [http://www.sou.edu/ENGLISH/IDTC/Terms.htm](http://www.sou.edu/ENGLISH/IDTC/Terms.htm). Retrieved on 1 December 2002.  
\(^{20}\) E.g. , texts of E. F. Keller’s , S. Harding’s and A. Tickner’s  
units described as passive, mute, emotional, subjective, or associated with the private sphere as implicitly ‘feminized’. The next step is the evaluation and the diagnosis of ‘deficiency’, ‘lack, or ‘abnormality’.

2. SELF-DESCRIPTIONS

2. A. Tolerance (Passivity), Victimization and Irresponsibility

Speaking about modern conceptions of identity in the post-Soviet era, Verdery takes up the theme of agency. Those identity constructs, as she claims, contrast female inactive object with male acting subject (Verdery, 1994:248).

If we look at the lists of characteristics notoriously referred to by the interviewed Belarusians, we perceive that they are dominated by such categories as passivity, inaction and victimisation. Even in the WW2 narrative, the heroism of Belarusians is somehow tainted by passivity - it is heroism brought about by history, provoked, and not something that would make Belarusians the makers of the history, or its active subjects.

We may see that the passivity or 'tolerance', as Belarusians prefer to call it, is rationalized in Belarusian discourse by the experiences of the war and heavy population loss. Although generally peaceful and devoid of aggressive intent, Belarusians perceive themselves as constantly in the epicenter of these conflicts due to their position in-between Russia and Europe. They become heroes as if against their will. Their heroism is heavy, tragic and desperate, its memory brings pain and feelings of injustice, as exemplified by a child-hero, Marat Kaziej, who was killed throwing bottles with petrol at German tanks.

The war narrative, on the surface stressing the resistance, in fact portrays the nation as a victim to a brutal terror. The blood curdling war stories illustrated by the animated installations at the Minsk WW2 museum are retold to newer and newer generations, instilling the feeling of suffering and loss. On the other hand, the WW2 partisans are frequently evoked with pride as they epitomize Belarusian ability to willingly offer their life for their country. Thus, war narrative, speaking of provoked agency of Belarusians, in reality justifies present passivity or unwillingness to get involved in conflicts.

The Belarusian space is presented throughout history as a precious land, that, like a female body, is the passive object various strangers try to divide and possess. It is the place that

is indispensable but which has at the same time no voice if its own. This attitude is particularly visible in the Russian intention to grasp that space as a road to the world, the essential passage through which everything comes to Russia, both good, and evil. The emphasis on the 'naturally given' position (geopolitics) indicates as well the attitude of inaction and the belief in the external sources of history.

Some interlocutors justify the today’s peaceful coexistence of Belarusians and Russians with the national quality of ‘tolerance’. One of the interviewed states that this particular Belarusian ‘tolerance’ is the greatest reason of pride for him as it is the value that the nation carried intact through all the post-war years and could now donate to the European Community. Thus, Belarusian tolerance is painted as qualitatively different from that of the European Community as it is 'real' and 'natural', and it contains an emotional component that the European community is devoid of. It is claimed that in the case of the Community, there is more indifference than tolerance.22

It is emphasized, too, that Belarusians can boast the fact that 'they never took anything from anybody …(although) they took things from us and we just looked calmly at this'23. Thus, things taken away include, apart from their native land, Belarusians symbolic values. The name of the country was taken away by Lithuanians, the same with the coat of arms, heroes and national history24. This theme of undeserved harm and deprivation returns in many variations throughout the material.

Characteristically, Belarusians, when asked about their heroes, point not to the fighters or kings, but to Francisk Skaryna, the Renaissance intellectual who spoke many languages, excelled in various fields and produced the first version of Belarusian bible. Other frequently mentioned names belong, similarly, to literary figures, such as Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas.

The gender imbued conceptualizations of Belarusians appear as well when it is proposed that the people have to be controlled as they may not know what to do with their freedom. Therefore, as three of my interlocutors claim, Lukashenko is maybe not the worst option possible.25 Discussing among themselves the Belarusian case, they explain, of their own accord

22 Interview with W. A., director of a historical archive, Minsk, December 2000.
23 Interview with V. M. radio journalist, 29 August 2001, Minsk.
24 Unpublished article of Belarusian versions of history and heraldic, untitled, by Ihar Lalkov, historian, employed at the state research institute, version of December 2000.
25 Interview on 28 August 2000 in Minsk, 3 female interviewees, 2 from Minsk one from Brzesc: a ballet dancer, a linguist and a housewife. All of them Russian speaking.
and not being prompted to do this by any question, the nature of Belarusian nationalism. It is the nationalism that they describe as 'good', and devoid of aggression, expressed in the willingness to live in 'this country in peace' and, 'to be happy'. And yet, in spite of this some Belarusians believe they compatriots need to have a strong authority over them, something like ‘a lid’ that would keep the ‘steam in the cauldron’.

This ‘need for control’ theme is closely connected to a powerful metaphor of a nation as an immature child (topic associated typically with feminity), that needs to be taken care of.

2B. Child and Family Metaphor

Understanding based on the transfer of a certain familiar experience to another, unknown domain is a very powerful means of reality constructing. Some particularly useful insights into the functioning of metaphor can be gained from G. Lakoff who presented differences between the Conservative and Liberal moral systems via the opposition between the Strict Father and Nurturing Parent Metaphors.26

I would like to claim that both Lukashenka and his opponents alike resort in their communication to what Lakoff defined as ‘Nation-Family metaphor in its strict Father Version. There are some obvious differences, though, in the two camps’ interpretations. Lukashenka group represents itself as keeping the things in order, as a provider of jobs, money, health and education. It is a vision of a strict but good and just parent, leading the child by the hand, the image which was even literally formulated in Lukashenka’s speech where Belarus was compared to a little girl carried in his ‘manly arms’.27 But the Father, for the provision of security, demands the children to follow his orders. They should work and study in peace, should not doubt his good intentions. The child, the nation, may err as it is simply not strong enough to make its own decisions and has to be protected from the insidious external influences.

In the other case the Parent is as well ominous but the child itself is no good, it does not appreciate what is done for it and does not pay back. It does not want to learn; it is slow and not intelligent enough. It cannot be, therefore, treated seriously, and should be strictly controlled. If it does not perform it should be forbidden from speaking. This is exemplified by the proposition of the restrictive voting system that could be helpful in the local conditions because ‘majority of

26 www/http://wysiwyg:bodyframe.3/
people from the moral and logical point of view have no right to do it (i.e. vote). This would be a normal route that Western countries traveled... everywhere there was a restrictive census in the very beginning, the possessions or education were decisive... And now a politician has to deal with cretinism. Dance kazachok in front of them." 28

2.C Invisibility, Suffering and Silence

The references pertaining to the role of Belarus in world politics contain the idea of invisibility and muteness. Belarus is not heard and this indicates the denial of the role of a speaker, which is also a frequent trope in feminist analyses of gendered constructs.29

Belarusian silence or ‘patience’ is strongly emphasized or even exaggerated and Belarusians themselves like to make jokes about their ability to cope with difficulties without protesting or fighting back. Two most frequently repeated jokes refer to this quality. In one of them the Belarusian who is hanged between a German and a Russian survives the execution and then comments on his experience. In the beginning, he admits, it was hard but then he ‘got used' to it. In the other joke, having sat on a pin, a Russian throws it away, Ukrainian hides it in his pocket and Belarusian remains seated because if the pin was there, it means that 'for some reason it should have been this way'.

The notion of extreme endurance is recurring, notwithstanding if you converse with the politician, historian or an accidental travel companion on the train. The ability to 'suffer' patiently is commented on by many, but not necessarily liked by everyone. As one of the interviewees sarcastically put it, Sisyphus is an archetype of the Belarusian and 'masochism is our national feature'30.

3. C. Fear, Locality, and Smallness

Fear is an emotional state frequently attributed to femaleness31 and in the interviews the fear of conflict or change is one of the dominant themes. In the majority of cases the interlocutors lead the listener, via the topic of fear, to the twin theme of domesticity, and shelter, to the traditional associations of home and safety, attachment and settlement (Webster, 1998: ix).

28 Interview with a painter, Belarusian, December 2000.
30 Interview, A.S., journalist and lecturer, Belrarusian speaking, Minsk, 30 August 2001
Home is a central idea dominating the questions referring to highest ‘values’ of life; the family and its happiness is the main life goal that is mentioned.

This may be seen as a consequence of the sharp division between the private and public spheres. The withdrawal from the latter is justified by its association with something dirty, dangerous and destructive, something that is likely to culminate in a personal tragedy.

Interestingly, the ‘home’ theme is frequently connected with the positive evaluation of Soviet Belarusian Republic, when industrialization and raising living standards brought well-being, and increased consumerism to this land, and led to a discourse reminiscent of this of the 1950s Britain, where home was described as a site of affluence (Webster, 1998:xiii).

Belarusians see themselves as open and hospitable, which would be quite typical for any nation’s self-description. But in their self-portrayal they are as well modest, naïve, weak, not appreciating themselves enough, sincere and satisfied with the little they have. The quality at which they constantly point, if compared to Russians, is the ability of Belarusians to work very hard and to look after their own household. Thus, they fence their land and within it they plant tress and vegetables, unlike Russians who are prone to change places. The difference is explained by geographic conditions again - Belarusians imagine themselves as being 'small'. In contrast, they speak of vast space as provoking Russian mobility.

The recurring topic of locality, stillness, or life-as-it-always-was is well illustrated by an interpretation offered by one of the interviewed. In her comments on the Belarusian state of mind she referred to an already symbolic title of the novel by Ivan Melesh 'Ludzie na balotie' (People of a marsh). The 'boloto', mud or mire, represents the place that is cut off from the rest of the world, - nobody can reach it unless the water is frozen. This has two types of consequences. Firstly, the 'new' cannot reach this place which is eternally the same, stagnated and backward. Mud, or swamp is a place of physical sickness as well, of a bad, stale atmosphere. On the other hand, due to isolation, some archaic, traditional values that were lost elsewhere may be kept alive here, so it is a treasury of all things purest and noblest.

3.D. Eugenics – weakness of Belarusian males

Female interlocutors, as a rule, make comments on the male part of the population, which is according to them highly effeminate and unable to cope with life. Husbands are compared to

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32 Interview, ZaLi, linguist, September 2000, Minsk.
33 Interview TaM, Sept 200, Artiom, December 2000, Minsk.
children and described as additional burden, they are seen as weak psychologically, prone to alcoholism and depression. This, they say, is the result of the war, the fact that so many men died, and that the new generations were brought up by single women, mothers and grandmothers, who feared conflict and aggression most of everything in the world. Thus, the vast destruction of today's Belarus and the task of 'mending' of lives assigned to women are seen as responsible for the passivity of the male population.

According to one of the interviewees who resorts to a genetics discourse, the wars, (starting from the Napoleon's), led to the death of the 'heroes'. The survivors are just weak and cowardly men, child-like and capricious. On the one hand weak, they have, on the other one, the capability of manipulating women to do everything for them. They are not willing to compromise and discuss, not able to listen and argue. This visualization of males in terms of deficiency/lack is heavily reminiscent of the typical image of female body as 'seeping, and lacking form' (Grosz, 1994:203).

The view that Belarusian nature is somehow defective in a biological sense is present in scientific pieces as well. This opinion reverberates in texts written by Belarusian authors. For example J. Zaprudnik implies that the present developments are resulting from the Belarusian 'fitness' having been impaired by Stalinism, WW2 and Chernobyl. Another author diagnoses Belarusian society as inert and apathetic, while the leader of the Belarusian National Front, Z. Pazniak, describes Belarusians as ‘seriously sick’, heading either towards death or complete rebirth. Finally, the writer M. Tkacou sees his countrymen as 'genetically' pessimistic and cautious, 'dominated by fear of any change making things worse than they are at present'.

CONCLUSION

34 Interview, I.M. September 2001, Minsk.
35 Interview in Minsk 29 August with V., Russian speaker, working for the illegal NGO organization and in the evenings as a phone operator, same statements - interview in Minsk, 30 August, with Irina, Russian speaker, working for a state institution.
36 Interview in Minsk on 30 August with Tzwieta, working for a women organization 'Women's Reply'
In this paper – while looking at Belarusian national identity and its features in a post-communist context, I focused on the consequences of the implicit perception of the world in terms of binary oppositions organized around the principles of ‘female’ and ‘male’. Two issues were of particular interest here: firstly, how the ‘objective’ language of science incorporated the principles of ‘agency’ – culturally associated with the male domain - into its definition of ‘national identity’. Secondly, how the language of self description used in Belarus was permeated with the values that are associated in an implicit way with the ‘female’ pole of the male-female dichotomy construct, and how this led to a negative (self) evaluation of Belarusians as the people.

The starting point of our consideration was the fact that Belarusians were categorized within literature as possessing no national identity. This formulation was possible, we argued, not because Belarusians did not feel that nations around were ‘other’ to them, but because they did not display a strong aspiration to create independent statehood before 1991. Moreover, remarks made by Belarusians on the history of the nation, and the concrete characteristics and values referred to during interviews, indicate that the commonly accepted view on Belarus' lack of national identity does not adequately reflect the situation. Thus, my interlocutors were clearly able to state their separate status vis-à-vis other nations, including Russians. Sometimes this ‘difference’ was, as they declared, in the ‘indescribable sphere of feeling’, but in most cases it was documented by the attribution of concrete features to 'us' and ‘them’. It would be, therefore, more prudent, I concluded, to see the source of the ‘no-national feeling’ claim in the theoretical constructs and concretely, in the gendering inherent in the very definition of ‘national identity’.

Interestingly, we observed that in their daily discourse, while referring to their country’s positioning in the world, Belarusians stressed, among others, its vulnerability, passivity, victimization, muteness, invisibility and ‘smallness’. This group of images is implicitly connected in European culture, I claimed, with the principle of ‘femaleness’. Appreciating the importance of the way in which nation is gendered for the creation of individual subjectivities, I surmised that the manner in which we describe ourselves may lead to very concrete types of practices and preferences – in private life and in politics.

Thus, for example, the fact that Belarusians describe themselves as ‘passive’ and devoid of agency (and therefore, implicitly ‘female’), leads to their production as deficient and lacking subjects, both in the social science analyses and in the arena of international politics. Their
‘docility’ and ethnic tolerance (vis-à-vis Russians) is not seen as something good and valuable, or something to be replicated. Instead, they are represented, even in their own discourse, as ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’ This tendency, I argued, originates in the implicit tendency to rely on binary oppositions garnered around male-female poles and in the negative valuation of the experience that is traditionally labeled as female.

The general aim of this analysis was to sensitize the analyst and the politician or citizen alike, to the power inherent in the language we use. The case of Belarus may make us more aware of the consequences of the unreflective way in which people tend to organize their experiences and bundle together the features that show some form of ‘deficiency’ or ‘lack’ with the ‘female’ principle.

Lastly, while gendering of definitions is potentially dangerous as it contributes to the creation of the reality around us and ‘makes’ things and phenomena, we may see how gendering of the self-description has already been exploited politically in Belarus. Beliefs about Belarusian passivity, weakness and smallness were easily used in Lukashenka's discourse that offered fatherly ‘protection’ and propounded the necessity of being in a close relationship to an immediate, strong neighbor.

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September 2000: TaM, F/activist, ZaLi – M/professor
December 2000: W. A., M/director of a historical archive, Minsk.
May 2001 :Vladimir Dorohov, M/journalist, Russian background, Minsk
28-30 August 2001: V- F/Russian speaker, working for NGO, Irina – F/Russian speaker, employed by state institution, Tzwieta, F/working for a women organisation 'Women's Reply', group of 3 female interviewees, 2 from Minsk one from Brzesc: F/ ballet dancer, a linguist and a housewife. All of them Russian speaking., A.S., M/journalist, Belrarusian speaking, Minsk , V. M. M/radio journalist, Belarusian speaker, Minsk