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Siarhei Liubimau

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Practices and Discourses of Uneven Development: The Role of Border in Cultural Politics of the Identity of the Belarusian Community in Warsaw

Abstract

This paper analyses two aspects of Belarusian minority in Warsaw, which can be reframed with reference to the concept of border as a certain spatial configuration, articulating the essence of the uneven socio-geographical development. These two aspects are the contraband of alcohol and cigarettes from Belarus to Poland and the Warsaw concerts of Belarusian rock bands, which are banned or persecuted in different ways in their homeland. Both illicit import and concerts are read as strategies of different subgroups of Belarusians to locate themselves in the Polish social landscape, inevitably implying the encounters with rather repressive dimensions of the frontier. It is precisely regional configuration of uneven development that differentiates the specificity of the functioning of Polish-Belarusian border and therefore differentiates the practices crystallized as the responses to this border. In the case of alcohol and cigarettes, this unevenness is grasped in economic terms and in the case of concerts it is saturated with political meaning.

Introduction

Being a Belarusian who lives in Poland, I would claim that the experience of crossing the Polish-Belarusian border is one of the most intensive experiences structuring my identity. When dealing with frontier guards and customs officials on the one hand and facing passengers from both countries on the other hand, you receive hints for understanding the most important aspects of Polish-Belarusian relations, and, to some extent, the most important aspects of the stance of each country in the global system. These moments can make you feel that all the manifold relationships between Belarus and Poland crystallized within the different aspects of the border, which divides and, hence, constitutes two different societies. There is always a temptation to think that when we expose the

specificity of the mechanisms, presuppositions and closures of this border, we will manage to grasp the specificity of two societies on a larger scale. The analysis that follows aims precisely at clarifying the practices and motivations of the social actors, displaced and located simultaneously in two socio-spatial contexts (Poland and Belarus) – referring to the specificity of the functioning of Polish-Belarusian border. However, it has an ambition to retain the angle on the more fundamental relations between these two societies face-to-face and somehow in the context of world-wide geopolitics.

Our immediate goal here is to scrutinize the ways in which the Polish-Belarusian border as a distinct socio-spatial configuration determines the possibilities and the strategies of self-representation of Belarusian minority in Warsaw. For this purpose we pick the lens of the specificity of two terms emerging and becoming apparent in the social practices set by the given frontier. These two terms are "uneven development" and "contraband", where the latter one is understood as the result of the former one. Hence, the idea here is to coordinate the specificity of cultural practices of the studied community with the specificity of the two introduced constructs. More precisely, the paper attempts to juxtapose the politically engaged Belarusian rock concerts in Warsaw (one of the most recognizable activities of the representatives of Belarusian minority here) with the smuggling of vodka and cigarettes as two different but related results of the uneven development between Poland and Belarus. In order to present a more coherent argument, the paper is divided into four sections. The aim of the first section is to clarify in what fashion the key-terms are used here (primarily, these terms are "border" and "national minority"). The second section strives to sketch the most important attributes of Polish-Belarusian border as encouraging contraband (the practices of "anonymous" Belarusians bringing cheap vodka and cigarettes to Poland), which is the outcome of uneven development, modifying the specificity of Belarusian identity in Poland. The third section dwells on the peculiarities of attempts by Belarusians to assert their identity in Polish public life (by looking at the case of Belarusian rock concerts). Finally, the fourth section brings up the problem of coordination of smuggling and rock concerts, referring to the socio-spatial configuration of Polish-Belarusian border as to a third term.

Clarification of Terms

One of the main assumptions of this paper is that we can grasp the relationships between two distinct states by looking at the specificity of the border between them and at the specificity of the practices arising as responses to the border dispositions. More precisely, we would argue that, in our current case, the strict frontier serves as a medium (understood as a form of communication as it persists in theoretical frameworks of McLuhan, Postman and others¹) which constitutes manifold aspects of uneven development and, closer to the topic of this work, gives voice to Belarusians who strive to articulate their presence in Poland. In this case, it is valuable to adhere to the reading of the border as a medium or a form of communication since such a focus helps to reveal the formal nature of this spatial configuration. This means that it makes possible to regard border not as an object, but as a mechanism which saturates the practices of the Belarusian community with social sense. Hence, the idea proposed here is that we should read the stance of Belarusian minority not as one concerning Belarus and Poland as distinct states-essences, but as one grasping both countries in their relation [of uneven development], which is expressed in the phenomenon of the border.

In this perspective, it is also crucial to retain the link with the spatial background of the described case, since the concept of uneven development apparently has a spatial meaning. As Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper put it, the term uneven development signifies "the composite and dynamic spatio-temporal patterning of socially constructed differences of many different scales, from the local to the global"². Since we focus on the crystallization of life-projects of the Diaspora within the set of rules of uneven development, it could be also fruitful to refer to Homi Bhabha, who understands Diaspora as the

¹ McLuhan M., 1964, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill; Postman N., 1992, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, New York: Vintage Books.

² Soja E., Hooper B., 1993, "The Spaces that Difference Makes: Some Notes on the Geographical Margins of the New Cultural Movements", in Keith M., Pile S. (eds.), *Place and the Politics of Identity*, London: Routledge, p.285.

"simultaneous realization of different spatialities"³. Our claim here is that the critical social theory of space, which strives to reveal the geographical dimension of social processes, promises to be a useful conceptual tool since it helps to grasp the subject as a position, not as an agent (what matters is not "who I am", but "where I am"). A compatible insight can be found in Michael Keith and Steve Pile, arguing that in the contemporary moment spatial thinking can help a lot if we want to understand the different political and cultural strategies because it reveals the unfixed character of identity. As they write, the debates concerning the tension "modernity/post-modernity" usually raise three issues: "the relationship between time and space; the potential of politics; and the construction of identity"⁴. Keith and Pile interestingly point out that a lot of spatial metaphors are now used for the purpose of describing mechanisms of power. This disposition shows that space is not "a passive empty area on which things happen"⁵. Their argument is that different communities vary and choose different cultural/political strategies precisely because the spatialities they inhabit are different. At the same time, Keith and Pile are echoing Bhabha by saying that Diasporas are the third space, mediating two worlds (outside and inside, oppressor and oppressed, etc.)⁶.

Such a lens can be applied to Belarusians in Warsaw: this group may be grasped as the third space, which is shaped economically and politically with reference to border-crossing practices. For developing this argument further on, it is crucial to figure out what makes the border so significant for the community under analysis. Why is this frontier the important point of reference within the process of self-representation of the Belarusian minority and within the process of interactions of this minority with other players? Our presupposition here is that precisely the border and power relations emerging around it encourage the contraband of some goods from Belarus to Poland since they invest the goods "smuggled" in this direction with certain (economic, cultural, political, etc.) value. Based on this, we propose here to read the border not as a mere medium but also as a form of

³ Quoted from Keith M., Pile S., 1993, "Introduction Part One: The Politics of Place", in Keith M., Pile S. (eds.), *Place and the Politics of Identity*, *op. cit.*, p.6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.18.

exchange value (which is a form of communication as well). In Marx's work, money is the peak of the evolution of exchange value; a construction which establishes certain relations between things and maintains commodity form (invests other goods with exchange value). In the case of the politics of identity of the Belarusian minority in Warsaw, the practices emerging from uneven development – which becomes apparent mostly in the form of the frontier – make use precisely of this hybrid form of exchange value as the regularity of forming a surplus value. A given community comes to terms with its chances of accumulating different sorts of capital and establishes links with other players by crossing the border. Or, alternatively, this border and the enclaves of the different forms of power inherent in it give space for and differentiate the concrete strategies of manifesting cultural identity and interpreting the social world, and opportunities within this world, by Belarusians in Poland.

At the same time, the current paper addresses primarily the issue of the discursive role of the frontier within the cultural politics of national minorities. It should be noted that our interest here lies rather beyond the concrete procedures of crossing the border. Although the description of these procedures can be a productive strategy of answering the posed question, we rather propose to concentrate here on the discursive implications of this phenomenon, i.e. to emphasize mainly the discourses of uneven development, which condition and are conditioned by the practices of uneven development, and which can be properly read only taken together with the practices. To put it more precisely, the more important task here will be to show that in the case of the studied national minority, the Polish-Belarusian border is the structural limit (or closure) whose logic/set of dispositions the cultural players cannot overcome and which they constantly reproduce in direct and distorted ways. The claim is that the analysed frontier and the enclaves of the different forms of power inherent in it give space for and differentiate the concrete strategies of manifesting cultural identity and interpreting the opportunities within the social world encountered by Belarusians in Poland. However, it would be dangerous to abandon entirely the goal to figure out what is the nature and material impact of this structural limit and what are its articulations. Our assumption here is that the very concept of uneven development operating in a vein conventional in the critical social theory of space would enable us to retain an analytical link between the discourses and the practices in our context.

The understanding of the border drawn up above is analytically coordinated with the conceptualization of the minority we employ. In our use, minority is not a group of concrete people, but a certain stance performed in public and enacted by certain discourses (here, precisely, the frontier serves as the key constellation giving rise to these discourses). Hence, people studied here are mainly journalists, political/social activists, cultural entrepreneurs, etc. It is important that the literal people, who venture to take this stance, first, represent themselves as Belarusians and, second, assume that the territory they currently inhabit is not their native territory. It is also important to note that this stance stems not only from people of the minority as a closed totality, but is the result of mutual monitoring/interactions between this community and other stances (primarily, these are stances of their homeland and the country they currently live in). Such an understanding of national minorities can be found in Rogers Brubaker, who builds his theory adhering to the concept of "field" (in Brubaker's work, a field is a container of different related endeavours to take a certain stance), which is one of the most recognizable concepts of Pierre Bourdieu⁷. Picking the framework of Brubaker, we also stress that a community seen exclusively as a public stance does not imply an irrefragable understanding of this social fact. Our paper strives to show that the concrete public stance – or, in other words, representation – is always dialectically related to the trends, which are blocked or neglected in the process of this representation. For the purpose of the juxtaposition of accentuated and hidden trends, it seems promising to refer to the construct of "scape" coined by Arjun Appadurai⁸. Hence, we would argue that it is fruitful to approach minorities as consisting of many scapes, which are not homologous to each other and can be even conflicting. However, the tension between different scapes within the chosen community can be grasped as the outcome of the comprising logic, which binds these conflicting or incompatible scapes and inserts them in the same frame of reference. The goal of this paper is precisely to disclose this logic by operating with the construct of the border. More precisely, the two scapes constituting Belarusian community in Poland are two modifications of the contraband. The first one is the literal smuggling – the practices of the "anonymous" Belarusians bringing cheap vodka and cigarettes to

⁷ Brubaker R., 1996, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Appadurai A., 1990, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7, 2-3, pp.295-310.

Poland, while the other one – which has never been thought of as smuggling, but will be hopefully proven as such in our paper – is organizing concerts of Belarusian bands in Warsaw by activists of the Belarusian community. The important attribute of such bands is that they all were banned (or, in some cases, deprived of a significant part of their audience) in their homeland. Hence, we would argue that this variation of trans-border mobility can be compared with smuggling since it implies illegal practices and since the practices of crossing the border become strategies of accumulating various forms of capital.

Belarusians and Contraband

Thus, the construct of contraband is of primal importance in our paper. The most basic meaning of contraband, which is the starting point here, is "secretly importing prohibited goods or the goods on which duty is due"⁹. However, for us the other constitutive features of this phenomenon will be more important. In the first place, we propose to look at this type of mobility as a process of transferring some goods from one side of the border to the other one, on the condition that these goods gain some extra value as a consequence of such a transfer. The frontier dividing two countries/social landscapes is precisely, in the last instance, the source of this extra value. Another condition is that this transfer is always in conflict with the set of legal rules and categories regulating the various types of trans-border flows or with the legal norms constitutive in only one of the countries. Such a comprehension of contraband is smoothly applied to the practices of some inhabitants of Western Belarus, who transport goods from their homeland to Poland, violating established order, i.e. exceeding allowed quantities. The assortment of smuggled goods varies at times; however, the most stable and popular of them are vodka and cigarettes, which are much cheaper in Belarus. This popularity is emphasized also by customs officials, whose most insistent question is: "how much alcohol and cigarettes do you carry?" They might also check your luggage and you can see that they pay attention primarily to bottles and things

⁹ On internet <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=smuggling> (17/04/2007).

resembling packs of cigarettes. Hence, in this paper we have to come to terms with the intensive image of a smuggler associated with Belarusians in Poland. This is one of the most important and influential commonsense assumptions concerning this community, however almost unrecognizable in the public discourse in Poland, remaining a vulgar daily stereotype.

At this stage, our analysis uses data from field studies in the Belarusian city of Brest, as well as in the Polish town of Terespol. These two urban sites are connected by a railroad, which is the main throughway from Belarus to Europe and is widely used by the contrabandists of Polish, Belarusian, and, more rarely, Russian and Ukrainian origin. It can be argued that the specificity of their life projects derives from conditions under which some goods gain extra value by being transferred in space. The purpose of this section is to reframe the specificity of the activities of Belarusians from Brest and Brest region who import cheap alcohol and cigarettes to the Polish side. For some part of the population of Western Belarus such border-crossing for profit is one of the main sources of income; however, it should be also acknowledged that currently this type of entrepreneurship is rather seldom the main occupation in the chosen region. A retired woman who has been importing cigarettes and alcohol from Belarus to Poland for more than ten years says that the majority of people going to Poland and selling goods which are more expensive there do it not to earn some surplus money, but in order to buy products which are better in Poland and are not very expensive. She speaks primarily of food and clothes. According to her, this border cannot be a source of stable income because of the many restrictions concerning the import of a range of goods to the Polish side. In particular, people from the Brest region are allowed to import to Poland only one pack of cigarettes and only half liter of vodka. As a 30-year old Belarusian man living in Brest says, such a restriction narrowed the possibility of illegally importing these goods. Since the legal quantities are so tiny, it is very difficult to hide the big parcels. Thus, it appears that the extensive (in terms of quantity) contraband of alcohol and cigarettes would be impossible without the cooperation of Belarusians with the Poles from Terespol. One of the most common situations on the Brest-Terespol train – almost all the passengers on this train are going to Poland merely with the aim of bringing something and selling it there – is one of young males throwing boxes of cigarettes out of the window while the train still has not passed the customs office and border control in the Terespol train station, but has already entered the territory accessible to its dwellers. While

doing it, they are talking on mobile phones in Polish, reporting the concrete location of the boxes.

Nevertheless, the association of Belarusians in Warsaw with contraband of alcohol and cigarettes remains intensive, although most of the goods imported from Belarus are usually distributed directly in border areas (in our case, Terespol). This intensiveness can be explained by the existence in Warsaw of several locations used for illegal distribution of smuggled goods from the East (almost exclusively from Ukraine and Belarus). One of the biggest and most popular sites like this is the so-called "Russian Market", located at a deserted stadium in the Warsaw district of Praga, close to the train station Eastern Warsaw (Warszawa Wschodnia). People involved in illicit trade there are mostly Belarusians and Ukrainians themselves, which, in our opinion, significantly contributes to the process of constitution of Belarusian identity in Poland by confirming the image of Belarusians as smugglers. It should be however noted that it is very problematic to estimate the size of this group and its significance for shaping Belarusian identity in quantitative terms. The majority of people in this group are not registered in Poland, come to Warsaw with tourist visas and temporarily participate in the constantly changing networks of sellers formed before. Such networks are opaque and their mechanisms can hardly be grasped from the stories of commuters from Brest to Terespol and back. The problem is that the sellers in the stadium are usually mentioned as "ones who are in Warsaw", which signifies just their geographical location and makes the concrete people – who are constantly rotated – unimportant. Thus, in spite of the fact that, in reality, contraband as an attempt to get a surplus value by means of a spatial transfer of certain goods is not a stable and common occupation of Belarusians entering Poland, this connotation still persists due to the existence of the symbolic focus on contraband – in the physical, social and mental map of Warsaw – as one of the scapes forming Belarusian community.

Belarusian Concerts in Warsaw

Another issue explored in this paper is the matter of the conscious construction of identity by active members of Belarusian community in Warsaw in contrast to the traits ascribed to this national group by the external players. Such an angle is better compatible with Brubaker's understanding of a minority as a stance. The conceptual framework elaborated by him presupposes considering Belarusians as those who act publicly in Poland and venture to represent – adequately or not – all the subgroups or, in some fashion, scapes of the community they come from. As a result, certain scapes, integral parts of this community, are emphasized and certain are hidden. In order to approach this aspect of the presence of Belarusians in Poland, we analyse data collected in media as well as during observations in the field of social and cultural activists of Belarusian origin in Warsaw. We especially focus on their initiative – which has become almost a stamp – to organize concerts of Belarusian rock bands critical towards the ruling elites of the country they come from. It is important to note that almost all these bands got onto the "black list" of President Lukashenko in 2005 after having actively participated in events organized by political opposition and are therefore significantly limited in the process of promoting themselves in Belarus now (their music cannot be played on TV and radio and their concerts are semi-legal).

It is also crucial to note that within this analysis the variable of Polish-Belarusian border remains pivotal. To put it differently, the striving here is to figure out how the significance of this concrete frontier is articulated in realms different from the illegal import and trade and, more precisely, in the deliberate management of the manifestation of Belarusian cultural identity in Warsaw. Our idea is to explore the phenomenon of "Belarusian concerts" in Warsaw and to confront it with the phenomenon of contraband. The claim would be that the flows of music from Belarus to Poland are somehow similar to the flows of vodka and cigarettes (as we have already pointed out, vodka and cigarettes are the most popular goods smuggled from Belarus to Poland). In this perspective, contraband can be interpreted as a mode of mobility, yet vodka/cigarettes on the one hand and concerts on the other hand are fragments of its different scapes, if we are to retain the above introduced concepts of Arjun Appadurai. There is a certain resemblance in the logic which gives rise to these, by no means different, types of social practices. Hence, we propose to look at the issue of Belarusian rock concerts in Warsaw through the lens we used when looking at the import of material goods from Belarus to Poland, i.e. through the analytical

construct of uneven development. However, in the case of the concerts as a way of cultural entrepreneurship the concept "uneven development" would be invested with a political sense and "border" with a symbolic one.

It should be necessarily underlined that almost always the symbolic practices performed in public by Belarusian community in Poland are shaped as a contestation of the political regime of contemporary Belarus. Such a disposition is strengthened by the presence in Poland of a significant group of political refugees from Belarus who are not allowed to come back (literally to cross the border) to their home country. And, therefore, it will be difficult to avoid the analysis of their direct statements concerning the political process in this country. One of the political refugees from Belarus and a typical example of a Belarusian activist in Warsaw, Volha, a 24-years-old woman working as a journalist for one of the radio stations in the capital city of Poland, starts her life-story by talking about the reasons and circumstances of why and how she had to leave her homeland. These reasons are purely political: actively participating in the election campaign on the opposition side and writing articles criticizing President Lukashenko himself and his family. The most important question she asks other Belarusians in order to "map" people is: "Are you allowed to come back to Belarus?" In our view, this accentuation of the troublesome – and presupposing a tension in terms of law – experience of crossing the Polish-Belarusian border for political reasons appears not by chance and can be recognized as one of the manifold attempts by Belarusian activists to address the issue of their presence in Poland, including the rock concerts analysed here.

One of the most spectacular appearances of Belarusian rock music in Warsaw in 2006 was the concert "Solidarity with Belarus", which took place in the downtown of Warsaw one week before presidential elections in Belarus (March 12th, 2006). As Maya Medich puts it on the website FREEMUSE:

"The idea behind the concert, broadcasted live on Polish TV, was to take inspiration from the music that helped to bring down communism in Poland. Polish 'freedom' songs of the 1980s were translated and performed in the Belarusian language. The hope amongst the organizers and artists is that music can fuel

revolution and bring about democracy in Belarus as it did in Poland nearly twenty years ago, and more recently in the neighbouring Ukraine in 2004".¹⁰

As explicitly claimed in the article, the most significant trait of the bands participating in the concert is that they are "blacklisted", banned in their own country. As the journalist Maya Medich puts it in the text, the main cause why they were "blacklisted" is that they perform their songs in Belarusian language. Furthermore, as they take a critical stance to the current Belarusian government, these bands hypothetically can be punished for "discrediting Belarus abroad" and "insulting the president" (according to laws which were adopted recently, these are criminal offences). There are many purely instrumental ways to shut rock music in Belarus down:

"A sophisticated variety of legal and economic mechanisms are employed to prevent rock and underground bands from performing: health and safety laws, housing regulations and tax irregularities are regularly used as a pretext to prevent concerts and unofficial gatherings. Large concert halls are generally state-owned, and the municipal authorities who grant special licenses for cultural events frequently revoke them without refund".¹¹

One more crucial point argued in the article is that such a line-up of obstacles significantly reduces the earning potential of the "blacklisted" bands independently of their real popularity. As Maya Medich continues, "banned from performing at home and air-brushed from official media"¹², Belarusian rock bands have no choice but to emigrate, or to stay at home but perform abroad. Bands tour regularly to play for ethnic Belarusian audiences in Lithuania and Poland, and the largest festival of alternative Belarusian music –

¹⁰ Medich M., *Blacklisted bands play in Poland*, on internet <http://www.freemuse.org/sw12630.asp> (05/05/2006).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² It is interesting that since the beginning of the year 2005 FM radio stations in Belarus are allowed to play only 20 percent of non-Belarusian music.

Basowiszczka – takes place every summer in Bialystok, Eastern Poland"¹³. Another article dedicated to the Belarusian music starts with the sentence: "The first album compilation published outside Belarus presenting Belarusian rock music comes from Germany: 'Belarusian Red Book – Music of Belarus'. Most of the bands on the CD have been blacklisted or censored in their home country". The idea of the compilation is articulated by one of the managers of this non-profit project Ingo Petz:

"Our aim was to create attention towards the catastrophic situation which rock bands have to work under in Belarus. Secondly, we wanted to show people in the West something about Belarusian music culture. Because usually people identify Belarus with dictatorship, a land of political catastrophe, so we aimed at showing how Belarusian music is very alive and creative, and in this way to give a positive impulse from the country"¹⁴.

Hence, in all articles the persisting idea is that of a force which pushes Belarusians from their homeland to Poland. Within the public discourse, this force is conventionally ascribed to Belarusian political power, however, the angle we have chosen implies that it would be more rewarding to focus not on one closed social landscape, but also on its relations with other social landscapes. Another core aspect of the quoted texts from mass media is that they somehow come to terms with the unevenness of Belarusian and Polish conditions. Moreover, one of their burdens is to clarify the way in which these concerts gain extra value when transferred from their original cultural and political context to the new one. Apparently, this mechanism of constituting the extra value is different from the one working in the case of the contraband of alcohol and cigarettes; yet, both are dependent on the process of crossing the border. We argue, in the case of concerts played by bands prohibited in Belarus, that it is precisely political uneven development which enhances this variant of mobility.

¹³ Medich M., *Blacklisted bands play in Poland*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ CD with *Blacklisted Belarusian Music*, on internet <http://www.freemuse.org/sw12745.asp> (05/05/2006).

Uneven Development and Its Variations

Since we adhere to the idea that the most important term which conditions the coordination of the illicit import of certain goods from Belarus to Poland with the necessity of some rock bands to go in the same direction because of their vulnerability in contemporary Belarusian social system is the concept of uneven development, it is inevitable to dwell briefly on the meaning invested into this concept. Within this paper, the construct of uneven development is derived from the Marxist discourse, where it is regarded as a clue for any society or as a principle shaping the social world. Basically, it signifies the field of uneven distribution of capital, where the less developed segments depend on and are subjugated to the more developed ones. This term obtains a new meaning in the disciplinary field of critical social theory of space, whose central objective is to reveal the specificity of interrelations between a spatial phenomena and the social being. In this paradigm, the focus lies on the fact of uneven geographical distribution of goods and possibilities. Moreover, it is asserted that this geographical unevenness is the inevitable attribute and the quintessence of capitalism. For instance, Edward Soja writes that the system of unequal exchange is impossible without regional uneven development as a source for surplus product and accumulation of capital, while the surplus value transfer is decisive for the dynamics of capitalism in general. For Soja, the geographical transfer of value is "the mechanism or process through which a part of the value produced at one location, area or region is realized in another, adding to the receiving region's localized accumulation base"¹⁵. Our assumption is that it could be fruitful to analyse the patterns of uneven development not only in terms of geopolitics and world-system, but also through the prism of discourses and practices of concrete communities, in our case of Belarusian minority in Warsaw.

Such a conceptualization makes it possible to adhere to the standpoint that the phenomenon of contraband can be explained by referring to the economic term "uneven development" and to the phenomenon of the strict border as a particular institution. At the same time, we should keep in mind the concept of the analysed border as a specific spatial

¹⁵ Soja E., 1989, *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London: Verso, p.114.

configuration saturated with social/political meaning. The supposition is that the social practices and motivations of national minorities, bound to both their original and current homelands, are constituted, to a significant degree, by the border as a certain socio-spatial structure. In a broader sense, it is uneven development that gives rise both to literal contraband and to the flows of music from Belarus and Poland because both of these activities are based on the rule that the "goods" imported to the more developed country (Poland) earn some surplus. Apparently, here we deal with diverging types of unevenness and in order to dress this divergence in conceptual terms, we find it fruitful to refer to the distinction between the East and the West elaborated by Frederic Jameson and refined by Slavoj Žižek. According to Žižek, who in his turn quotes Jameson, the difference is that "...East wishes to talk in terms of power and oppression; the West in terms of culture and commodification. There are really no common denominators in this initial struggle of discursive rules, and what we end up with is the inevitable comedy of each side, muttering irrelevant replies in its own favourite language"¹⁶. Hence, our claim here would be that the stress on the political, not the economic aspect of the experience of the border by the Belarusian community in Poland stems precisely from the domination of the discursive rules, which, according to Jameson and Žižek, are common for the "East".

At the same time, it does not mean that the economic aspect (for instance, the smuggling of vodka and cigarettes), which is not visible in public, is less important in the "Eastern" conditions. Moreover it is reasonable to presuppose that the everyday life of Belarusians in Warsaw clearly diverges from the public stance taken by this community. As it was already argued above, the members of the minority, who venture to represent this group in the public sphere, even in private conversations employ political meanings as the point of reference for mapping relations with others (identifying themselves and others within the interaction). These political meanings are centered on the assumption that these people are in Warsaw precisely because they cannot remain legal in Belarus (basically, the same logic is applied to the phenomenon of Belarusian concerts in Poland), although it is clear – and Maya Medich addresses this issue in her article writing that the "blacklisted" Belarusian musicians can earn much more in Poland than in their homeland – that the economic factor is also significant. Our point here is that the issue of power relations this

¹⁶ Quoted from Žižek S., 2002, *Revolution at the Gates*, London: Verso, p.191.

minority encounters in their everyday practices remains unaddressed, though crossing the border and remaining legal in Poland entails some rather repressive procedures with the involvement of local authorities. There is a temptation to argue that the persistence of an authoritarian regime in Belarus (the total domination of oppression over commodification) enhances personal orientation to the public/political and not to the private. Moreover, there exists the widely shared assumption that the public in Belarus does not work the way it should work (there is basically no public sphere where individuals get space for the articulation of their positions). Thus, it can be presupposed that when public players who retain links to their repressive homelands are located in the context of a more open and transparent public sphere, their aspiration to challenge these repressive conditions in the new context totally prevails. As a result, the manifestation of Belarusian identity in Warsaw in terms of oppression rather than in terms of commodification is expected to be more adequate.

In this case, it is also an issue of uneven development which differentiates the practices of self-representations. When the vocalist of the Belarusian band N.R.M Ljavon Volski was asked why his band is so popular in Poland, his answer was: "Because we give over such a strong energy. Our concerts are very emotional. You can instantly feel that we come from a country where there are still things we need to struggle for. Somehow, that struggle of ours appears to be more serious than the struggle against, for instance, McDonalds"¹⁷. In our perspective, the rock musician talks here about the unevenness of Polish and Belarusian conditions. If we are to retain the idea of Jameson/Zizek in this context, Ljavon Volski claims that Belarus is "more Eastern" than Poland. And, therefore, the case of Belarus is crucial for Poland too since it makes it possible to adhere to the more convenient discursive codes (to employ the "lens of oppression" to which people are still more accustomed here). It is also necessary to note here that the "East" itself is apparently the construction which is applied to the description of a concrete situation in cases where power and oppression instead of culture and commodification are emphasized publicly. Moreover, "East" and "West" cannot be separated from each other. Being the outcome of

¹⁷ *A Concert is a Cry for Freedom*, Interview with Belarusian singer Ljavon Volski, on internet <http://www.freemuse.org/sw12752.asp> (05/05/2006).

unevenness, they can be recognized only in the situation when development and underdevelopment are juxtaposed.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that the Belarusian activists in Poland saturate the frontier precisely with political sense. They stress that their practices of crossing the Polish-Belarusian border (and the associated practices) were turned into illegal or semi-legal by the politics of the contemporary elites in Belarus. Within the rhetoric they employ, the economic concept of contraband (vodka and cigarettes as the most intensive image of it) is substituted by a political one (rock concerts as the most spectacular case). To dress it into the terms of Jameson and Žižek, Belarusian community picks precisely the theme of oppression, not of commodification, which is predictable in the conditions of the "East", whereas namely the phenomenon of the border as a certain socio-spatial configuration, in which the tendency of uneven development is crystallized, can enable the coordination of the discursive rules of oppression on the one hand and commodification on the other hand (which, according to Jameson and Žižek, are hardly compatible). In this situation, the understanding of the frontier as a form of communication introduced above turns out rewarding because such a problematization locates the deepest focus not on the literal objects of study, but on the mechanisms and procedures within which these objects emerge and become available for analysis. Therefore, the border (and uneven development) is not a motive within the imagination of Belarusians in Warsaw, but rather the fashion in which this imagination is structured. The motive of contraband is used here as the most convenient/appropriate form of visualization of this medium and is distorted (being available only in the terms of oppression) within the rhetorical tools constituting the Belarusian community in Warsaw as a public stance.

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