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## Queer as Alla:

Subversion and/or re-affirmation of the homophobic nationalist discourse of normality in post-Soviet Vilnius

**IF YOU ARE** non-heterosexual and you live in Vilnius, then gay-friendly options for going out are pretty limited for you. You would probably end up in the same place each weekend – a little underground gay club, called *Soho*. While for the gay community it is a well-known place to have drinks, to dance and to flirt, those who do not clearly identify as lesbian, gay, bi or trans usually have never even heard about this place. And those who do hear about it tend to imagine it as a place "outside" the boundaries of normality and morality, a place for those who live on the margins of society, delimited according to the axis of sexuality, or, to put it in a coarse language – a "nest of whores" (Tereškinas 2004, 32).

Although the times of the totalitarian Communist regime are gone since more than twenty years, the strict boundaries between what is normal and what is not, persist and in some cases have become even more rigid (Stukuls 1999, 537). The high level of societal homophobia,<sup>1</sup> encouraged by nationalist discourse is a perfect example of this boundary control. Although LGBT organisations present visibility and openness of non-heteronormative sexualities

as their main goal, it does not change the situation, where the majority of gays are "in the closet" (Atviri.lt 2012a). Homophobia and secrecy are also widespread in the gay community and it is obviously manifest in *Sobo*. Queerness<sup>2</sup> here does not dare to speak its name, but it "knows its place," which is always separated from the normal, always in the position of the abject. There is no name of the club at the entrance, not to mention a rainbow flag, only bright red fluorescence lights, low frequency dance beat and the stairs leading down to the basement.

As the flyer at the door says, in English, tonight is a special night in *Sobo* – it's *Alla's B-day party*. After midnight a stout and rough bouncer, who meets everyone at the entrance of the club, comes up on the stage dressed as Alla Pugacheva. At least this is the message of his fancy dress, a wig of wild blond hair and glaring make-up. If you come from Eastern Europe or Russia, no matter if you are straight or gay, you don't need any explanation of who Alla is. This extremely famous Russian singer and pop icon was, and still is, adored by millions, for almost 40 years now. In the times of Soviet oppression she was the voice who appealed to the masses, expressed the *true* feelings and was "allowed to break ideological taboos" by mocking the existing regime (Partan 2007, 487). However, tonight, here in *Sobo*, it is *Alla* who is mocked. Those who are perceived by the society as "whores" as their "perverse" masculinity is a threat to the nation, family and "normal" men and women (Tereškinas 2007, 164), those who are said to be breaking taboos and societal norms with their hedonism, perversity and effeminacy (Blagojevic 2011, 35) are enjoying a mimetic impersonation of Alla – the symbol of exaggerated femininity from the Soviet times.

What lessons can this figure of *Alla in Soho*, a figure situated between East and West, between the memory of the Soviet past and the hopes of a better Western future, between the strict definitions of femininity and masculinity, give us in the context of the nationalist, homophobic discourse, which seems to overwhelm the post-Soviet era with its desire to preserve boundaries and distinctions between what is normal, and what is not, along the lines of the axis of sexuality, ethnicity and geopolitics in Lithuania? Can we read *Alla* as a great parody and subversion of the norms of gender, sexuality, culture, the reworking of the traumatic (post-)Soviet past, which haunts nationalist imagery in times of independence? Does it really manage to renegotiate the cultural memory and stigma, or rather, by laughing at itself, reproduce the boundaries setting itself apart? Instead of subverting, maybe it only reaffirms the place of the queer abject "outside" normality? Or does it do *both* things at the same time?

In order to touch upon these questions I employ two main concepts: first, the *abject*, elaborated by Julia Kristeva, as "the something," which has to be expelled as a foundational possibility for the "self" to be created, the primary abjection of "the ambiguous, in-between, composite" (1982, 4); which has to be abjected for the strict boundaries of the individual or collective identity to maintain, to ensure normality. Second, the concept of *drag* as formulated by Judith Butler, as that, which "reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (1990, 187), but however, does not necessarily subvert (hetero)normativity, but can also reaffirm it, which is, at best, "a site of certain ambivalence" (Butler 1993, 85). Following the figure of *Alla in Soho* which seems to embody perfectly the abject, the figure on the margins, the ambiguity of gender and culture, I will first dive into the homophobic nationalist discourse of normality in contemporary Lithuania, and then ask about the subversive possibilities of post-Soviet drag.



### Queer as the abject: Homophobia inside out

In the societal *imagery* of post-Soviet societies<sup>3</sup> those who are perceived as sexually different (and homosexuality often stands as exemplary), who are queer, occupy the place of the *abject*, as it was described by Julia Kristeva.<sup>4</sup> Abject for Kristeva is "the 'object' of the primal repression", which is precisely an emergence of the "speaking being, always already haunted by the Other" (1982, 12). In Kristeva's thought the abject is that, which has to be excluded in order for the *subject* to emerge, and a subject is that, which always has this abjection as an inherent feature, as a foundational loss. Iris Marion Young uses Kristeva's concept of the abject to understand societal discrimination, derogatory attitudes and behaviour towards those, who do not occupy a hegemonic subject position, e.g. non-white people, non-heterosexual, differently able bodies or elderly (1990, 210). Young argues that "the habitual and unconscious fears and aversions that continue the perception of some groups as despised and ugly bodies at least partly arise from anxieties over loss of identity" (202). In her own way, Butler uses Young and Kristeva in the explanation of the dynamics of homophobia in the context of an outburst of AIDS in the US, as a repulsion and expulsion of "others"

for the purposes of social regulation and control. "The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer and this excreting function becomes as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit." (1993,182) The vulgar word, here employed by Butler, quite accurately reflects the impossibility to find a "proper" word to name "that something," which was described by Kristeva as the abject.

When society is guided by the principal of abjection, rather than acknowledgment and inclusion of Other, the very *thought* of "the something," which exceeds the boundaries of normality (in the case which is analysed in this article, the supposedly normal gender and/or sexuality) is extremely threatening, even physically repulsive, disgusting, sickening. Therefore this "something" never actually becomes an *object* of thought, neither occupies a *subject* position. In the case of the Lithuanian society, queerness is definitely this unthinkable "something" (Atviri.lt 2012b). Banal statistics can partially approve this claim – around 70% of Lithuanian respondents *say* that they don't *know* gay people (Sprinter tyrimai 2010), that is, they are not objects in their everyday knowledge. Accordingly, around half of those, identified as gay would never *say* that they are non-heterosexual even to their family, not to mention in more public environments. Therefore they do not occupy the subject position as queer. Any attempt to make queers visible, heard, to *name* them, is followed by the chorus of voices, shaming queers for "demonstrating" their desires, requiring attention, having nothing to be proud of except "who they are sleeping with." For example, before the first Gay Pride in 2010, the first ever open LGBT event in Lithuania, a huge outburst of hom-

ophobic statements filled the media and the public sphere. The head of the Parliament, Irena Degutienė, told journalists that the “glorification of the culture of sexual pleasures and hedonism” is not appealing to her, and she encouraged people simply “do not go and do not watch” the Pride. “Every one of us has a so called sexual orientation and we don’t necessarily have to *demonstrate* it”, she said (BNS 2010). Another example is a statement by the contemporary Mayor of Vilnius, Juozas Imbrasas, who several times prevented educational and political events of LGBT people and even prohibited the hoisting up of a rainbow flag. He stated that “homosexuals can hold their events in closed spaces,” but not in an open-air (Delfi 2008). These examples show how queers are discursively put in a position of abject – not radically excluded, but, however, still too disgusting to be public.

Interestingly, the only openly-gay member of the Parliament, a member of the highly conservative and even homophobic party *Homeland union – Lithuanian conservatives*, Rokas Žilinskas, joined the chorus of voices, shaming gays for demonstrating their sexuality. During the Lithuanian TV show *Be Grimo*, on February 4, 2010, he claimed to be absolutely satisfied with “enjoying his homosexuality at home,” and not to see the purpose of “*demonstrating* with whom he is sleeping with” and therefore not supporting the idea of the Pride (in this way perpetuating the idea of the Pride as an event of excessive “demonstration of sexuality”). Although he is one of only a few “open” homosexuals, his position radically differs from the official stance of the Lithuanian LGBT organisations, which organised the Pride in order to get more visibility. However, this position seems to work as a strategy, which helps him to find a position even within his own homophobic party and, therefore, also within the wider society. In the meanwhile, the politics of visibility declared by

the LGBT organisations as one of the main goals to gain societal inclusion,<sup>5</sup> faces, on the contrary, hostility in society. Notably it is not celebrated by the majority of LGBT people in Lithuania either, as most of the attempts by the few activists to gain visibility are often criticized by those queers who prefer to stay in the closet.<sup>6</sup> Discursive production of queer as an abject is therefore characteristic not only of the nationalist hetero-patriarchal hegemonic discourse, but also of LGBT people, who do not necessarily take a critical stance on this discourse.

The specificity of the situation in the Lithuanian society must be understood in the wider post-Soviet context. Brian James Baer in his analysis of Russian post-Soviet literature claims that Russian gays sometimes express a certain nostalgia for the era of totalitarianism, when homosexuality was not at all a question of public discussion and therefore gays did not had to face the dilemma of coming out (2005, 24). Baer claims that the situation, when, on the one hand, most gays and lesbians are in the closet, while, on the other hand, (homo)sexuality itself is a highly popular topic in the media and the entertainment industry, creates a paradox of an open secret. "Like the Aesopian political references in Soviet literature, homosexuality in post-Soviet culture is only partially concealed and always vulnerable to exposure", he says (25). Baer shows how a popular post-Soviet Russian genre of literature, detective stories, often includes an aspect of homosexuality as a "dirty" secret (40). Homosexuality is represented as a "hidden truth" about male characters, which can be exposed at any time and this exposure then would lead to loss, change and the unknown. What is one of the most frightening aspects of this figure, is that it is perceived not only as an Other, which is hiding among the normal subjects of society, but also, as an Other *within* the subject itself.

Therefore, the figure of the *homosexual* itself becomes a symbol, an embodiment of "the breakdown of the social order" and the moral decadence (28).

Baer's literary analysis can help to interpret the public nationalist, heteronormative discourse in contemporary Lithuania. In the situation of the secrecy around queerness, which is partly sustained by LGBT peoples' hesitancy to speak about their sexuality, nationalist discourse produces elaborated imaginations and even intricate mythologies around the queer. The goal of this discourse is to retain queer in the position of object at the same time producing an image of the unified and solid national-sexual "self."

### **The abject and the nationalist imagery of self**

In the case of Lithuania, where homosexuals are told, and they tend to believe themselves, that their sexuality is something inappropriate and not to be talked about, the figure of the homosexual is widely employed in the nationalist discourse, characteristic of post-Soviet societies (Stukuls 1999; Tismaneanu 2003; Kubica 2007; Mizielinska 2011). Nationalist imagery produces its abjects in the process of creating the image of the purified national self. This self supposedly consists of, and is maintained by, the "traditional family" (Verdery 1996, 79), "strong catholic morality" and "ethnic purity."<sup>7</sup> The image is so strong that it can be even visualized, in the form of a pure, white, heterosexual family, as you can see in a photo of a street banner from Vilnius. This banner was ordered by the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs as a part of the program to "strengthen traditional families" (LRS 2012), in other words to narrow down the concept of family to a concept of marriage in the constitution.



JCDecaux

# Apginsime santuoką – išsaugosime Lietuvą



Socialinė reklama. Parengė LR Socialinės  
apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. [www.socmin.lt](http://www.socmin.lt)

The words on the banner say "Protect marriage – Save Lithuania", implying the necessity to save and protect (heteronormative) marriage and country, and the connection between these two. Protect and save from what? It seems that the creators of the banner did not see it as necessary to explain and left it implicit. However, for an observer from outside the Lithuanian society, some utterances by well-known parliamentarians are highly revealing. E.g. the Minister of Work and Social Affairs, Rimantas Dagys, stated that narrowing down the concept of family to the concept of "marriage between a man and a woman" is the best way to "prevent same-sex marriages" (Bernardinai.lt 2012). Popular news portal Delfi even more explicitly revealed the character of the so-called "family policy," by calling it "the prohibition of homosexual marriages" (Delfi 2012). Homophobia therefore must not be understood as a simple side effect of this heteronormative discourse. On the contrary, the discourse is *built* on the abjection of queers. As Kristeva has pointed out, "the more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection" (1982, 13). In this case, the beautiful image in which nationalist fantasy "recognizes itself," is the image of young, healthy, heterosexual, nuclear family, as illustrated by the poster.

White colour, which dominates the poster, makes this image so clean and pure, that it becomes almost an empty space which can be interpreted and filled in with any culturally determined connotations and thus embody the invisible "norm" (Dyer 1997, 45). This purified image is built on the exclusion of all kinds of difference (not only sexual, but also ethnic and racial) outside of the boundaries of normality and public acceptance. Queerness, as it can be understood from the public discourses, in this context becomes the epitome of all abject differences. Heteronormative nationalist discourse claims, at the same time, that (homo)sexuality is something to be kept in

secret, in the private realm. At the same time, on the basis of this claim, it makes (homo)sexuality *the* reason for social decadence, for the *bad* things in society, *the* evil, *the* threat to the purified – white, clean and solid – image of the narcissistic nationalist self. Queerness in the societal imagery appears as its antithesis, as always partially hidden, as a dark, unclear, unclean perversion, a "dirty" secret (Baer 2005, 41). It haunts the imagination as that which threatens with degradation, decadence, and, finally, death. In the nationalist discourse we can recognize a condition, described by Kristeva, when the abjection, or a phobia, (in the case of this article, homo-phobia) makes those frightening, unconscious elements "excluded but in a strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for the defensive *position* to be established – one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration. As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside." (Kristeva 1982, 7)

In order to exclude, but also elaborate until sublimation, the nationalist discourse builds mystical texts, an intricate mythology to delimitate the place for the loathsome abject, and by means of exclusion, create a purified image of "me" or, in the case of nationalism – "us." The perfect example of such discourse in contemporary Lithuania is the infamous article "The crawling totalitarianism" written by a well known philosopher, public intellectual, former activist of the movement for the independence, prof. Vytautas Radžvilas:

*Under the cover of the slogans of "democracy," "freedom," "equality," "tolerance," the propagators of liberal totalitarianism are sending nation and state back to the times of ideological and political oppression. More and more often in a public sphere are attacked those,*

who think and speak independently, freely and critically. Those, who are Christians, or acknowledge and respect the civilizational and cultural role of Christianity, are called by the terms *inherited from the arsenal of the Soviet atheism*: "clergy," "obscurants," "enemies of progress." In truth, the dictionary of "the progressive forces" has grown and changed a bit. Those, who follow the Christian attitudes towards life and human relationships, those who have a good ethnic consciousness and think patriotically, are not anymore called "reactionaries," "retrogrades," "bourgeois nationalists" or "fascists." *Today they became "homophobes," "racists," "xenophobes," "the enemies of freedom and equality."* (Radžvilas 2010, translation and emphasis mine)

He writes about the decadence of the nation, which he perceives in the contemporary society and points to the reasons and those responsible for the decadence. His main claim is that the Soviet oppression now is replaced by the new, "crawling" totalitarianism and that some mysterious and dark forces in the society, hiding under the cover of the West, are taking all the dirtiest measures to annihilate the nation. Thus he encourages people to protect independence by going back to the foundations. Radžvilas continues:

In order to break morally and psychologically the society, the *dirtiest* measures are taken. Violently imposing the ideological and moral attitudes, which are supposedly "progressive," but alien and unacceptable for the majority of the society, the massive campaigns of ideological indoctrination, propaganda, condemnation and brainwashing are organized. In order to silence the citizens, who *dare to call the things by their real names*, more and more often the open lies and defamation is taking place. [...] A big part of our

Nation, especially the young generation, so far does not envisage the *true face* of this new different "soft" totalitarianism, *which hides under the cover of "West."* Although it also enslaves peoples and nations, but it does it in much more subtle and hidden forms. *The distinctive feature of this crawling totalitarianism is its hidden ambivalence.* Publicly, the principles of "freedom" and "tolerance" are declared. However, these principles become empty declarations in other spheres of life, by embedding the strict standards of "political correctness."

This text, in my interpretation, deals with the traumatic memory of the Soviet occupation, securing the boundaries of the nation through abjection. The dangerous groups, threatening with the new totalitarianism, seem to be depicted in a way strikingly familiar to the way Kristeva describes the abject. The mysterious "they" are ambivalent, hiding, covered – "the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (1982, 2). Moreover, "they" are taking dirty measures, and are probably dirty themselves, they not only harm, but also defile. They are more similar to animals than humans, as their totalitarianism is "crawling," as if it would be a snake, a spider, or a worm. Representing the frightening world of animals, "they" also represent "sex and death" (Kristeva 1982, 12), and therefore, a danger for the sanctity, sanity and safety of nation and state. What seems to be most important, "they" cannot stand the truth: it is neither possible to see their "true face," nor do "they" allow those to speak, who "dare to call the things by their real names." As a perfect embodiment of abject, "they" disturb the unity and homogeneity of true meanings and draw you "to the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982, 2).

Interestingly, "they" in this discourse seem to be a mirror image

of the prior Soviet occupation, even the "return" of the totalitarianism. Here we encounter a significant particularity of the post-Soviet nationalist heteronormative discourse – what it abjects first and foremost is its Soviet past.<sup>8</sup> Therefore all other abjects are more or less equated with this odious and haunting memory, even if this equation at the first glance might seem counterintuitive. In his text Radžvilas seems to imply that homophobes, racists and xenophobes (I purposefully do not use quotation marks here, as contrary to Radžvilas, I do not want to imply that these are necessarily inaccurate characteristics) are those, who are *calling the things by their true names*. Therefore, it seems to be reasonable to guess that in his logic, non-heterosexuals, non-whites and non-Lithuanians are those who have to be abjected to protect the boundaries of the nation, to avoid decadence. But what are the "real names" that Radžvilas is talking about? And what is this Truth that the "crawling totalitarianism" seems to be afraid of?

In order to understand this, I would like to employ the analysis by Adi Kuntsman in her article "Between Gulags and Pride parades: sexuality, nation, and haunted speech acts". She analyses the homophobic hate speech in contemporary Israel by a Russian speaking immigrant Boris Kamyanov, who expresses his negative attitude towards other immigrants from the former Soviet Union, precisely – those openly fighting for gay rights. "'Shadow, know thy place!' And your place was, and is, by the latrine", he says. Kuntsman explains that this expression, just like other homophobic acts of hate speech employed by Kamyanov, such as *pidory*, *kobly*, and *kovyryjalki*, comes from the jargon of the Soviet prison culture (2008, 269). Employing Butler's theorizations on hate speech, Kuntsman shows that homophobic hate speech works through the reiteration and performance of traumatic (in this case Soviet) memory. A similar mechanism is at

work also in the discourse, produced by Radžvilas. On the one hand he warns about the dangers of political correctness, as, according to him, it is the reflection of the Soviet-like totalitarianism,<sup>9</sup> while on the other hand we see that the supposedly "real," not politically correct, names for queers are, paradoxically, those inherited from the so odious and haunting Soviet memory.<sup>10</sup> The only "truth" that this discourse can point to, appears to be the "truth" of the Soviet past, the "truth" of homophobia, xenophobia, and totalitarianism. On the one hand, it seems that abject queerness, which seeks to find its subject position, is perceived as a threat, as a possible loss of the national identity, and therefore, depicted as a sort of recurrence of the Soviet past, of the painful memory of occupation. However, on the other hand, it is precisely this history of Soviet totalitarianism, which seems to put queers in the position of abject, in a degrading condition, followed by the names, which do not actually say "who" they are, but only cast them in a place on the margins.

### **Ambiguous drag and the (im)possibility of subversion**

After a long, but necessary immersion in the homophobic discourse, it is high time to come back to the place on the margins, to the place, produced by homophobic discourse as "the nest of whores." I have already depicted the complex love-hate relationship of the hetero-patriarchal nationalist discourse with the haunting Soviet memory, and demonstrated how queer is produced as an abject, a scapegoat to discharge the societal anxieties in the painful creation of purified national self. Is there a possibility for subversion of this hegemonic, exclusionary discourse? Let me draw your attention back to the already described drag performance, a central part of *Alla's B-day party*, where a Soviet ideal of femininity is impersonated by a post-Soviet gay (?) man, who works as a bouncer in the Vilnius gay

club *Soho*. In order to read this drag beyond its initial intentions, I invoke here Mieke Bal's theorization of the role of cultural memory in the performance, as that which makes the performance *performative*. Memory according to Bal is a "stage director," which conducts the performance and makes the viewer an intrinsic part of it (Bal 2002). Can I read this drag in a celebratory way, as the subject, which subverts homophobic nationalist discourse? Or shall I read this drag in a way, which would reveal its immersion in the memory of Soviet times, its complexity, significance and ambiguity, which is not subversive, but rather reaffirming its position? Or does it go both ways at the same time?

The short white dress and a wig of curly wild blond hair do not really mask the masculinity of the body of the security guy. If the drag is supposed to deceive us at least for a second about the "truth" of the gender of the performer, this is not the case. The "man" behind the illusion of *Alla* is even more clearly a "man," because of the amateurish drag, which exposes more than it covers – big hairy hands, not perfectly shaved beard. Probably this transparency is intentional, as it makes this performance entertaining. It reminds of an episode from the classical Soviet movie, *Gentlemen of fortune* (1971), where three "thieves" dress up as old ladies in order to hide their true identity and to avoid militia. Famous characters of this Soviet movie entertain the audience by putting on a female outfit and then being simply *not capable* to mask their masculinity, which breaks forth as some unquestionable *truth* of their identity. We are not seduced to doubt about the truth of binary gender here – these scenes works only as a confirmation of how "real men" are. And the same schema works for the drag of Alla.

"There is no necessary relation between drag and subversion", reminds Judith Butler (1993, 85). Some drags can be read more as



a policing of queerness and reaffirmation of the boundaries of normalized genders and sexualities, a part of heteronormative economy, rather than subversion. It is tempting to apply this also to *Alla*, who beneath the clothes and make-up is still visibly a "proper" hairy and muscular man. The suggestive Slavic voice of the real *Alla* emotionally singing about scarlet roses and true love in a recording only emphasizes the masked "truth" of the poorly hidden masculinity. However: "At best (*sic!*), it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power the one opposes" (Butler 1993, 85). According to Butler, there is no incompatibility in saying that any drag is always implicated in the reproduction of the sexist system *at the same time* as it denaturalizes and subverts the system. It is precisely this *ambivalence* of drag, as it *both* appropriates *and* subverts "racist, misogynist, and homophobic norms of oppression" (87), which is the most interesting and productive aspect to be read into a performance.

Anthropologist Ether Newton in her path-breaking book *Mother camp: female impersonators in America* (1979) argues that the culture of drag queens is based on the pleasure, which is given by the possibility to control the stigma of effeminacy, often applied to gay man in patriarchal society, by embodying it in a performance, intended for the gay audience. In such a drag the "femininity," attributed to gay men is not stigmatized and ashamed, but in control and assertive, retaliating against a hegemonic straight world. As Artūras Tereškinas has shown, in the Lithuanian public sphere gay men are predominantly represented as effeminate; as if anyone can recognize a gay man on a street by his "feminine gestures, soft voice and original or flamboyant clothes" (2004, 33). The drag of *Alla* there-

fore can be seen as a perfect way to laugh at this stereotype, even if (and always necessarily) this laughter is induced by the immersion in the heteronormative society. Moreover, it is not only *any* femininity that is mimicked in this performance, but a concrete femininity of *Alla*: the real person Alla Pugacheva, adored superstar of the whole post-Soviet sphere and, at the same time, Alla, as a symbol of a common Soviet cultural memory. Therefore, it seems that Alla perfectly performs through the double stigma, attached to gay men in the Lithuanian context – the stereotypical stigma of effeminacy and the paradoxical stigma put on them by the haunting Soviet past. *Alla*, obviously, negotiates not only gender and sexuality, but also the history of 50 years of Soviet colonization. On the one hand, it is a part of the legacy of the mental and societal structures of Soviet period, a problematic reproduction of the stereotypes, while on the other hand it is also a felicitous parody of this legacy.

Robert Kulpa, in his analysis of the relationships between nations and sexualities in Eastern Europe touches the question of such performances and claims, that "the '*communist nostalgia*', dressed up and performed through the embodiment of iconic singers of communism, is what *nationalizes* these performances of a culturally specific gender" (2011, 52). Lucidly he points to the essential feature of the contemporary post-Soviet nations and nationalisms – they exist always already in the relation to (or negation of) their Soviet past. Similarly, I would claim, that also homosexualities, which are according to Kulpa, "always already national/ised" (53) exist only in the negotiation of the history of Soviet oppression. This negotiation is inherently ambivalent. This post-Soviet drag seems to be inspired by the genuine fascination with the artist Alla Pugacheva, a symbol of subversive feminine power. Also it seems to be prompted by a general adoration of Russian music and

pop culture, which is widely spread in the post-Soviet region, and queers are not an exception. Therefore, this drag can be called a simple expression of Soviet nostalgia and sentimental attachment to the "East". However, it is also not clear, if it is the very Soviet system, which inspires nostalgia, or the dissident moments, such as subversive Alla's messages in the songs, which are the things that inspires this longing for the lost past. Most likely, the former does not go without the latter.

The impersonation of Alla is not only loving, but also parodic. It is mimicry of the exaggerated femininity and emotionality of the singer *and* the self-irony towards the sentimental attachment to the memories of supposedly "good-old" Soviet times, when men were men, women were women and *pydarai* knew their place. In this way *Alla in Soho* seems to be not less ambivalent than the nationalist discourse which, on the one hand is blaming queers for representing the threat to the nation, for representing the "new totalitarianism," while on the other hand this discourse itself is immersed in the structures of thought inherited from the haunting Soviet times. Just like the perfect heteronormative family of the nationalist fantasy in the banner from the streets of Vilnius, *Alla* is also dressed up in white, representing nothingness and everything at the same time. On the one hand, she seems to be laughing at the utopian conservative desires to preserve the purity and innocence of the nation, family and individual, subversively laughing from her supposedly dirty and dangerous place at the margins, "by latrine," "the nest of whores." On the other hand, *Alla* at the same time discloses a desperate desire to become part of this beautiful and clean picture, a desire to leave the traumatic past behind, to have a proper name, a desire for inclusion.

## Conclusion

Invited by the enigmatic figure of *Alla in Soho*, this article deals with the discourses of homophobia and nationalism in contemporary Lithuania and comes to the conclusion that both the image of (sexual, ethnic, historical) normality and the excluded queerness are produced in an ambiguous connection with the (post-)Soviet memory and the contemporary creation of national self. The concept of the abject, elaborated by Kristeva, helps to understand the production and the placement of the figure of queer in the imagery of homophobic nationalist discourse as the one always outside, as necessary but loathsome, inevitable but unthinkable. The concept of drag as an ambiguity, elaborated by Butler, helps to approach the abject in its attempt to subvert the discourse, which produces it as an abject. Instead of celebrating post-Soviet drag as emancipation from the structures of normality, this article rather sees it as immersed in the same structures of gendered, ethnic and historical divisions. *Alla in Soho* in this article served as an embodiment of a queer position in-between, as an ambivalent and contradictory parody, which reproduces at the same time as it subverts. By asking more questions than giving answers, by not privileging any discourse as the only right one, this article invites the reader to understand the post-Soviet environment through the lens of feminist and queer theory and appreciate complexity more than clear categories and boundaries.

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Research Conference in Budapest. In 2010 she presented a paper at the international conference "Human rights and homosexuality: Past, present, future" in Riga. For her work as a journalist Rasa won the EU Journalist Award 2010, part of the campaign "For diversity. Against discrimination." She has experience as an activist in Lithuanian LGBT organisation Lithuanian Gay League (LGL).

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## NOTES

1. I employ the word "homophobia" as that which stands for the hatred towards all those who does not fit neatly into the binary schema of gender, sex and sexuality. This usage seems to be reasonable in Lithuanian context, which is much alike neighboring the Polish context, described by Mizielinska, where "gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, transgenders – are called freaks, dykes, faggots interchangeably" (Mizielinska 2011, 90).
2. In this article I will use "queer" as an umbrella term to name all non-heteronormative identities. I decided to use this word, in order not to delineate the sphere of possible societal exclusion, as it does not point concretely to any sexual identity. However, most of the examples from public sphere, which I am analyzing in this article, mostly deal with homosexuality. It does not mean that I present "queer" as a synonymous to "gay." Simply the activism of gays and lesbians in many post-Soviet societies are, as Grazyna Kubica has pointed out, the most visible activism, which breaks the nation-religious homogeneity of the nation (2007, 184).
3. Not to say, first, that in a global context it is an exception, or, even more importantly, that all post-Soviet societies are the same. However, the biggest concern of this article is a certain specific memory of exclusion of queerness, characteristic for Eastern Europe. Without this slight generalization the whole issue devoted to "Eastern European Sexualities" probably would be pointless.
4. In her reformulation of Jacques Lacan's thought, Kristeva assimilates the insights from Mary Douglas influential work *Purity and danger*, about the ways in which different societies build structures of culture by way of exclusion and policing of boundaries (Butler 1990).
5. For example the latest initiative by the Lithuanian Gay league comes with the slogan "Let's start talking!" following other projects like "Open and safe at work," or such events as "Rainbow Days."
6. Here and later in statements like this one, I invoke mostly my subjective ob-



servations from the participation in a popular Lithuanian LGBT social network Gayline.lt. This network works as a dating tool, a discussion forum and a thematic news portal. I presume that critical comments under certain articles, which discuss activism, reveal some general opinions about not politically active LGBT people. An example of this is the discussion around the initiative by Romas Zabarauskas, a young and increasingly popular film director. He launched a move to put "homo-friendly" stickers on cafes in Vilnius, and for this received a huge outburst of negative and degrading comments by Gayline.lt visitors.

7. In Lithuanian context, these aspects of nationalism have been thoroughly analyzed by the leftist philosopher and feminist Nida Vasiliauskaitė.
8. This pertains only to those societies that have chosen "Western" direction, and is the opposite in countries such as Russia, where the Soviet past is glorified in the nationalist imagery.
9. Another example of this discourse is utterances by the contemporary Minister of the social affairs, Rimantas Dagys, who claimed in Parliament that Communism propagated same-sex love.
10. Indeed, queerness, in the context of Lithuania, as in the context of Russian Jews in Israel, described by Kuntsman, does not have a proper, authentic name. Queers can either "hide" under the names imported from the West, which sound politically correct and seem not to reveal the true nature of what they point to – such as *gėjus* [gay], *lesbietė* [lesbian], *homoseksualas* [homosexual]. Or, as supposedly more authentically, they can be called by the degrading names, inherited from the Soviet prison culture – *gaidys* ([cock], that is gay, also can be used as an adjective), *pederastas* (confusing paedophilia and homosexuality), or *žydras* (literal translation of a Russian word *goluboj*, which means light blue and also comes from the prison culture and marks homosexuality) (see Nikitina and Roberts, 2002).

## ABSTRACT

Using the allegorical figure of *Alla in Soho* as an entry point, this article presents an analysis of the homophobic nationalist discourse in contemporary Lithuania. The article claims that both the image of national/sexual normality and excluded queerness in this context should be understood in an ambiguous connection with the haunting Soviet memory. The concept of the abject, as elaborated by Julia Kristeva is used to understand how in the homophobic nationalist discourse, queerness is produced as something outside the borders of normality, as inevitable and unthinkable at the same time. The concept of drag as an ambiguity, elaborated by Judith Butler, invites question about the possibilities of queer to subvert the discourse, which produces it as an abject. The drag performance in the Vilnius gay club *Soho*, the impersonation of the Soviet symbol of femininity, Alla Pugacheva, serves as an embodiment of a queer position in-between, as an ambivalent and contradictory parody. The post-Soviet drag of *Alla in Soho* reproduces normative sexual and national structures at the same time as it subverts them.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Med den allegoriska figuren *Alla in Soho* som utgångspunkt analyserar denna artikel den homofoba, nationalistiska diskursen i dagens Litauen. Artikeln hävdar att bilden både av nationell/sexuell normalitet och av exkluderad queerness bör, i det här sammanhanget, förstås i ett mångtydigt samband med det envist kvardröjande minnet av Sovjet. Föreställningen om objektet, såsom den utvecklats av Julia Kristeva (1982), används för att studera produktionen av queerness inom den homofoba, nationalistiska diskursen som något utanför normalitetens gränser, något på en gång ofrånkomligt och otänkbart. Förståelsen av drag som en mångtydighet, utvecklad av Judith Butler (1993), öppnar för att ställa frågor om queers möjlighet att underminera den diskurs som framställer det som ett objekt.

Tolkningen av ett populärt draguppträdande på Soho, en gayklubb i Vilnius,

går som en röd tråd genom hela artikeln. I detta uppträdande gestaltas den sovjetiska femininitetssymbolen Alla Pugacheva av klubbens dörrvakt. Artikeln hävdar att detta drag kan förstås såväl som en förnyad bekräftelse av den heteronormativa genusstrukturen, som en subversiv parodi. Detta exempel fungerar således som ett förkroppsligande av en ambivalent och motsägelsefull queer mellanposition. Artikeln visar dessutom hur denna föreställning fungerar genom att appellera till det kulturella minnet av sovjettiden. Det ambivalenta förhållande som samtida queera i Litauen har till minnet av ett totalitärt förflutet avslöjas. Själva kärnan i artikel utgörs av en analys av homofoba, nationalistiska diskurser i Litauen. Artikeln gör en tolkning av homofoba diskurser runt det första offentliga LHBT-evenemanget i Litauen, "Baltic Pride 2010 Vilnius", och hur de framställer queer sexualitet som ett objekt, som något som "inte borde vara offentligt". Dessa diskurser kopplas sedan till en tolkning av en, av staten stödd, samhällsannons, en banderoll med texten "Skydda äktenskapet – Rädda Litauen", som visar sambandet mellan nationalistiska bilder av den idealiserade litauiska familjen och det objektiva queer som utgör ett hot mot den. Avslutningsvis gör artikeln en tolkning av en ökad artikel av prof. Vytautas Radžvilas, en välkänd offentlig person i Litauen. De nationalistiska, homofoba mytologier som skapas i Radžvilas text jämförs med liknande hatiska uttalande beskrivna av Adi Kuntsman (2008), och sambandet mellan nationalistisk homofobi och traumatiska minnen av Sovjetregimen blir därigenom tydligt.

Artikeln slutar med en analys av den mångtydiga post-sovjetiska dragföreställningen *Alla in Sobo*, som visas inte bara underminera normativa sexualitets- och nationalitetsstrukturer, utan även ansluta sig till dem. Allegoriskt pekar den mot en tolkning av queer i Litauen som framställt som ett objekt av homofoba, nationalistiska diskurser, men också aktivt deltagande i reproducerandet av normativa strukturer.

**Keywords:** queer, post-communist, drag, abject, Central and Eastern Europe, homophobia.