

FEMINISATION OF THE NATION

IMAGES OF WOMAN, FAMILY AND NATION IN THE LITHUANIAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTION

THROUGHOUT 2008, THE topics of family, sexuality and abortion have been discussed extensively in the Lithuanian Parliament and media. Politicians and other public figures have employed stereotypes and presuppositions about women and their 'womanly nature' in order to defend restrictive policies in the sphere of reproduction and sexuality. Moreover, it seems that the portrayal of women in the public discourse is closely connected to the image of the Lithuanian nation. Fragility of the nation is often compared to the weakness of a woman; constant reiteration of such comparisons helped to build momentum for the implementation of conservative pro-life policies. Moreover, the debate on abortion and sexuality has led to discussions of Lithuanian culture, its authentic values, contemporaneityⁱ and the Lithuanian nation.

THIS PHENOMENON IS not limited to Lithuania: because of women's capacity to reproduce a nation biologically and culturally, an image of a woman is often used as a symbol of nation's health and continuity. At the same time, this continuity is secured by means of control over women's lifestyle and sexuality. Many scholars have written on this interrelation between gender and nationalism in different cultures, geographic locations, and historical periods (e.g. Mosse 1985; Parker et al. 1992; Yuval-Davis 1997). Their work shows that the connection between images of a woman and nation is especially salient under conditions of political instability, economic

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ⁱ For reasons of clarity, I use the term 'contemporaneity' to refer to the three concepts found in

the Lithuanian public discourse, which more precisely should be translated to English as 'modernity' (modernybė), 'modernness' (modernumas) and 'contemporaneity' (šiuolaikiškumas).

decline, and integration in the international community. Contemporary Lithuania is a perfect example of a country facing such challenges to national integrity. In this article, I use critical discourse analysis to analyse the narrative construction of a woman and nation in this country.

THE ANALYSIS IS focused on several political initiatives aimed at regulation of reproduction and relationships which triggered the discussions on sexuality and women among Lithuanian politicians and in the media. One of them was the Draft Act on the Protection of Human Life at the Prenatal Stage (hereafter the Draft Act) which severely limits access to abortion. There have been several unsuccessful attempts to ban abortion before, but only in December 2007 the Draft Act won the first approval by the Parliament and was widely discussed by the public throughout 2008. After it was forwarded to parliamentary committees for improvement, it has not made it back to the plenary session yet.

ANOTHER ISSUE WHICH provoked passionate debate was the approval of the State Family Policy Concept (hereafter the Family Concept) in June 2008. This document defines the state's stance on family affairs and creates guidelines for further family policy development in Lithuania. It defines a family as an officially registered marriage between a man and a woman, defines a single parent household as an incomplete family, discourages divorce and single-parenting. Because the document will affect regulations in the sphere of social welfare and financial support of families in the near future, opposition claims that it might increase the risk of social exclusion of those partnerships which do not fall under the new definition of a full family.

IN ORDER TO trace the connection between images of a woman and nation, I employed methods of critical discourse analysis. The timeframe for the analysis was December 20th, 2007 – December 25th, 2008. The data come from two groups of sources. The first group is the discourse of the four parliamentary sessions where the Draft Act and the Family Concept were discussed, the narratives of those with the most political discursive power. The second group includes 65 media articles, which discuss abortion and/or family in the context of these two political initiatives, from the three most popular internet news portals - *Delfi.lt*, *Balsas.lt* and *Bernardinai.lt*. Discursive actors in these media spaces are politicians, journalists, church representatives, academics (e.g. political scientists, philosophers, psychologists) and prominent public figures (e.g. writers). In this article I focus mostly on those who support conservative policies, since precisely in their narratives the connection between the image of a woman and nation is established.

THE MOST POPULAR topics in the media analysed were: a) the appropriateness of policies as solutions to social problems in Lithuania, such as a growing number of abortions and divorces; b) possible causes of these problems; c) discussions on human nature and the nature of men and women; and d) slandering of political opponents through 'revealing' conspiracies by anti-national and/or pro-gay organisations and individuals. Similar topics dominated the statements made by Members of Parliament (MPs) during the plenary sessions in question. The choice of topics shows that this discussion has evolved to be more than a mere debate on certain policies: it has developed into a struggle between different interpretations of society, its needs and problems. In the following sections, I present the results of discourse analysis focusing on the images of a woman, family, and the Lithuanian nation.

DISCUSSION ON 'WOMANLY NATURE'

IT SHOULD HARDLY elicit surprise that the texts by those defending conventional family values and opposing abortion construct the image of a woman as very traditional. A woman is portrayed as naturally striving for child-bearing and lifelong family relationships and as responsible for the well-being of all family members yet weak and passive in face of challenges.

IN THE DISCOURSE analysed, abortion and divorce are presented as unnatural and immoral practices. There are several ways in which this position is defended. One of them is the hyperbolisation of the horrors of the abortion procedure through a detailed description of the damage done to the embryo (e.g. Juknaitė 2008) and visualisation of its physical pain through shocking images (e.g. Saukienė 2008b; Rudalevičienė 2008). Another way is through demonstration of spiritual pain a woman is experiencing during abortion or divorce (e.g. *ibid.*).

DESCRIBING ABORTION AND divorce as unnatural strengthens the claim that a woman is biologically striving for child-bearing and lifelong family relationships. This claim is also reinforced by demonstrating that the decision to terminate pregnancy is not made by the woman herself but is forced upon her by other people (*ibid.*). Paradoxically, this does not imply that such 'unnatural' and 'immoral' behaviour is not the woman's responsibility.

IN THE TEXTS analysed, divorce and unwanted pregnancy are often equated with personal failure. Authors frequently use such concepts as

‘misfortune’ and ‘unhappiness’, which emphasises the negative meaning of these experiences. What is more, they often stress individual responsibility for abortion and divorce. Consider, for instance, the following quotation:

“A woman who has undergone an abortion believes she has committed an unforgivable sin. This is the core of [her] spiritual wound. She is a mother aware of her responsibility for the death of her child whom she has not allowed to be born.” (Žiugždienė 2008)ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱAll further translations from Lithuanian are the author’s.

The words “believes” and “sin” emphasise that the experience is personal. The expression “she has committed a sin” refers to active engagement in the experience. It is stressed that an abortion is a woman’s choice, and thus she is responsible for it. The authors who describe women’s experiences direct all attention to her physical and psychological state but almost never to her personal circumstances and reasons for her choice. This gives the reader an impression that a woman has full agency in the situation when her and her family’s well-being is threatened.

WOMEN ARE ALSO blamed for men’s failure to fulfil their familial responsibilities. Consider the following excerpt:

“Paradoxically, women who claim the right to abortion promote irresponsibility among men, protect men who avoid commitment, and turn themselves into an object, a tool to achieve satisfaction, but not an equal partner to a man.” (Lašienė 2008)

Blaming and shaming for immoral and irresponsible behaviour is a common theme in the analysed texts. It is often stated that the main cause of the growing number of abortions in the country is women’s unwillingness to sacrifice their social, professional, and financial achievements for the needs of pregnancy and family (e.g. Matulas, Tomaševskis, parliament’s plenary session nr. 368, 20.12.2007; Lašienė 2008). The use of shame and the theme of accusation of the mother, as well as of any disobedient citizen or just an opponent in a discussion, is deeply embedded in the Lithuanian culture. When describing the use of shame in Lithuanian politics and public discourse, Lithuanian sociologist Artūras Tereškinas (2007: 12) states that “the aim of the rhetoric of morality and shaming is to force us to feel ashamed and to make the dissenting point of view unimaginable”. In the debate on abortion, where a woman’s identity is defined as depending on her child-bearing function, arguing for her right to terminate pregnancy is a shameful line of argumentation, devaluing the woman and her ‘nature’.

ANOTHER OBSERVATION IS that a woman is often portrayed as fragile and unable to stand up to social pressure. The theme of weakness of a childless and/or unmarried woman was present in the Lithuanian culture long before Christianity; such a woman was believed to be weak because of her 'womanly nature' and to gain spiritual strength only when she was fulfilling her duties of child-bearing, nurturing, and taking care of the family (Kavolis 1992: 28). The same image of weakness inherent in 'womanly nature' is created by describing a woman as being threatened by 'violence' and 'pressure':

A woman is presented as a safeguard of well-being of a family and nation

"The rhetoric of the right to choice, which is very popular today, in fact hides the reality of violence. Pressure put on a woman by other people is enormous. 64 per cent of American women who chose abortion did so under pressure from other people - parents, husbands, partners." (Obelenienė cited in Saukienė 2008a)

Furthermore, the image of female passivity is reinforced by proclaiming that women's political activism is wrong. The head of the National Association of Families and Parents says that "[s]ingle mothers whose relationship was unsuccessful are trying to make society believe that they are being discriminated against" (Ramonas, cited in BNS, 2008). "Making society believe" is active behaviour inappropriate on behalf of those whose "unsuccessful relationship" is their personal matter. Moreover, the arguments of pro-choice politically active women are constantly devalued as not serious by calling such women "hysterical feminists" (Dapšauskas, 2008). Because hysteria is usually perceived as a pathology of a woman's psyche and body (Foucault 1978), this epithet discards women's activism as irrational.

NARRATIVES WHICH DESCRIBE pro-choice organisations and activists as promoting unsafe sex, promiscuity, drug use, and even racism or as liaising with Western political groups (e.g. Dapšauskas, 2008a; Čyvas, 2008) suggest that active feminism and pro-choice politics are not only immoral but also inauthentic to the Lithuanian culture.

TO CONCLUDE, THE discourse analysed shows that the approach to regulating reproduction, family relations, and gender roles is still very traditional in Lithuanian politics. The image of a weak woman is reinforced by naturalisation of her passivity, accusation of immoral behaviour, and demonisation of feminism and pro-choice political activism. At the same time, a woman is presented as a safeguard of well-being of a family and the nation.

CONTEMPORANEITY VS. AUTHENTICITY

BEFORE I PROCEED with analysing discourse on the nation, some explanation of the concepts of ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘authenticity’ is necessary, since they are significant for the connection between images of a woman and the nation. Even though these two concepts are not antonyms of each other, I contrast the two in the title of this paragraph because this is how they are contrasted in the Lithuanian discourse on abortion and family values.

IF WE REFER to Bauman’s (1995) definition of modernity and postmodernity, it can be said that in Lithuanian public discourse the term ‘contemporaneity’ confuses the two. According to Bauman, modernity is the time of creation of fixed and durable identity, while in postmodernity it is liquid, i.e. unstable and undefined. Bauman (1995: 81) writes that “[t]he main identity-bound anxiety of modern times was the worry about durability; it is the concern with commitment-avoidance today”. The Lithuanian discourse on national and gender identity concerns both durability and commitment; the actors in this discourse often use such concepts as ‘modernness’ and ‘contemporaneity’ to refer to postmodernism, however, with the emphasis on negative connotations such as inauthenticity. Postmodernism is constructed as posing a threat to national and gender identities.

DEFENDERS OF TRADITIONAL values link ‘contemporaneity’ to alternative lifestyles and fluid sexuality. In their texts, ‘contemporary’ fluid identities are often associated with sexual minorities (Dapšauskas 2008c), unstable relationships like unmarried couples (Dapšauskas 2008b) and women leading excessive sex lives (Juknaitė 2008). A famous Lithuanian writer describes the contemporary consumer society as a civilization “where sex appeal is used as a method of mass control artificially promoted by all means available, where advertisements and magazines are full of naked and half-naked bodies and seducing overly erotic voices are offering products on TV” (ibid.). Here, the author emphasises artificiality of ‘excessive’ sexuality and reveals inauthenticity of contemporary culture.

MOREOVER, ‘CONTEMPORANEITY’ AND non-traditional lifestyles are portrayed as alien to national identity by claiming that they originate from outside Lithuania, either from the Soviet past or modern West. Consider, for instance, this excerpt: “In the post-communist Lithuania, the habits of Bolsheviks’ Russia have not changed since Stalin’s times: to do an abortion is just as easy as to drink a glass of water” (Aleknaitė

2008). More often, the alien culture is portrayed as having its origin in the West. In his article, Paulius Saudargas, an MP, accuses the opposition of having ties with sexual minorities and being susceptible to foreign influence. He writes that by campaigning against Lithuania's restrictive policies the opposition "is not solving social problems but giving tribute to a certain alien culture which has already penetrated our society, the culture of death imported together with the candies of the Western culture, the free world of the internet, and 'the flag of freedom' of MTV" (Saudargas 2008).

WESTERN 'CONTEMPORANEITY' IS constantly contrasted with Lithuanian 'authenticity'. This is achieved by several means. One of them is use of metaphors and hyperboles in order to create a repulsive image of Europe:

"Europe is threatening the entire world, the entire Christian world. [...] Europe is rotten, it is going to the dogs. Can we still look at Europe? I think we should follow God's word and call family our main value" (Gražulis, parliament's plenary session nr. 424, 2008).

The presence and proximity of "rotten Europe" calls for drawing a boundary between the authentic national self and fake others, between morality and decadence, between truth and forgery. The threatening discourse in the parliament, media and on the streets is aimed at reminding about the effort the country must take to preserve itself, since in Lithuania people "have more good sense than in other European countries where a bearded man can be called a mother" (Čepas, cited in Dapšauskas, 2008b). As a result of this discourse, 'the true' cultural essence of national collectivity is constructed.

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THE CONCEPT OF 'contemporaneity' is also eliminated from official documents. Because of its ambiguity and possibility of interpretation in terms of human rights, cosmopolitan values, and European law, the authors of the Family Concept were impelled to avoid this word in the text. During the parliamentary discussion of the Concept's text, it was proposed to include that "the Concept is based on historically developed *contemporary* family values". However, the response was that "values cannot be yesterday's, tomorrow's, or contemporary. They are eternal and developed through history" (Visockytė, Parliament plenary session nr. 424, 2008).

BY CLAIMING THAT values are eternal and developed through history, they are naturalised as authentic and self-evident. Deviation from these values is wrong and unimaginable. Such naturalisation, used by politicians in the debate on family and interests of the Lithuanian society, reinforces the salience of traditional values. The outside world in this discourse is portrayed as representing corrupt ‘contemporaneity’ which is blamed for the decline of the Lithuanian family, culture, and nation.

FAMILY AND NATION

AS I DISCUSSED earlier, a woman is portrayed as weak by demonstrating her submission to social pressure and normalisation of her passivity. Similarly, the image of a fragile nation is created by depicting ‘contemporaneity’ as a threat to its survival. In the narratives of defenders of traditional values, the Lithuanian nation itself is endowed with feminine features. In this chapter, I will present the results of a critical discourse analysis which focused on family and nation, as well as suggest some explanation for the political origins of this discourse.

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THE FIRST IMPORTANT observation is that ‘eternity’ of the nation is designated as the ultimate goal by political and religious authorities. The authors of the Family Policy Concept believe that the document proclaims the family to be a national value, since it is the “ultimate good for society [...] which guarantees the well-being of [its] members – men, women, children, and all – and healthy development of the society, survival and rejuvenation of the nation and the state” (Baškienė, cited in Bernardinai.lt, 2008). Because of its procreational functions, the family gains the status of the highest value in society. The image of a successful and happy family is often used as a metaphor for the nation and symbol of its prosperity.

WHEN DESCRIBING NINETEENTH-CENTURY Western Europe, George L. Mosse (1985: 20) argues that at the outset of the modern nation-state system, the family was “a cheap and efficient surrogate for the state, controlling passions at their source”. The early function of the family, aside from procreation, was to control bodies and sexuality. Since the Family Concept promotes marriage and makes it more respectable than unregistered partnership, the significance of the state in family life

is increasing. After the document's approval, a family would come into existence only after recognition by the state and/or church, as these two institutions can officially register marriage in Lithuania.

MOREOVER, THE FAMILY promotes a certain kind of (self)discipline among citizens. As Krafft-Ebing (cited in Mosse 1985: 11) states, "if the normally constituted civilized being was not capable of mastering his sexual urges as soon as they came into conflict with the demands of society, then family and state, the foundations of the legal and moral order, would cease to exist". Those who do not belong to a 'normal' heterosexual family are constantly accused of irresponsibility, immorality or even insanity.

THE ANALYSIS ALSO shows that the moral status of women in political narratives is associated with their ability and willingness to procreate and realise their sexuality in an acceptable way. In the context of the discussion on abortion and family values, women's bodies – which function as a mechanism for reproduction - are sometimes proclaimed to belong to the collective, as the following quotation from the parliament's plenary session suggests:

"First of all, I believe that women, who think that their body is their own business, are not right. The same body cannot have different blood type, different sex, different eye colour. It is already a different body. [...] If today at schools and universities they tell that your body is your personal business, what will the level of morality of our girls, our youth be?" (Tomaševskis, parliament's plenary session nr. 368, 2007)

THIS STATEMENT DEMONSTRATES how women become the "bearers of the collective" (Yuval-Davis 1997: 26) in a national project because of their biological capacity to reproduce children and citizens.

IN MANY CULTURES, women symbolise procreation, continuity, and longevity of the nation. A woman is the defender of her people: in the traditional role of a mother, she is "the custodian of tradition, who kept nostalgia alive in the active world of men" (Mosse 1985: 97). Despite her triviality and frivolity, a woman is the embodiment of order inside and outside the household, order which is necessary to keep the nation together. Mosse (1985) observes that in the eighteenth-century Germany, feminine national symbols meant the restoration of traditional Germanic morality, aimed at combating immoral French; thus, a woman symbolised the nation not yet corrupted by the modern age. Her weakness and tenderness were also constructed as the origin of her ability to care, nurture, and love unconditionally and to embody the virtues of commitment and sobriety.

THE LITHUANIAN NATIONAL symbol, Virgin Mary, is an example of a successful image of the nation. She is a very respected figure that embodies the ideals of responsibility, stability, and self-sacrifice. In the Lithuanian Christian tradition, as Kavolis (1992) writes, Virgin Mary is an intermediary between people and God and between nature and culture, reproducing culture through education of children. The informal name of Lithuania, the Land of Mary, is frequently used in literature, media, and political discourse to express patriotic love.

AS MENTIONED ALREADY, the texts analysed describe ‘contemporaneity’ as a threat, often in the context of the narrative of the nation in a crisis. For example, the Archbishop of Kaunas stated that if the Family Concept was not approved, the nation would face the danger of a breakdown and moral deadlock (Tamkevičius, cited in ELTA, 2008). The MP quoted before, Paulius Saudargas, writes that the family is the “life-giving cell of society, close to us and protected for many years, while the new winds of modernity are not always winds of freedom and progress” (Saudargas, 2008). It suggests that the family, protected by the government – ‘protected’ in this context means regulated, i.e. registered officially as a marriage, – is able to safeguard the continuity of the nation.

ONE OF THE advocates of traditional family values, after describing the vices of the modern world, asks the reader: “Doesn’t Lithuania need to regulate consumer instincts in order to achieve emancipation from selfishness and pursuit of personal enrichment at the expense of fellow citizens?” (Vaitoška, 2008). His article suggests that only one answer is possible. The narratives of threat and nation’s fragility try to persuade that for the well-being of the nation, restrictions on ‘contemporaneity’ and anti-social behaviour are needed. Such narratives are nothing new: the lives of citizens, their sexuality and relationships have always existed within the boundaries of morally acceptable conduct. Age of consent is just one example of this; promoting marriage and banning abortion are the two other expressions of restrictive policy which is presented as a means to “help society to mature in the moral sense” and “promote responsible motherhood and fatherhood” (Baškienė, parliament’s plenary session nr. 424, 2008). As Mosse (1985: 9) writes, through the defence of the legal and symbolic meaning of a complete heterosexual family, men and women are reaching out to grasp a “slice of eternity” embodied in the nation.

MORALITY AND TRADITIONAL values are often associated with the authentic Lithuanian culture which has roots in the Lithuanian history. The advice to “go to the countryside where any old lady will tell you what

a real family is” (Gražulis, parliament’s plenary session nr. 336, 2007) demonstrates that the ‘true’ values are found in parts of the nation which preserve collective wisdom and cultural identity. The claim that wisdom and morality of a people come from their culture and tradition show how traditionalism serves the collective imagination of the nation. When Hobsbawm (1983: 266) writes about the invention of national traditions, he claims that “the traditionalism of peasants was constantly praised by nineteenth-century conservatives as the ideal model of the subject’s political comportment”. The same traditionalism is being praised in today’s Lithuania. The search for values which are deeply rooted in culture, for religion and national identity, helps to legitimate the policies rejecting postmodernity and re-establishing regulation of private lives of citizens.

WOMEN ARE ALWAYS imagined at the border between ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘authenticity’. Referring to the work of Partha Chatterjee on the nationalism and “the women’s question” in India, Radhakrishnan (1992) states the following:

“By mobilizing the inner/outer distinction against the “outerness” of the West, nationalist rhetoric makes “woman” the pure and ahistorical signifier of “interiority”. In the fight against the enemy from the outside, something within gets even more repressed and “woman” becomes the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history.” (Radhakrishnan 1992: 84)

THIS IS VERY visible in the Lithuanian public discourse, where the Lithuanian nation and its women are imagined to be damaged by the immoral foreign influence. Its national identity and cultural authenticity are in danger of being contaminated by the West with its values of individualism, relativism, hedonism, unstable pluralism and needlessly liberal democracy (Heng and Devan 1992: 351).

AS A RESPONSE to the challenges of ‘contemporaneity’ and deculturalising, demoralising and destabilising influence of the ‘progressive’ West, the state uses subtle means to re-establish patriarchal order and legitimise restrictions and governance of bodies. Political discussions on abortion, sexuality and relationships serve as an arena for contesting national ideals, consolidation and sometimes challenging of the state’s control of the nation.

THUS, THE RESULTS of the discourse analysis on family and nation show that the nation is often imagined as traditionally feminine - loving, procreating, and fragile. The narrative of cultural authenticity is important for both women and the nation: the ‘true’ values are described as

safeguarded and reproduced by women in families. Because of the threat of ambiguous and unstable ‘contemporaneity’, the government pushes for restrictive measures in order to protect identity and continuity of the nation. The claim that Lithuanian values are “eternal and developed through history” (and thus cannot be modern, chosen or changed) justifies such restrictive policies and allows the state to interfere in private affairs of its citizens. Presenting the Lithuanian nation as conservative and religious unites the imagined community and thus helps to legitimise state’s control in the face of aggressive ‘contemporaneity’.

CONCLUSION

THE GOAL OF this article was to explore the interrelation between images of the nation and women in the Lithuanian public discourse. The analysis shows that in the parliament and media we indeed find a tendency to endow the nation with features of a weak woman in need of patriarchal

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protection. In the discussions on abortion and family policy, moral decline, immorality of the modern world, and fragility of women are the most popular narratives, serving as grounds for restrictive policies. Blaming women for the disappearance of ‘authentic’ Lithuanian culture creates hostile cultural climate and legitimises strong rule of the government. This tendency is not restricted to Lithuania but appears time and again in different historical periods and places, whenever the nation is seeking

to reassure its identity, and the government is looking for means to consolidate its power. Debates on the issues of reproduction, sexual lifestyle, and gender roles serve as arenas for re-establishing of the essential connection between the nation, government, history, and culture.

HOWEVER, WHENEVER NEW narratives of moral crisis and threat to the nation emerge, nothing is really *re*-established. Understanding of national self and the other, images of ‘contemporaneity’ employed in public discourse, portrayals of woman and nation are never the same. Every time traditional values are defended, their boundaries are questioned and changed. Despite the success of abortion ban and devaluation of unmarried partnerships, new images of woman and nation are created in political struggle. In this process, the image of a strong independent woman defending her rights and of the nation able and willing to be part of the international community once again have a chance to establish themselves as dominant narratives in the public discourse.

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