Nationality and sexuality: homophobic political discourse and the ‘national threat’ in post-Soviet Latvia

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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 de-criminalised by the Latvian Saeima in 1992 but on the understanding that gays and lesbians would remain out of sight. 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 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 and was required to transpose 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). 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 Administrative 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 demonstrated 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. The EU average was 44%.
The aim of this article is thus to understand why attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Latvia are worse than in all other EU member states. While acknowledging that intolerance towards non-heteronormative sexuality cannot be explained with reference to 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 it. I shall begin by analysing the influence of religion, the legacy of communist discourse on homosexuality and post-91 reactions against 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 Latvian antipathy to sexual minorities, I will analyse Latvian political discourse to show that homosexuality has been successfully naturalised as the negation of Latvian
national identity, othering homosexuality 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. 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 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). 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 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.
Yet how influential is the Church’s teaching on individuals’ attitudes towards homosexuality? Building on earlier research by Allport and Ross (1967), Kirkpatrick (1949) and Stouffer (1955) which 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, 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, i.e. there is a strong correlation 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 and that Christians are more likely to believe what 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), p. 241).
However, this does not explain why, according to the Eurobarometer survey 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). Moreover, Latvians are predominantly Lutheran. In Europe at least, the Lutheran Church is one of the most progressive denominations with regard to support for gay rights, with many Scandinavian Lutheran Churches appointing gay clergy and blessing same-sex marriages. While the impact of religion on attitudes towards homosexuality should not be underestimated, I will argue later in the article that attitudes towards homosexuality in Latvia are conditioned not by religion per se but rather by discourses of religion in national identity narratives, constructed to legitimise a particular understanding of political community.

Legacy of communism
As all bar one of the former communist member-states of the European Union fall below the EU average with reference to support for gay rights, the impact of communist ideology and the communist regime 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: p. 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 USSR, although attitudes became increasingly intolerant due to the changing nature of Party elites, as intellectuals and urban Marxists were replaced by peasants, 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: p. 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’ (ibid.) and a vestige of imperial decadence. 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: p. 71). Lesbianism was considered particularly heinous. While men could be excused for not controlling their sexual urges – in whatever direction – lesbians 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, any women putting her sexual inter-
ests before the interests of her family was considered 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, who were used to being told what to believe by the communist 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 the eight 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 among the former communist states. 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 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.

*Reaction against communism*

The final explanatory factors I wish to examine before turning to the influence of national identity relate to the reaction against communism in the period of transition in Latvia and the influence of the dominant political culture that emerged
as a result. The reaction against communism took a number of forms: retradi-
tionalisation, the return to normality and fear of instability. In rejecting their So-
viet past and adopting a ‘restored’ model of statehood, Latvians sought to pick up where they left off in 1940, harking back to the pre-communist period, to the ‘golden age’ of the 1920s and 1930s and its traditional values and norms (see Smith, Aasland and Mole, 1993). As this period was considered the opposite of the abnormal Soviet experience, ‘traditional’ thus became equated with ‘normal,’ with traditional gender roles seen as ‘an important aspect of the nostalgia for ‘normality’’ (Watson, 1993, 472-3). However, the ‘norm’ in Latvia has been strictly defined in national, Christian and heterosexual terms. Homosexuality confuses and threatens this traditional gender order. While ‘abnormal’ activity could be tolerated in private, the appearance of gays and lesbians in the public space is interpreted as a direct attack on the ‘norm’ rather than the right to free assembly in a democratic space. Furthermore, the collapse of state socialism triggered massive social, economic and political upheaval and in the context of massive change ‘cultural diversity seems threatening’ (Inglehart & Baker, 1990, p. 28). Anything unfamiliar, such as homosexuality, is seen as a threat to stabili-
ty. Individuals thus ‘cling to traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and em-
phasize absolute rules and familiar norms in an attempt to maximize predictabil-
ity in an uncertain world.’ (ibid.)

EE Political culture + democratic paradox

Democratic paradox
Some politicians in Central and Eastern Europe have a completely different understanding of concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ compared with their counterparts in the West and as defined in their international commitments. Democracy is often understood simply to mean ‘rule of the majority’, which frees politicians from the need to take account of the rights of minority groups. The claim 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.

To understand why an issue of personal morality became such a political issue in Latvia, we need to examine the very 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 have comprised parties of the right and/or centre-right. No democratic state in Europe has been ruled by governments of the same ideological hue for such a long period of time. To understand why this matters, we need to examine Chantal Mouffe’s concept of the ‘democratic paradox’ (2000). Mouffe 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. (2005, 30)
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. While the absence of adversarial confrontation helps us understand why issues of morality become political issues, this does not explain why gay rights were the focus of political attack rather than, say, the large number of strip clubs that has opened in Riga since the mid-1990s. To understand this, we must, I argue, examine the relationship between (homo)sexuality and nationality.

**Nationality/sexuality**

Nationality and sexuality are both social constructs. While most nationalists 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 homosexual desire is biologically driven, homosexuality as a social category is also constructed. Rejecting Freudian, Marxist and socio-biological explanations of sexuality as insufficient, I support the political sociological view that sexual categories and the meanings assigned to them are constructed by social institutions such as the Church, the family and secular institutions, the latter including parliaments but also the law and, in particular, medicine. Institutions such as these ‘produce and/or reproduce ideologies and norms, which define social expecta-
tions’ 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.

I argue that politicians have sanctioned discrimination against gays and lesbians as a means to counter the perceived threat to their nation resulting from 50 years of Soviet control. In other words, they sought to other homosexuality as a means to fix a desired conceptualisation of national identity by naturalising a construction of homosexuality as the negation of said identity. There is, of course, no a priori relationship between nationality and sexuality. The relationship between categories and the meanings ascribed to them is culturally and historically contingent. As Jeffrey 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 the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, are highly 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 meanings ascribed to homosexuality that holds across space and time. Granting certain meanings a dominant position and excluding others can only be achieved through the establishment of a specific hegemonic discourse which ‘constitutes and organises social relations around a particular structure of meanings,’ thereby creating legitimate moral leadership and a social hierarchy (Doty, 1996, p. 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 Chantal 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, p. 15). 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 the existence of the discourse if it is to unify the discursive field and partially stabilise its meanings and identities. While never fully hegemonic and always contested, specific discourses on sexuality are thus produced to legitimate particular truth-regimes. In this context, homosexuality is constructed as the constitutive outside of the Latvian nation.

With regard to the relationship between sexuality and national identity, the focus on the biological reproduction of the nation presupposes the sexing of the nation as heterosexual. In his seminal work on nationalism and sexuality, George Mosse argues that ‘the 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 which involved notions of respectability and appropriate sexual behaviour’ (in Charles and Hintjens, 1998: p. 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 is thought to undermine the ‘male bonding’ required to forge the nation and defend it militarily, while homosexuals are also perceived as not possessing 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 effeminate and lesbians as strong and butch confuses the patriarchal gender order and the public/private roles of men and women central to most ethno-national discourses, while at the same time transgressing group norms on appropriate sexual behaviour. Furthermore, the perceived inability of gays and lesbians to reproduce is seen 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’. Nations which seek 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. Patriarchal gender order and rules on sexuality 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. Stressing the heterosexuality of the nation also allows nationalists to establish continuity -- through kinship ties -- between the pre- and post-communist periods of their history.

In several respects, men own the nation. The view that it was constructed by men for men is supported by the main theories of nationalism. Gellner’s theory that the nation is a product of industrialisation and modernity automatically associates it with activities typically regarded as masculine at the time: industry and labour (1996). Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ came into being as a result of print-capitalism, also dominated by men. Brubaker's assertion that national identity is the product of public discourses implicitly gives men a more prominent role in its construction in that they dominated public life (1999).
Other commentators argue not only that men created the nation but they also continue to enjoy more active membership of it today. Women are designated roles as ‘the symbols of the nation, while men are its agents’ (Lutz, Phoenix and Yuval-Davis, 1995, 9). This is apparent in several ways. Firstly, the nation is often feminised: it is referred to as ‘the motherland’, adorned with metaphors of fertility, such as the ‘birth of the nation’, and is deemed vulnerable and in need of protection, like the women in a typical patriarchal society (Mayer, 1995, 1-2; Zarkov, 1995, 113). Secondly, women are regarded as the future of the nation because they give birth to subsequent generations. And, thirdly, women play a key cultural role: they are often regarded as the cultural boundary-markers of the group, embodying its traditions and enacting behavioural norms and reflecting the nation's core values (Yuval-Davis, 1997, 23). Women therefore symbolise the nation and what it stands for. However, women's symbolic status offers them little opportunity to actively participate in the creation or preservation of the nation. In contrast, men are the nation's actors. They are viewed as its protectors and they fight wars to defend the 'women and children' who symbolise the nation's future. Furthermore, nationalist rhetoric, evoking the values of honour, valour and courage to inspire action in the name of the nation, appeals primarily to typically masculine virtues such as 'willpower, honour, courage' (Nagel, 1998, 245). As men can defend the nation's honour by defending its women, an extension of this logic suggests that male control over women can be justified by the protection of the nation. If women embody the nation’s cultural norms, then prescribing and monitoring their dress and behaviour can preserve national traditions from within.
With regard to sexuality, the focus on the biological reproduction of the nation presupposes the sexing of the nation as heterosexual. In his seminal work on nationalism and sexuality, George Mosse argues that ‘the nationalist ideologies which emerged 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 which involved notions of respectability and appropriate sexual behaviour’ (cited in Charles & Hintjens, 1998, 2). Heterosexuality thus became a taken-for-granted attribute of the nation and a dominant group norm, against which actions and beliefs were judged. Behaviour contravening group norms is deemed not just alien but threatening. The perception of gay men as weak and effeminate and lesbians as strong and butch confuses the patriarchal gender order and the public/private roles of men and women central to most ethno-national discourses, while at the same time transgressing group norms on appropriate sexual behaviour. Furthermore, the perceived inability of gays and lesbians to reproduce is seen as a threat to the continued existence of the nation, a view taken to extremes last year by Poland’s President Lech Kaczynski, who argued that ‘widespread homosexuality would lead to the disappearance of the human race’. Nations which seek 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. As we shall see when examining the Latvian case, the patriarchal gender order and rules on sexuality 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.
Latvia

Latvian national discourse that has developed from the period of national awakening thus emphasises the idea of the nation-as-family, clear gender roles in a patriarchal system and cultural and ethnic reproduction through women. While not explicitly anti-gay, the heterosexuality of the nation is taken for granted. After 50 years of Soviet occupation, however, this conceptualisation of Latvian-ness was under threat. The nation-as-family and its traditional gender roles were distorted and the centrality of ethnicity was undermined by the presence of hundred of thousands of Russian-speaking, Soviet-era immigrants. To counter this threat, politicians sought to exclude phenomena that would undermine the nation-as-family, clear gender roles in a patriarchal system and cultural and ethnic reproduction through women.

In dealing with the legacy of the Soviet past, politicians in post-communist Latvia thus emphasised the role of the nation-family and traditional gender roles and sexual norms as a means of ensuring the continued existence of the Latvian nation, masking the rupture between inter-war and post-communist Latvia and creating stability and continuity in times of uncertainty and social and political change. In the cultural and historical context of post-communist Latvia, anything perceived to be ‘non-traditional’ and thus ‘abnormal’ was seen not just as alien but as a threat to the continued existence of the Latvian nation in its desired ethnic form, and, as a result, ‘successive mainstream political parties, to sustain political promises of social stability, certainty and order in a post-Soviet context, have always heterosexed the nation’ and sought to present homosexuality as un-Latvian (Waitt, 2005, 177).
To facilitate this goal, politicians have constructed twin discourses of ‘Latvian nationality’ and ‘homosexuality’, with the latter presented as threatening the existence of the former so as to unify its discursive field and partially stabilise its meanings and identities. Homosexuality is thus constructed as the constitutive outside of the Latvian nation. Drawing on Latvian and UK media sources and from the ‘Database of Quotes on Homophobic Speech in Latvia’ created by Mozaika, an alliance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Persons and their Friends in Latvia, the following section sets out the main themes uniting the discursive field of ‘homosexuality’ and thereby constructing the constitutive outside of the ‘Latvian nationality’ discourse.

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→ under threat/at risk  → threat/disease

Normal and traditional/abnormal

- “We Latvians are used to living in accordance with our normal principles of morality and this pathology should not be written into law. We have already
gone too far in letting this, if we can call it that, flea into our coat.” Pēteris Tabūns, Official Record of Parliament (ORP)

- [A public gay and lesbian parade offends Christians] “because an abnormality is being proclaimed as a normal occurrence.” Ainārs Baštiks, former and current Minister for Children’s and Family Affairs, Rīgas Balss

- [Referring to homosexuals] “And these are not simply different thinkers – they are different because they are abnormally oriented. And you see, seriously psychologically ill people get taken to Aptiekas Street. And it is a pity that some kind of clinic has not been invented, where these people could also be medically treated a little bit, then there would be significantly fewer of them. But we haven’t come that far yet, but maybe in the future we will.” Pēteris Tabūns, ORP

- Janis Smits calls on gay people to be ‘healed by God and recover normal sexual orientation’.¹¹

Family/anti-family

- “Defenders of same-sex marriage are trying to put in the centre of attention the issue of equal rights for adults, neglecting children’s rights and, as a consequence, the interests of the state. 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 Šlesere, ORP

- “If there are no families, there will be no descendants, there will be nothing. In the world there exist various interpretations about marriage ... But in our understanding, which is based on Christian values, marriage is created as a union of man and woman followed by creation of children. God, when he cre-
ated people, also said be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Janis Smits, Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze

- [With reference to Riga Pride] “[F]amily rights are threatened – 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.” Ainārs Baštiks, former and current Minister for Children’s and Family Affairs, Rīgas Balss

- “I believe that the provisions of law allow the local government to take a justified decision to prohibit the organising of such a march, because 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 Ladvigs, Riga City Council deputy, Chas

**Religious/irreligious**

- “We are a state based on Christian values and we cannot advertise, let’s say, things that are unacceptable to a large part of society.” Aigars Kalvītis, Prime Minister, Latvijas Avīze

- Prime Minister Kalvītis: ‘for sexual minorities to parade in the very heart of Riga, next to the Dome Church, is unacceptable’.

- “Anyone can go along with the socialists, communists, Brussels, the Kremlin, the UN, homosexuals [sic], Soros, foreigners and support their values. I
choose Latvia, Latgale [eastern region], the Christian faith, our traditions and morality.” Ināra Ostrovska, Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze

- “Lord, protect Latvia from the sins of sodomy and unholliness!” Janis Smits, ORP

Sovereign/undermining sovereignty

- “We must 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 homosexualists [sic].” Janis Smits, ORP
- We, members of the 9th Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, denounce the attacks by the homosexual group of European Parliament members who are trying to limit our freedom of speech and our religious convictions.’ 6 MPs
- ‘Stop 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.’ Card. Pujats

Threat

- “For this reason I would recommend that every deputy who votes in favour of the legalisation of homosexuality 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.” Janis Smits, ORP
- “You must understand that we don’t want to repress anyone. But we also cannot silently look at what is happening today. We already have a demographic crisis but now we also have homosexual propaganda!” Ainars Slesers, Vesti Segodņa.
• “I invite all Christians who are here, in the hall of Parliament, to understand their responsibility. If you vote for the legalisation of homosexuality, then, please, go to church and openly repent for what you have done, because it will no longer be possible to halt this plague that you have let loose in our society.” Jānis Šmits, ORP

• [Gays] are ‘moral and physical cripples’. Peteris Tabuns

**Gender and sexuality in Latvian national identity**

I would now like to look at the gendering and sexing of Latvian identity in various stages in the nation’s history to highlight the central role of the patriarchal gender order and its implied heterosexuality in conceptualisations of Latvian-ness. The national awakening took place at a time when the Latvian territories were constituent parts of the Russian Empire and were controlled at the local level by German landowners. Ieva Zake (2008) argues that, rather than seeking independence, the main aims of the nationalists at this time were to harden ethnic boundaries so as to avoid cultural assimilation by the Germans and Russians. As mothers and cultural reproducers, women were expected to play the key role in this, performing traditional gender roles and cultural practices as a means of ‘establishing markers of difference in the family and for the nation’ (Novikova, 2000, 330). This presupposed a specific gender order based on the patriarchal family, which came to be seen as the main unit of and metaphor for the Latvian nation. Given the focus on biological reproduction of the nation, the heterosexual nature of the Latvian nation-family was taken for granted.
When Latvia became an independent state 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). As a result, the ‘emerging masculine subject of the new nation contracted women into the realm of the collective symbolic.’ (ibid.) For an illuminating example of this, we need look no further than Riga’s most famous landmark, the Freedom Monument, completed in 1935. To nationalists this monument is the nation. At the top of the monument Latvia is depicted as a woman, holding three stars, representing the regions of Kurzeme, Latgale and Vidzeme. Feminised Latvia enjoys the protection of (male) soldiers at all times. The non-symbolic representations of the nation can be found at the base of the monument, where two reliefs depict important battles in the nation’s history fought by men: the 1905 uprising and the battle against the Bermontians on the Iron Bridge during the war of independence. Here we can clearly see that women are seen as symbols of the motherland, while men offer protection and are the agents in the nation’s independence.13

Following the annexation of Latvia by the USSR in 1940, Latvians were 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. The traditional Latvian nation-family was subsequently distorted in that the regime sought to liberate women from their private burden by transferring domestic functions, such as childcare, from the private to the public sphere, while at the same time assuming responsibility for the fulfilment of the traditional masculine roles of father and provider by safeguarding women’s role as mothers but ensuring them access to paid work (Ashwin, 2000). While families
did remain the primary units of society, the communist experience resulted in what Latvians saw as 'the distortion of social relations between men and women’ in that the public and private gender roles central to the nation-family were confused (Latvia Human Development Report 1995, p. 37). While the traditional Latvian family was under threat as a result of the Soviet experience, so too was the Latvian nation following the mass inward migration of hundreds of thousands of Russian-speakers as a result of Stalinist nationality policy.

To Latvians, the Soviet experience was seen as abnormal 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,’ with ‘a traditionally prescribed gender identity … an important aspect of the nostalgia for ‘normality’” (Watson, 1993, 472-3). The normalisation of the return to the patriarchal gender order was clear in the 1995 Latvia Human Development Report, for example. Prepared jointly with the UN 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) Furthermore, the traditional nation-family also allowed ‘the ruptures between pre- and post-communist Lat-
via to be masked’ in that continuity could be established through kinship ties be-
tween Latvians of the First Republic and Latvians of the post-Soviet state (Waitt,
2005, 167). Furthermore, as was the case during the National Awakening, dis-
courses of the family helped mark the boundary of the ethno-cultural community
in the face of the perceived threat of national extinction from Russian-speakers.
And as this discourse enabled nationalists ‘to denote the nation as something to
which one was ‘naturally’ tied through the past and maintained into the future,’
it legitimising the exclusion of Russians from both the national collective and –
following 1994 Law on Citizenship, which stipulated that only descendents of
citizens of the inter-war republic were entitled to automatic citizenship – from
the body politic (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 legitimacy among broad sectors
of the populations.’ (Stukuls, 1999, 541)

In dealing with the legacy of the Soviet past, then, politicians in post-communist
Latvia emphasised the role of the nation-family and traditional gender and sex-
ual norms as a means of ensuring the continued existence of the Latvian nation,
masking the rupture between the inter-war and post-communist Latvian states
and creating stability and continuity in times of uncertainty and social and politi-
cal change. As Inglehart and Baker explain, this is not uncommon: ‘When sur-
vival is uncertain, cultural diversity seems threatening. ... People cling to tradi-
tional gender roles and sexual norms, and emphasize absolute rules and familiar
norms in an attempt to maximize predictability in an uncertain world.’ (1990,
28) In the cultural and historical context of post-communist Latvia, therefore,
anything perceived to be ‘non-traditional’ and thus ‘abnormal’ was seen not just
as alien but as a threat to the continued existence of the Latvian nation in its desired ethnic form and, as a result, ‘successive mainstream political parties, to sustain political promises of social stability, certainty and order in a post-Soviet context, have always heterosexed the nation’ and sought to present homosexuality as un-Latvian (Waitt, 2005, 177).
Bibliography

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Endnotes

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 parlia-
3. The result was slightly lower in Romania but this country was not yet a member of the EU.
Internationalist, no. 201
5. As Boswell (1980) demonstrates, however, the Christian Church’s attitude towards homosexuality was not
always as intolerant.
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. The normalisation of the return to the patriarchal gender order was clear in the 1995 Latvia Human Devel-
opment Report, for example. Prepared jointly with the UN 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)
8. Indeed, historians of sexuality argue that it was the spread of modern medicine and Freudian psycho-
analysis 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.
11. ‘Human rights chairman defends homophobic stance’, Baltic Times, 06.12.2006 (last accessed:
23.06.2008)
13. The gender bias is also represented in the fact that of the 129 monuments and statues in Riga dedicated
to famous Latvians, only 8 are of women. Of these eight, five are simply wall plaques rather than statues.