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**Sexuality and nationality:
homophobic discourse and the
'national threat' in contemporary
Latvia**

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ABSTRACT. This paper considers why attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Latvia appear to be more intolerant than in all other EU member states. The paper argues that while the legacy of communist discourses on homosexuality and the impact of post-communist transition have played a role in shaping attitudes towards sexuality and sexual minorities in Central and Eastern Europe, these factors cannot sufficiently explain the divergence among post-communist states and, in particular, do not account for Latvia's extreme position. While acknowledging that intolerance towards non-heteronormative sexualities cannot be explained by a single factor, the paper argues that homosexuality has become particularly reviled in Latvia because it has been widely discursively constructed as a threat to the continued existence of the nation.

Introduction

Following the decades of oppression suffered by Latvian gays and lesbians during the period of Soviet occupation, consenting sexual acts between adult men were decriminalised by the Latvian parliament, the Saeima, in 1992 but on the understanding that gays and lesbians in Latvia would remain out of sight.¹ Gays and lesbians were indeed largely invisible throughout the nineties but began to move from the private into the public sphere as a result of the EU accession process. Emboldened by the membership requirement that applicants respect and protect minorities and by civic initiatives supported and financed by Brussels, gays and lesbians became increasingly visible in the late nineties and in the early years of the new millennium, culminating in the first Gay Pride march in Riga in 2005. Gay rights became an explicitly political issue when Latvia became a fully fledged member of the European Union in 2004 and transposed various directives on human rights and equality, banning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

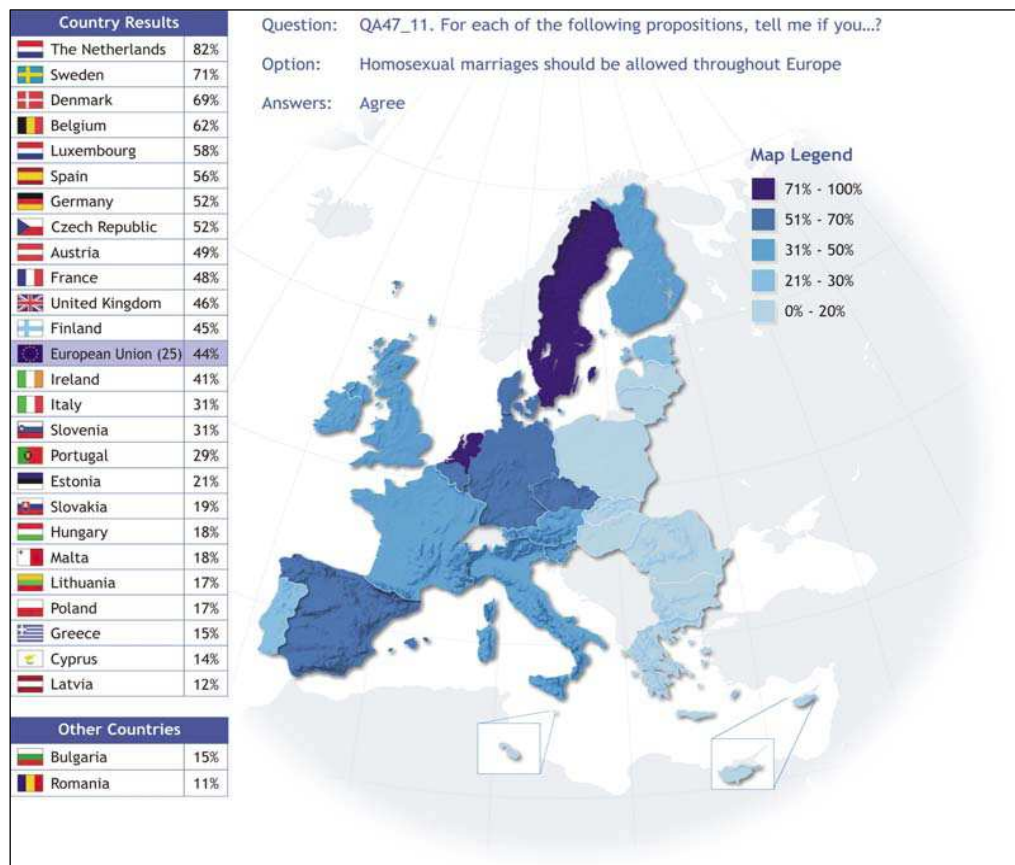
While these achievements are significant, the general situation for gays and lesbians in Latvia remains difficult. Same-sex marriage is explicitly prohibited by Article 35.2 of the Civil Code and the Latvian Constitution was amended in 2005 to define marriage only as a union of a man and a woman (Article 110).² Even amendments to the Labour Law came about as the result of pressure from the European Parliament rather than the Saeima's commitment to equal rights for gays and lesbians. Indeed, Latvia was the last member state of the EU to transpose the Employment Equality Directive banning sexual orientation discrimination in employment. While the first Gay Pride march finally went ahead in Riga in 2005, this was only after the District Administra-

1 Consenting sexual acts between adult women had never been specifically criminalised.

2 The Human Rights Office did submit a registered partnership bill in 1999 but it was rejected by the parliamentary Human Rights and Public Affairs Commission.

tive Court had annulled the City Council’s decision to ban the event, the latter move having enjoyed the support of then Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis. The event went ahead but marchers were attacked by religious and far-right demonstrators, as was the case in subsequent years. While one might argue that the opinions of a small number of protesters at a Gay Pride march are not representative of society at large, the results of a broad-based 2006 Eurobarometer poll suggested that Latvians had the highest intolerance of gays and lesbians of all member states of the EU at that time, with only 12% of respondents agreeing that same-sex partnerships should be allowed throughout Europe.³ The EU average was 44%.

Figure. 1: Attitudes of EU citizens towards same-sex marriage



Source: Eurobarometer 66 (2006: 41)

3 The result was slightly lower in Romania but this country was not yet a member of the EU.

The aim of this paper is thus to understand why attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Latvia are worse than in other EU member states. While acknowledging that intolerance towards non-heteronormative sexualities cannot be explained by a single factor but is the cumulative effect of a range of social influences, I argue that homosexuality is particularly reviled in Latvia because it is seen as a threat to the continued existence of the nation and the core values that seek to define the nation. I begin by analysing the influence of religion, the legacy of communist discourse on homosexuality and the impact of the transition from communism in shaping attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexuality in Central and Eastern Europe to demonstrate that – while important – these factors do not sufficiently explain the divergence among the post-communist states and, in particular, do not account for Latvia’s extreme position. To help explain Latvians’ antipathy to equal rights for sexual minorities, I analyse political and media discourse to show that homosexuality has been naturalised as the negation of Latvian nationality, ‘othered’ as a means to fix a desired conceptualisation of Latvian-ness.

Religion

Perhaps the most commonly cited cause of homophobia throughout the world is religion. Throughout the centuries the words of St Paul (Romans I: 26-28) and narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis: 18-19) have been used to condemn same-sex practices.⁴ Indeed, the main branches of the Christian Church in Central and Eastern Europe have certainly been highly vocal in their condemnation of non-heteronormative sexuality. The current position of the Catholic Church to homosexuality is closely tied to its views on procreation. Same-sex acts are considered sinful in that sexuality is presented as being ‘naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2353).⁵ Homosexual acts thus ‘close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2357) The position of the Orthodox Church is equally unequivocal. At the August 2000 Sacred Bishop’s Council, the Russian Orthodox Church adopted ‘The Basis of the Social Concept’, setting out the

4 For an alternative interpretation of the Sodom narrative, see Spong, J.S. (1989) ‘Sodom revisited’, *New Internationalist*, no. 201

5 As Boswell (1980) demonstrates, however, the Christian Church’s attitude towards homosexuality was not always as intolerant.

Church's position on a range of social issues. The chapter entitled 'Problems of bioethics' makes it clear that:

The Orthodox Church proceeds from the invariable conviction that the divinely established marital union of man and woman cannot be compared to the perverted manifestations of sexuality. She believes homosexuality to be a sinful distortion of human nature. ... While treating people with homosexual inclinations with pastoral responsibility, the Church is resolutely against the attempts to present this sinful tendency as a "norm" and even something to be proud of and emulate.⁶

While the Lutheran Church is one of the most progressive Christian denominations with regard to support for gay rights, with many Scandinavian Lutheran Churches appointing gay clergy and blessing or performing same-sex marriages, the same is not true of the Latvian Lutheran Church. When a bill was drafted by the National Human Rights Office that would allow same-sex couples to enjoy the same rights as married couples, the head of the Lutheran Church – together with his Catholic and Orthodox counterparts – signed an open letter, which read:

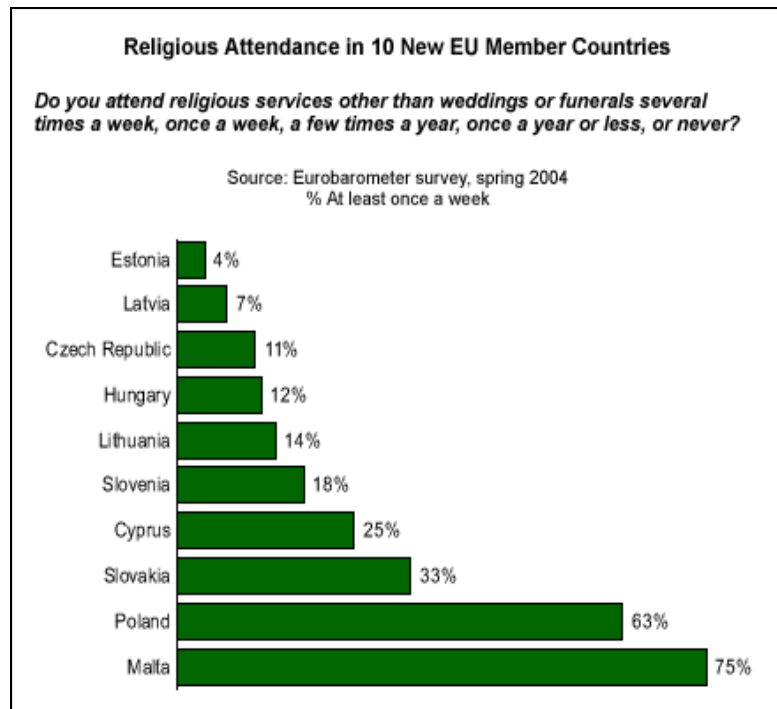
We cannot have special rights for homosexual orientation as a special condition. No one provides laws for kleptomania, vampires, alcoholics and drug addicts. Regardless of whether these sicknesses are inborn or obtained in practice, we have to fight them and not provide new laws favourable to them.⁷

Yet how influential is religious teaching on individuals' attitudes towards homosexuality? Earlier research by Allport and Ross (1967), Kirkpatrick (1949) and Stouffer (1955) demonstrated that churchgoers are more authoritarian and less tolerant towards sectors of society pursuing alternative lifestyles in general due to pressure to conform to the in-group and to their greater likelihood to accept what they are told by authority figures.

6 The Basics of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, chapter XII 'The problems of bioethics': www.mospat.ru (official website of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church; last accessed 15.06.2009)

7 'Human Rights Office backs gay, lesbian rights', *Baltic Times*, 07.10.1999

Figure 2: Religious attendance in 10 new EU member states



Source: Eurobarometer (2004)

Building on this earlier work, more recent social science research confirms that strength of religious belief is, in particular, the strongest predictor of negative attitudes to homosexuality. Rowatt et al. (2009) and Whitley (2009) explain the link between religious belief and intolerance towards gays and lesbians with reference to conservatism that is that there are strong correlations between religiosity and conservatism and between conservatism and homophobia. Plugge-Foust and Strickland (2000) see the relationship between religiosity and homophobia somewhat differently, arguing that homophobia is an irrational thought process, with Christians more likely to believe that which others would consider irrational. In general, Herek and Glunt found that ‘the more often that their subjects went to church, the more hostile those subjects were towards homosexuality’ (cited in Plugge-Foust and Strickland (2000: 241).

However, this does not explain why, according to the Eurobarometer survey cited in Figure 1, Poles, 63% of whom attend church regularly, are more supportive of same-sex marriage than Latvians, only 7% of whom attend church at least once a week (see

Fig. 2). While the impact of religion should not be underestimated, attitudes towards homosexuality in Latvia are conditioned not by religion per se but rather by the role of religion in national identity narratives constructed to legitimise a particular understanding of political community. The values espoused by the main churches in Latvia are indeed shared by many Latvians. However, this is not because of their religious significance but rather because they are presented as *national* values.

The impact of communism

As figure 1 shows, all but one of the former communist member-states of the European Union fall below the EU average with reference to support for gay rights, suggesting that the impact of communist ideology and the communist experience must also be taken into account when examining intolerance towards gays in Latvia. In the early days of the Soviet Union Bolshevik intellectuals recognised the existence of the human sexual drive but insisted on the ‘wholesale subordination of sexuality to the proletariat’s class interests ... for the sake of the Soviet state and Communist Party’ (Kon, 1999: 208). While Karl Marx considered homosexuals to be the deviant products of bourgeois society, there was initially a laissez-faire approach towards homosexuality in the Soviet Union, although attitudes became increasingly intolerant due to the changing nature of Party elites, as intellectuals and urban Marxists were replaced by officials with peasant backgrounds, resulting in increased anti-intellectualism. As all communist citizens were expected to adhere to the ‘psychology of the collective’, ‘alternative’ sexualities were considered unacceptable, while homosexuality was further seen as contrary to the public good in that it could not produce children (Attwood, 1996: 102). As men and women in Marxist-Leninist discourse were seen as ‘two indivisible halves of the same whole’, homosexuality went against the image of the communist Man and was thus seen as a ‘dangerous sign of individualism’ and a vestige of imperial decadence (ibid.). Nikolai Krylenko, Commissar for Justice, proclaimed in 1936 that after two decades of socialism ‘there was no reason for anyone to be homosexual’ and individuals continuing to do so must be ‘remnants of the exploiting classes’ (Baird 2007: 71). Lesbianism was considered particularly heinous. While men could be excused for not controlling their sexual urges – in whatever direction – lesbians it was believed had no excuse, as the existence of female sexuality was all but denied. Furthermore, as the identity of women was so closely tied to motherhood, a woman putting her sexual interests before the interests of her family was considered

to be an outrage. In any case, communist regimes were hostile to sexuality in general because they sought ‘to ensure absolute control over the personality’ by attempting ‘to deindividualise it, to destroy its independence and emotional world.’ (Kon 1999: 208) Therefore, state-sanctioned homophobia, which was never publicly challenged, shaped the opinions of generations of citizens in communist states, who were used to being told what to believe by the regime.

While we can assume that the legacy of communism has had an impact on people’s attitudes towards homosexuality, this does not explain the variance in the level of support for gay rights among post-communist members of the EU. Were the legacy of communism to be the key explanatory factor, one would expect to see far greater convergence of opinion. Yet there is a gulf of 40% between Latvia and the Czech Republic. Even taking account of the different versions of communism in the USSR and the Central and East European satellite states, the 9% variance between Latvia and Estonia – which as Soviet republics were both controlled by the same communist regime – is not insignificant. While the communist legacy, like religion, does have an important impact on attitudes towards homosexuality, it is insufficient to explain the particularly negative position in Latvia.

The impact of the post-communist transition

The final set of factors that can help us understand homophobia in Central and Eastern Europe relates to the impact of the collapse of state socialism and subsequent reaction against communism in the period of transition. The collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe triggered massive social, economic and political upheaval and in the context of such massive change ‘cultural diversity seems threatening’ (Inglehart and Baker 1990: 28). Anything unfamiliar, such as homosexuality, was seen as a threat to stability and there was thus a tendency among individuals to ‘cling to traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and emphasize absolute rules and familiar norms in an attempt to maximize predictability in an uncertain world.’ (ibid.) The focus on absolute rules and intolerance of difference after the end of the Cold War can itself be seen as a part of the legacy of communist political culture, as the Manichean worldview of communism and its belief in the perfection of Marxism-Leninism rested on a view of

truths as absolute rather than relative: people, states and ideas were either good or bad and, if they were not explicitly good, they were implicitly bad.⁸

In many former communist states, political elites rejected their communist past and harked back to the pre-communist period, to the ‘golden age’ of the 1920s and 1930s and its traditional values and norms. As this period was considered the opposite of the abnormal communist experience, ‘traditional’ thus became equated with ‘normal,’ with traditional gender and sexual roles seen as ‘an important aspect of the nostalgia for ‘normality’’ (Watson 1993: 472-3). What is seen as ‘normal’ has often, however, been strictly defined in national, Christian and heterosexual terms and homosexuality thus confuses and threatens this traditional order. While ‘abnormal’ behaviour could be tolerated in private, the appearance of gays and lesbians in public spaces, particularly those of national or religious significance, was interpreted as a direct attack on the ‘norm’ rather than an instance of citizen using their right of free assembly in a democratic space. This point was explicitly made by former Latvian Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis:

For me, as the head of government, it is unacceptable that in our capital city, in the very heart of Riga, next to the Dome Cathedral, there is a parade of sexual minorities. This is unacceptable. We are a state based on Christian values. We cannot advertise things that are not acceptable to the majority of society.⁹

This misrepresentation of what is seen as permissible democratic practice is also reflected in politicians’ misunderstanding of concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’. Democracy is often used simply to mean ‘rule of the majority’, which frees politicians from the need to take account of the rights of minority groups, while claims by certain MPs that human rights are not above the laws of God shows that the concept of universal human rights is misunderstood or wilfully distorted.

8 This point was made by Zvi Gitelman at the international workshop on ‘Anti-Semitism in an Era of Transition’, UCL, 19 June 2009

9 Aivars Kalvitis, former Prime Minister of Latvia, 20.07.05, Latvian television; *Mozaika* (2007), p. 33

While the factors we have discussed above could all relate to some to degree to most Central and East European states, one political factor is peculiar to Latvia. To understand why an issue of personal morality became such a political issue in Latvia, we need to examine the nature of Latvian politics. With the exception of one five-month period from February to July 1999 when the Social Democratic Union was invited to join the ruling coalition, all Latvian governments since the re-establishment of the independent Latvian state in 1991 have comprised parties of the right and/or centre-right. Few democratic states in Europe have been ruled by governments of the same ideological complexion for such a long period. To understand why this matters, it is helpful to examine Chantal Mouffe's concept of the 'democratic paradox'. Mouffe (2005: 30) argues that:

A well functioning democracy calls for a clash of democratic political positions. This is what the confrontation between left and right needs to be about. Such a confrontation should provide collective forms of identification strong enough to mobilise political passions. ... When political frontiers become blurred, disaffection with political parties sets in and one witnesses the growth of other types of collective identities, around nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification.

As there has been no left or centre-left presence in Latvian governments since 1991, the adversarial basis of politics is missing. As a result, the confrontation between different political positions is replaced by confrontation between 'essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values' (ibid.) In other words, the battle between right and left in Latvia has been replaced by the battle between right and wrong. In the Latvian case, the essentialist forms of identification (Latvian-ness) and non-negotiable moral values (heterosexism) go hand in hand. However, the nature of Latvian politics is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for the country's high degree of homophobia. While the absence of adversarial confrontation helps us understand why issues of morality have become political issues, it does not explain why gay rights, in particular, were the focus of political attack rather than, say, the large number of strip clubs that have opened in Riga since the mid-1990s. To understand this, we must, I argue, examine the relationship between (homo)sexuality and nationality.

Nationality/sexuality

The nationalist perspective on the relationship between nationality and sexuality focuses on the biological reproduction of the nation and accordingly presupposes the latter to be heterosexual. According to Charles and Hintjens, ‘nationalist ideologies which arose in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe were associated with attempts on the part of national bourgeoisies to create national collectivities in their own image. This image was grounded in a specific gender division of labour, sexual orientation and ethnicity’ and also involved ideas of respectability and appropriate sexual behaviour (1998: 2). Heterosexuality thus became a taken-for-granted attribute of the nation and dominant group norm, against which actions and beliefs were judged. In terms of nation-making, the presence of gay men was thought to undermine the ‘male bonding’ required to forge the nation and defend it militarily, while homosexuals were also considered not to possess the typically masculine virtues of ‘willpower, honour, courage’ required to inspire action in the name of the nation (Nagel 1998: 245). The perception of gay men as weak and lesbians as strong confuses the patriarchal gender order and public and private roles of men and women central to most ethno-national discourses. Moreover, the perceived inability of gays and lesbians to reproduce is presented as a threat to the continued existence of the nation, a view taken to extremes by Poland’s President Lech Kaczynski, who argued that ‘widespread homosexuality would lead to the disappearance of the human race’.¹⁰ Nations seeking to define themselves in ethnic terms, emphasising shared a bloodline and common descent, are therefore more likely to have a patriarchal gender order and absolute rules on sexuality, which are enforced even more strictly in contexts of cultural pluralism, perceived threats to the continued existence of the nation and in times of social and political upheaval. As we shall see in the Latvian context, stressing the heterosexuality of the nation allowed nationalists to establish continuity through family ties between the pre- and post-communist periods of their history.

The academic perspective on the relationship between nationality and sexuality sees both as social constructs. While nationalists themselves and some die-hard primordialist scholars view nations as organic communities united by shared biology, the prevailing view is that they are socially constructed. While sexual desire is biologically

¹⁰ ‘Fury at Polish president gay threat warning’, *Irish Independent*, 21.02.2007 (last accessed: 25.06.2008)

driven, sexual categories and the meanings assigned to them are constructed by institutions such as the Church and the family as well as by the law and, in particular, by medicine.¹¹ Institutions such as these ‘produce and/or reproduce ideologies and norms, which define social expectations’ with regard to acceptable mores and behaviours (Stuhlhofer and Sandfort 2005: 5). While never fully hegemonic and always contested, specific discourses on sexuality are produced to create moral leadership and social hierarchy at any given time and to legitimate a particular truth-regime. There is, of course, no *a priori* relationship between nationality and sexuality. The relationship between categories and the meanings ascribed to them are culturally and historically contingent. As Weeks explains, ‘homosexuality, like all forms of sexuality, has different meanings in different cultures – so much so that it becomes difficult to find any common essence which links the different ways it is lived’ (1992, xi). The fact that certain societies, such as Scandinavia and the Netherlands, are supportive of same-sex partnerships, while others, such as Poland and the Baltic States, are not demonstrates that it is impossible to find a meta-level explanation for the meaning ascribed to homosexuality that holds across space and time.

Granting certain meanings a dominant position and excluding others is achieved through the establishment of a specific discourse that ‘constitutes and organises social relations around a particular structure of meanings’ (Doty 1996:, 239). The unification of the discursive field and partial stabilisation of its meanings and identities are achieved by constructing its limits through the establishment of a ‘constitutive outside,’ also known as othering. As Mouffe explains, this difference ‘is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy, for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman, etc.’ (2005: 15). Within a particular discourse, internal unity and the constitutive outside are created through the logics of equivalence and difference.

The logic of equivalence creates chains of equivalence among different discursive elements, ‘subverting the differential character of those terms’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001:128). In other words, various unrelated identities are grouped together and

11 Indeed, historians of sexuality argue that it was the spread of modern medicine and Freudian psychoanalysis that produced the social categories of homosexual and heterosexual (Schluter, 2002, p. 29). Prior to the late nineteenth century people *behaved* homosexually or heterosexually - or both - but were never classified as such.

treated as similar with regard to a common reference point that negates the identity of the inside. However, the constitutive outside must be more than just different to the various elements within the discourse; otherwise, it is simply another difference within the discourse. The constitutive outside must *threaten* its existence if it is to unify the discursive field and partially stabilise its meanings and identity. In Latvia, I argue, the desired conceptualisation of national identity after fifty years of Soviet control has been partially fixed by constructing homosexuality as the constitutive outside of Latvian nationality, that is as the negation of Latvian-ness. To demonstrate this, we need to understand how Latvian national identity has been gendered and sexed.

Gender and sexuality in Latvian national identity

A central narrative in Latvian national discourse has been the spectre of both an internal and external threat. The Latvian national awakening took place at a time when Latvian territory was part of the Russian Empire and controlled at the local level by German landowners. Ieva Zake (2008) argues that, rather than seeking independence, the main aim of the nationalists at this time was to harden ethnic boundaries to avoid cultural assimilation by either Germans (the internal threat) or Russians (the external threat). During this period, the key role in challenging the internal threat of cultural assimilation was to be played by women, who, as mothers and cultural reproducers, were expected to perform traditional gender roles and cultural practices as a means of 'establishing markers of difference in the family and for the nation,' thereby hardening ethnic boundaries (Novikova, 2000: 330). This presupposed a specific gender order based on the patriarchal family, which had been the main unit of - and metaphor for - the Latvian nation for centuries. As early as the Middle Ages, the lives of the indigenous inhabitants of present-day Latvia began 'to centre ever more closely around the family' following the loss of political independence as a result of their defeat by the Teutonic Knights in the 1200s; the family was the last social unit within which they could retain their independence and 'was the last fortress within which Latvian culture and the Latvian language could be kept alive' (Andrups and Kalve 1954: 24-5). The patriarchal structure was clear in that, although the mother 'was more treasured and revered,' it was the father who had the final word and, when he died, it was the eldest son who became the new head of the family (Rubulis, 1984: 108).

When Latvia gained independent statehood in 1920, the shift in priorities from the cultural to the political promoted ‘a vision of national citizenry that, following the traditional sex-role distribution in a nation-family, would need a man at its political helm’ (Novikova 2000: 330). While female suffrage was granted in 1920, fewer than 4% of the members of parliament returned in the elections of that same year were women and, consequently, the ‘emerging masculine subject of the new nation contracted women into the realm of the collective symbolic’ (ibid.). Moreover, following the rise of authoritarianism in the 1930s, women’s civil rights were further constrained by the 1935 Civil Law, which gave husbands the legal right to make decisions within the family (Eglitis, 2002, p. 190).

Following the annexation of Latvia by the USSR in 1940, Latvians were then subject to a specific gender order institutionalised by the communist regime in which the roles of men and women were defined according to the perceived needs of the Soviet state. According to Latvian nationalists, the traditional nation-family was distorted by this regime in that it sought to ‘liberate’ women from their domestic roles by transferring childcare from the private to the public sphere, while at the same time undermining the traditional masculine roles of father and breadwinner by assuming responsibility for safeguarding women’s role as mothers and ensuring them access to paid work (Ashwin, 2000). The communist experience therefore resulted in what Latvians saw as ‘the distortion of social relations between men and women’ in that it confused the public and private gender roles central to the nation-family (Latvia Human Development Report 1995, p. 37). As in medieval Latvia, however, the family remained a site of resistance to foreign rule, a sphere where national traditions and culture could be transmitted in the face of the Soviet regime’s denationalising project. As Einhorn confirms, ‘[u]nder state socialism, many people invested the family with meaning as the source of dignity and creativity’ and ‘as fostering solidarity in an atomized society’ to the extent that there was ‘a tendency to idealize it’ (2002, p. 59-60).

As this brief historical digression shows, Latvian national discourse has emphasised the idea of the nation-as-family, clear public and private roles for men and women as well as ethno-cultural reproduction through women, with the heterosexuality of the nation taken for granted. By the end of the period of Soviet rule, however, this conceptualisation of Latvian-ness was under threat. The nation-as-family and its tradi-

tional gender roles were distorted, while the centrality of ethnic culture had been undermined by decades of mass migration by Russian-speakers, which resulted in the proportion of ethnic Latvians in Latvia dropping to 52% by 1991 and in ethnic Latvians constituting a minority in all major cities. To counter the perceived threat to the continued existence of the Latvian nation and to deal with the legacy of the Soviet past, social and political actors after 1991 sought discursively to exclude phenomena which undermined the desired conceptualisation of Latvian national identity, while at the same time emphasising the role of the family and tradition as a means of creating stability and continuity in times of uncertainty and social and political change.

Contemporary discourses of nationality and sexuality

In the cultural and historical context of post-communist Latvia, anything seen as ‘non-traditional’ and thereby ‘abnormal’ was considered to be not just alien but a threat to the continued existence of the Latvian nation in its desired ethnic form. As a result, political parties in Latvia sought to ‘heterosex’ the nation and present homosexuality as un-Latvian (Waitt 2005, 177). One can thus discern twin discourses of ‘Latvian ethno-nationality’ and ‘homosexuality’, whereby the latter is presented as a threat to the existence of the former, unifying its discursive field and thereby partially stabilising its identity and the meanings ascribed to it. This is not to suggest that homosexuality is presented as the only threat to the Latvian nation. As we shall see below, it is placed in a chain of equivalence with other elements to construct the constitutive outside of the ethno-national discourse. For the purpose of this paper, however, I seek to show that attempts to naturalise an antagonistic relationship between Latvian nationality and homosexuality help us understand why support for gay rights in Latvia is so low. Drawing on Latvian and UK media sources and on the ‘Database of Quotes on Homophobic Speech in Latvia’, the following section sets out the key tropes of the ‘ethno-nationality’ and ‘homosexuality’ discourses in Latvia to show how they are constructed as being mutually exclusive.¹²

12 Created by Mozaika, the Latvian alliance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Persons and their Friends in Latvia.

Fig. 3: Main tropes in ‘Latvian ethno-nationality’ and ‘Homosexuality’ discourses

Latvian ethno-nationality	Homosexuality
Under threat	Threat
- Internal	- Internal
- External	- External
Normal/traditional	Abnormal
Natural	Unnatural
Family-centred	Anti-family
Religious	Irreligious

The first trope is the idea of a ‘national threat’. As discussed above, the spectre of internal and external threats to the Latvian nation has historically been a central narrative in Latvian national discourse and is still a frequent theme today, with the Russian-speaking community seen as the internal threat, due to their dominant demographic position in the main cities and their perceived unwillingness to learn the Latvian language, and the European Union often presented as an external threat to Latvia for requiring the state to liberalise its citizenship laws and adopt legislation aimed at providing equal rights for sexual minorities. Latvian politicians have played on this historic fear of twin internal and external threats when attacking gay rights. For instance, following the debate in parliament on anti-discrimination legalisation, Janis Smits, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Commission, recommended that any deputy who voted in favour ‘should no longer go and place flowers by the Monument to Freedom, because with his vote he will be the same as those people who once tried to annihilate our people’.¹³ Echoing the views of Polish President Kaczynski, Latvian nationalists blamed homosexuality for the potential end of the nation. According to a joint statement issued by nine family organisations and political parties, the establishment of gay and lesbian organisations was ‘nothing less than planned genocide against the Latvian nation’.¹⁴ As Ainars Slesers, a deputy for the Latvia’s First Party explained: ‘You must understand that we don’t want to repress anyone. But we also

¹³ Parliament plenary session, 31.05.06; Official Record of Parliament; Mozaika (2007), p. 30.

¹⁴ ILGA-Europe 2001, 40

cannot silently look at what is happening today. We already have a demographic crisis but now we also have homosexual propaganda!’¹⁵

The internal threat was also linked to the external threat from the EU, perceived as forcing its liberal, secular and supra-national agenda on new member-states. Janis Smits, insisted that Latvians ‘say a clear “no” to all those wise men from the West, who want to suggest that our people undertake voluntary suicide because, as you know, children do not come from homosexuals [sic]’.¹⁶ The requirement that the Latvian parliament transpose the Employment Equality Directive banning sexual orientation discrimination in employment prompted six Latvian MPs to write to Strasbourg, denouncing ‘the attacks by the homosexual group of European Parliament members who are trying to limit our freedom of speech and our religious convictions.’¹⁷ The campaign was supported by religious leaders, criticising this ‘foreign-inspired action, in which a handful of people with questionable morals try to force the institutions of government to accept their perverse views’.¹⁸ It was even claimed that homosexuality did not exist in Latvia until the country joined the EU.¹⁹

As discussed above, the Soviet experience was seen as abnormal by Latvians and the desire to be normal was thus a ‘unifying notion in the period of opposition to Soviet communism,’ with normality ‘a site of political contestation after the restoration of Latvian independence’ (Stukuls 1999: 537). In rejecting the Soviet past, Latvian nationalists sought to return to the pre-annexation period, harking back to the Golden Age of the 1920s and 1930s and the traditional values and norms of the era. As this era was considered the opposite of the abnormal Soviet experience, ‘traditional’ thus became equated with ‘normal’ (Watson, 1993: 472-3). Gays and lesbians thus threatened tradition and the normality which Latvian nationalists sought to achieve, with the abnormality of homosexuality frequently referenced in anti-gay discourses. Peteris Tabuns, a deputy for the conservative-nationalist For Fatherland and Freedom (LNNK) party repeatedly emphasised Latvians’ ‘normal principles of morality’ which

15 Homepage of the Latvian People’s Party website; Mozaika (2007), p. 30

16 Parliament plenary session, 31.05.06; Official Record of Parliament; Mozaika (2007), p. 31

17 ‘Latvian MPs attack gays for immoral and hooligan behaviour’, *Pink News*, 03.06.08

18 ‘Catholic Cardinal Calls Gays ‘Prostitutes’ in Latvian Outburst’, UK Gay News, 10.05.2007: www.ukgaynews.org.uk (last accessed 01.03.2010)

19 ‘Crucible of hate’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 2007: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jun/01/gayrights.poland (last accessed: 03.03.2010)

he contrasted with the behavioural norms of gays and lesbians, who are ‘abnormally oriented’.²⁰ Former government minister Ainars Bastiks deemed Riga Pride to be offensive because ‘an abnormality’ was ‘proclaimed as a normal occurrence’.²¹ Linking sexuality to citizenship, former Prime Minister Andris Skele stated that only ‘correctly oriented’ people could ‘create a nation’ and that ‘differently oriented people should not be allowed to occupy responsible State positions’.²² The attempt by sexual minorities ‘to convince all of society that sexual relationships between members of the same sex is a totally normal occurrence’ was even presented as ‘dangerous,’ the threat of such action lying in the fact that it blurs the clearly defined and stoutly maintained ‘distinction between normality and abnormality,’ which, according to George L. Mosse, has always ‘provided the mechanism that enforced control and ensured security’ (1985: 10).²³

The normality of heterosexuality is tied to and reinforced by the fact that it is presented as ‘natural’. The idea of ‘nature’ is often invoked when attempts are made to legitimise discrimination against gay men and women in that ‘homosexuality ... presents a threat to the family and a threat to the natural order’ (Landes 2008). The assumed naturalness of the return to the traditional Latvian family after fifty years of Soviet rule was clear in the 1995 Latvia Human Development Report, for example. Prepared jointly with the United Nations Development Programme but written by local academics and politicians, the chapter on ‘Women in Transition’ reported that ‘a good portion of a woman’s life is occupied by bearing and raising children, caring for the home and family. For men, raising children and caring for children do not require leaving work. This division of labour is *natural and acceptable to all.*’ (Latvia Human Development Report 1995, p. 37; emphasis added)

20 Parliament plenary session, 31.05.06; Official Record of Parliament; Mozaika (2007), 37

21 *Rīgas Balss*, 20.07.05; Mozaika (2007), 25

22 *Rīgas Laiks*, no. 3, 1996; ILGA-Europe, 2001, 40

23 Homepage of the Latvian People’s Party website; Mozaika (2007), 30

Fig. 4: Selected statements about the family by Latvian politicians

‘The popularisation of homosexual relations and the demands to accept it as a norm will lead us to the degradation of our basic values: an understanding of the role of the family, of natural marriage and of a natural family.’

*Almers Ludvigs*²⁴

‘A strong, traditional family is the greatest value for the country. And only by strengthening and defending it, we can overcome the demographic crisis and avoid a looming demographic catastrophe for Latvia.’

*Inese Slesere*²⁵

‘Family rights are threatened [by Gay Pride] – only within marriage between a man and a woman can children be created. Latvia, which is dying out and where it would be necessary to stress family values, is thus put to shame.’

*Ainars Bastiks*²⁶

Furthermore, as Almers Ludvigs, Inese Šlesere and Ainārs Baštiks make clear above (see Fig. 4), it is the ‘natural’ or ‘traditional’ family that is seen as the key to the future of the ethnic nation. Combining the key tropes of ‘natural/traditional’ and ‘family’ thus enables them to legitimise their opposition to equal rights for gays and lesbians by presenting the latter as a threat to the desired future. Furthermore, the traditional family allows ‘the ruptures between pre- and post-communist Latvia to be masked’ in that continuity can be established through kinship ties between Latvians of the First Republic and Latvians of the post-Soviet state (Waitt 2005: 167). The perception of the ‘national threat’ thus emphasised ‘the centrality of procreation and motherhood as public rather than private issues and has given traditionalist claims le-

24 Almers Ludvigs, Riga City Council deputy, *Chas*, 09.07.2006; *Mozaika* (2007), 31-2

25 Inese Slesere MP, Parliament plenary session, 15.09.05; Official Record of Parliament; *Mozaika* (2007), 21

26 Ainars Bastiks, *Rīgas Balss*, 20.07.05; *Mozaika* (2007), 25

gitimacy among broad sectors of the populations' (Stukuls 1999: 541). Presenting homosexuality as unnatural thus allows discrimination against gays and lesbians to be legitimated in the name of the future of the Latvian ethnic nation.

As noted above, homosexuality is not the only element of the constitutive outside of the Latvian nationality discourse; it is one – albeit a very effective one – of many elements that are grouped together in a chain of equivalence to mark the boundary between the desired conceptualisation of the Self and Other. The use of a chain of equivalence can be clearly seen in the claim by Inara Ostrovskā, a deputy from the New Era party, that 'anyone can go along with the socialists, communists, Brussels, the Kremlin, the UN, homosexuals, Soros²⁷, foreigners and support their values. I choose Latvia, Latgale [a region in Eastern Latvia] the Christian faith, our traditions and morality.'²⁸ There is obviously nothing that socialism, the UN and homosexuals share other than their being defined as threats to Latvian national identity, itself constructed on the basis of a chain of equivalence of Christianity, Latvian traditions and (undefined) Latvian morality. Similarly, Peteris Tabuns's objection to the 'unrestricted spread of pederasty [homosexuality], pornography, drug addiction and alcoholism being interpreted as human rights achievements' seeks to establish an equivalence between unrelated elements, which are united solely by the threat they are perceived to pose to the desired conceptualization of Latvian morality (Waitt 2005: 170).

Conclusion: 'More gays, less Latvians!'²⁹

To deal with the legacy of the Soviet past, ensure the continued existence of the Latvian nation in its desired ethnic form and to create stability and continuity in times of uncertainty and socio-political change, politicians in post-Soviet Latvia have sought to construct a conceptualisation of Latvian ethno-national identity based on the family and on traditional gender roles and sexual norms, which are presented as 'normal' in opposition to the 'abnormal' Soviet experience. To establish this hegemonic ethno-national discourse, phenomena which undermine the desired conceptualisation of Latvian national identity have had to be discursively excluded. In the cultural and histori-

27 References to George Soros, the entrepreneur and currency trader, are often shorthand for 'Jew'. I would like to thank to Zvi Gitelman for making me aware of this.

28 *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*, 20.07.06; Mozaika (2007), 22

29 Banner held by a protester at Riga Gay Pride, Summer 2009; 'Flying the flag: why Pride is still relevant', *The Independent*, 18 June 2009: www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/flying-the-flag-why-pride-is-still-relevant-1707556.html (last accessed: 20.06.2009)

cal context of post-communist Latvia, anything perceived as ‘non-traditional’ and ‘abnormal’ was thus considered not just alien but as a threat to the very existence of the Latvian nation. Tapping into established historical fears of internal and external threats and the idealisation of the nation-family, a broad range of politicians – MPs, government ministers and the Prime Minister – have presented homosexuality as the negation of Latvian-ness. While this alone cannot explain the low level of support for equal rights for gays and lesbians in the country, the discursive practice of othering homosexuality to counter the perceived ‘national threat’ – in conjunction with the influence of religion, the communist legacy, the impact of the political transition and the peculiar nature of Latvian party politics – helps us gain a more nuanced understanding of the problem of homophobia in Latvia.

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