Behind the “Failed Revolution”

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Behind the “Failed Revolution”: Becoming Patriots, or the Work of Shame in Belarusian Protests

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Abstract: This article looks at the politics of shame in relation to the suppressed protests of December 2010 that challenged the re-election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as president of Belarus (1994–present). My empirical data consist of independent media publications, blog posts, and interviews that speak of “shame” as an emotional response to the protest, its aftermath, and its general context. The article investigates what lines of social differentiation are animated in the circulation of shame discourse, how ashamed subjects are constructed and positioned in this process, and what shame does in relation to protest and its community. Theoretically it engages with discussions on the ambivalence of shame in constructing national narratives and in social movement struggles. The findings suggest that shame, employed as a marker of a patriot of a “non-existent Belarusian nation” and “failed democracy,” creates multiple divisions along the lines of class, civic engagement, and political views. This in turn curtails social mobilization, and ultimately contributes to making social change unimaginable in the present.

Key words: Belarus, failure, national belonging, politics of emotion, protests, shame.

1 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers, the editors of the issue, Olga Sasunkevich, Felix Ackermann, and Mark Berman, and Julie Fedor, for their valuable comments on earlier versions of the article.
Patriotism is defined by the measure of shame that a person feels for the crimes committed on behalf of his/her nation. —Adam Michnik

Introduction

Shame and patriotism are linked together strikingly often these days on Russian-language social networks and websites. The lines quoted in the epigraph, for example, are referenced by diverse commentators writing on the most controversial issues faced by the revived so-called “Russian world”—the seeming futility of protest actions, the current state of Ukraine–Russia relations, and the glorification of Stalin amidst deliberate ignorance about Stalinist crimes (for example, Otkrytaia Rossia 2014, Prilepin 2014, Solonin 2008). At the same time this quote is a salient example of the kind of discourse upon which this article is focused. My aim here is to examine various articulations of shame—shame at being a Belarusian, and shame over the current state of Belarus—that followed the violent suppression of the mass protests of December 2010 in Minsk. I would like to inquire into this symbolic gesture of inscribing shame into a national subject so that the subject becomes a “patriot” laying an exclusive claim to really caring about and loving the country.

On 19 December 2010 between 20 and 40 thousand people came out onto the streets of Minsk (Human Rights Center “Viasna”

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2 This quote is attributed by internet commentators to Adam Michnik, but I have not been able to verify his authorship or identify the quote’s original source. Adam Michnik was an active participant of the anti-communist movement in Poland from the 1970s and was imprisoned several times in this connection. Since 1989 he has been editor-in-chief of the newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, originally founded that year as a voice of the Solidarity movement.

3 This estimate is based on the data presented by Human Rights Center “Viasna” based in Minsk. Other assessments of the numbers involved vary even more widely, depending on the side taken in the conflict. For instance, Dmitrii Bondarenko, then the head of opposition candidate Andrei Sannikov’s presidential campaign, stated that 80 thousand people participated in the protest (Charter97.org 2015), while the state TV-channel ONT news-program “Kontury” (2010) reported three–four thousand protesters.
2011a). At the time President Aliaksandr Lukashenka had been in power for sixteen years and, as his campaign had made clear, he was determined to “win” his fourth term in office. The participants mobilized to defend the votes they had cast in the presidential election, and to protest against the anticipated election fraud. Such a numerous protest had not been seen in Belarus since the 1990s. Later political analysts wrote that this had become possible because of the wave of so-called liberalization which preceded the elections and was allowed by Lukashenka in the hope of gaining recognition from the EU (e.g. Melyantsou 2011). Indeed, during the pre-election period the EU policies towards the Belarusian authorities did show some signs of improvement. After two years of EU sanctions against the Belarusian government, a number of

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4 The failure of elections to function as a mechanism of political change in Belarus is common knowledge among the political opposition, independent media, civil right defenders, and people critical towards the current system. For example, the Human Rights Center “Viasna” reported in 2011 that: “Since 1996, no Belarusian election campaigns, including the presidential ones of 2001 and 2006, have been recognized by the OSCE as compliant with international standards for free and democratic elections. It should be noted that all election campaigns over the past fifteen years, especially presidential elections, have been far too predictable in advance and are no longer a real form of exercising the citizens’ constitutional right to participate in government; nor is it a form of real government by the people” (Human Rights Center “Viasna” 2011a).

5 According to my interviews with political activists at the time, the last protests to gather tens of thousands participants happened during the so-called “Minsk spring” in 1996. This was the first and so far the only instance of sustained protest activities in the history of independent Belarus. Regular protest activities lasted for three months; the state’s first use of violence against the opposition—the mass arrests of protesters and forced political emigration of protest leaders (Zianon Pazniak and Siarhei Navumchyk)—occurred in the aftermath of the protests’ repression. This wave of protests occurred because of the threat to national independence associated with the planned signing of the agreement on the Union State between Russia and Belarus. The events started on 24 March and continued till the summer. They included several peaks of high mobilization (on 24 March, 2 April, and 26 April).

6 Lukashenka and 36 state officials were subjected to economic restrictions and a visa ban on travel to the EU because of the electoral fraud in the 2006 presidential election (Council 2006). In 2008 this restriction was suspended “to encourage Minsk to undertake the democratic reforms” (European Parliament 2011: 4).
high-ranking officials representing European governments (for example, the Foreign Ministers of Germany Guido Westerwelle and Poland Radoslaw Sikorski) visited Minsk to meet Lukashenka. Furthermore, various promises were now issued regarding substantial financial support and cooperation between the EU and the Belarusian establishment. This attempt to renew dialogue did not succeed, however: the state’s use of violence against peaceful protesters made it impossible for the European bodies either to recognize the results of the Belarusian presidential election or to cooperate with the Belarusian authorities.

During the election campaign, the attitude taken towards the oppositional candidates by the Belarusian state authorities (from the militia to the Central Election Commission) was initially quite mild. In this context, the brutal force used against the final protest on Election Day was all the more striking. According to local and international human rights observers, participants of the protest were beaten with batons; forty-three people (among them five presidential candidates) were accused of rioting (article 293 of the Criminal Code) or organizing and preparing acts violating public order (article 342), and sentenced to two to six years in prison; 639 people were placed under administrative arrest for ten to fifteen days; and 165 searches were conducted in NGO offices and activists’ apartments (Human Rights Council 2012; Human Rights Center “Viasna” 2011b). Moreover, in court hearings and after their release, some of the political prisoners (such as former presidential candidates Ales’ Mikhalevich (2011) and Andrei

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7 Melyantsou (2011: 81, 85) writes “The two Foreign Ministers made an unambiguous statement that the presidency of Alexander Lukashenko can be recognized by the European Union in case he holds fair and democratic elections: ‘For us it is the quality of the elections that is important rather than the result’, said Sikorski. It was Lukashenka’s good behavior during the campaign and on the election day that the allocation of EUR 3 billion promised by Radoslaw Sikorski depended on, as well as the beginning of negotiations on the Joint Interim Plan and renewal of full-fledged relations with the European Union as a whole.” A somewhat similar account can be found in Bialiatski (2014).
Sannikov (2011) made statements alleging torture in the KGB prison.

This article deals with narratives that framed the violent suppression of the protest in Belarus and Belarusian belonging in this respect in terms of shame. I have chosen to focus on these particular accounts and this particular emotion for a number of reasons. At the personal level, this feeling resonates with me. It is triggered, for example, by the ordinary question “Where are you from?” and by the silence of unrecognition, or the tiresome cliché of “the last European dictatorship” that follows after my reply. As Elspeth Probyn (2004: 328) has accurately observed, “It is a shame born from the body’s desire to fit in, just as it knows that it cannot.” Intellectually, I would like to engage with the debates on the ambivalence of shame. Does shame hold the potential for positive transformation, as some theorists propose, by linking it to a subject’s moral aspirations to an ideal (for example, Manion 2003, Probyn 2005), or to a possibility to build solidarity and community by turning shame into pride (Munt 2008)? Or does shame rather leave toxic marks on the person exposed to it, functioning as a mechanism of dominance and normativity (Ahmed 2004, Locke 2007, Woodward 2000)? Some scholars, on the contrary, look at all these conflicting interpretations of shame as oversimplified and instead attempt to redefine shame outside the shame/pride dynamics (Holmes 2015, Tarnopolsky 2004).

I read my empirical materials through the prism of these theoretical discussions and conceptualizations of shame. I share with them a critical stance towards both the existing politics of shame as a power-laden practice and to its dichotomous coupling with pride. This paper inquires whether shame as it is articulated in Belarusian protest circles can indeed create a space for emancipation and agency.

My analysis is governed by the following set of research questions:

- How is the speaking subject positioned in the discursive expression of shame in relation to the nation, state, and fellow-citizens? What lines of social distinction (such as
class, social background, and political views) are employed in the discourse of shame, and what divisions are created, in the process of constructing a nationally-minded subject?

- What are the effects of shame? How and why are the protest and its suppression in Belarus related to shame?
- What is the potential of shame that functions to connect national belonging and protest in the context of state violence and of the protesters’ failure to bring about political change?

The investigation of the politics of shame in its relation to the national subject, power, and protests is important given the complex and contested dynamics of shame. There are a number of historical examples of how collective shame, once imagined and prescribed, then fuels the politics of exclusion and scapegoating on the way to the restoration of dignity. A much cited sociological model that understands shame as a sign of threatened social bonds and connects shame and anger was developed by Tomas Scheff (2000). These ideas have been applied, for instance, to the analysis of the class system in neoliberal societies and in particular to research on the emotional experience of people living in poverty (see for example Chase and Walker 2013, Simonova 2014). At the same time, the shaming of noncompliant governments is one of the political instruments of international relations in situations involving violation of human rights and international law (Friman 2015). The Belarusian authorities have been the target not only of naming and shaming, but of the restrictive measures re-introduced by the EU and the US after 19 December 2010 (Council 2011, Department of the Treasury 2011). In other words, the case

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8 Economic sanctions and a visa ban against Lukashenka and other members of the government were introduced by the EU for the first time after the presidential elections of 2006 (Council 2006). In 2008 the visa ban was lifted. After the presidential elections of 2010 the EU and the US returned to the politics of restrictive measures, imposing a ban against Lukashenka and 157 state officials. In October 2015, after the release of political prisoners, sanctions were suspended and on 15 February 2016 permanently lifted. Only four persons (Vladimir Naumov, Viktor Sheiman, Dmitri Pavlichenko, and Yuri Sivakov), who are considered to be directly involved in the disappearance
presented in this research captures a double-edged process—feeling shame in the context of shaming.

**Bound or Separated by Shame: The Politics of Shame in the Struggle for Social Change**

Theoretically this research draws on the studies of the politics of shame in both the national imaginary and the struggles of social movements. I begin this section by highlighting the emotional underpinning of the very concepts of nation and national belonging. I then reflect on the dynamics of shame as both a subjective and collective emotion in order to explicate its relations to power structures and social norms. In my examination of the politics of shame, I refer back to the debate on the power and radical potential of shame for emancipatory social movements.

Mabel Berezin (2001) claims that manufacturing political affect is what nation-states do, and that therefore, the understanding of the citizen’s relation to the nation-state should be enlarged to explicitly incorporate emotional experience. In a similar vein Nira Yuval-Davis and colleagues propose the following definition of belonging: “[b]elonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling ‘at home’ and—as Michael Ignatieff points out (2001)—about feeling ‘safe’” (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten 2006: 2). Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort (2002: ix) express the same idea by playing with the very word “belonging,” which they see as “a fortuitous compound of being and longing.” This understanding of belonging, however, does not imply that emotions toward home/nation are innocent, innermost sentiments; rather, as the idea of “home” is always constructed in a particular way, these emotions are instead governed and shaped by different social structures (education systems, media, law) (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten 2006, Hedetoft and Hjort 2002).

The conceptualization of emotions as instructive of power relations forms the basis of the studies of the cultural politics of Lukashenka’s political opponents in 1999, are still under sanctions (Council Decision 2015; Department of the Treasury 2016).
emotions on which this article draws (for example, Ahmed 2004, Holmes 2015, and Woodward 2000). Claire Hemmings (2005: 553) points out that the scholarship on emotions advocates an ontological turn. Revitalizing interest in the notion of the subject, it enables inquiry into ruptures, incoherence, and continuity of subject formation. Besides sharing the philosophical interpretation of shame as defined by the gaze of the Other in situations of wrongdoing (Sartre 1996), scholars of the cultural politics of emotions are especially interested in the social dynamics of shame. Importantly for this study, this in turn can shed light on connections between experiences of shame at the individual and collective levels and their transformations.

At a subjective level shame is experienced as a desire to hide from exposure to others (Ahmed 2004). However, when circulation of the emotion, its repetition through time and by different actors, and the specificity of the given culture are taken into account, the situation becomes rather paradoxical. Kathleen Woodward (2000) argues that mass-mediated shame—the kind of shame that is performed in talk shows and tabloid articles—turns into a form of pride in the process of medialization. Media outlets eagerly seek out public confessions of wrongdoings and performances of shame with a view to increasing audience ratings, and precisely through this media attention, shame is translated into something different—fame, satisfaction, and pride (Woodward 2000). A somewhat similar idea about the dynamics of shame and pride is highlighted by Amanda Holmes (2015) in relation to the organized social groups that orient their activities to overcoming shame:

The movement to recuperate shame as a basis for communities of difference exposes this strange thing, though, about the nature of shame: namely, that it seems to dissipate when it is made public or when it is shared.... Either by the way of confession or by the way of a public reclamation of shame, it ... becomes a kind of pride (Holmes 2015: 416).

Investigations of how shame can function as a binding national sentiment can be found in the analysis of Australian political discourses by Paul Corcoran (2004) and Sara Ahmed
(2004). Corcoran (2004) uses multiple examples to describe the preoccupation with negative emotions, especially shame, in public political performances and their media representations in Australia. He sees in them a kind of paradoxical power that helps reinforce and build what he understands as positive emotions—pride, feelings of control, and national cohesion (Corcoran 2004). Sara Ahmed (2004) addresses a similar context, but focuses mostly on the discourse of national shame in relation to the so-called Stolen Generations, and suggests a different theoretical interpretation. She argues that the declaration of shame made on behalf of the whole nation allows a bypassing of actual involvement in serious reflections on naturalized power structures and privileges. In this way, it becomes possible to avoid facing the painful experiences of the affected people. Instead the shameful acts are relegated to the national history, and therefore the very acknowledgement of the shame becomes a sufficient gesture that “purifies” the national present and future of Australia (ibid.).

The role of shame in the concealment of social privilege as a salient feature of the political instrumentalization of shame is also shown in the work of emancipatory movements, especially the civil rights, LGBT, and feminist movements. This, I suggest, is relevant also for my topic—the so-called “fight for democracy” in Belarus. Activities of consciousness-raising groups and the struggles of the feminist and LGBT communities helped raise the issue that shame is distributed unevenly among different social groups and that this arrangement is political (Bartky 1990, Fisher 1984, Manion 2003). Shame is gendered in such a way that in patriarchical culture women are prone to feel ashamed (Bartky 1990, Manion 2003). It is connected to socio-economic status, so that one’s inability to obtain a high position in the capitalist society is presented as a personal failure (Chase and Walker 2013, Simonova 2014, but also Barbalet 1998, Kemper 2001). Finally, shame also sticks to queer

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9 The term refers to Indigenous Australian children who were forcibly taken away from their families and placed in “proper white” foster care by the Australian authorities in the framework of the politics of assimilation that was executed for the greater part of the twentieth century.
bodies (Ahmed 2004, Munt 2008). In this context some scholars and activists have started to see recognition of one’s shame as not only a mobilizing, but an emancipating factor: “There is also a certain joy that can be liberated by slipping out from underneath shame that was expressed historically in the eras of Black Civil Rights Movement, Gay Liberation Front, and the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s” (Munt 2008: 4).

At the same time, serious reservations and criticisms have been voiced in relation to this optimistic perception of the effect of shame for social movements (Fisher 1984, Locke 2007, Holmes 2015). To begin with, doubts about the radical potential of shame are based on the personal dynamics of the experience of shame presented above. As a feeling of negative self-assessment, shame constrains one’s desire to be visible (Ahmed 2004, Locke 2007). As Holmes argues, “Making shame the basis of a politics and attempting to use the affect of shame to ground a community fails to see the utterly incommunicable and isolating nature of the experience of shame” (2015: 416). Further support for the skeptical position towards the politics of shame can be found in the work by Jack Barbalet (1998), where shame is viewed as a mechanism ensuring social conformity rather than facilitating change. Shame may be a personally isolating experience, but as such it can also reveal the recognition and acceptance of social norms and values.

Another critical aspect of the political employment of shame comes from the analysis of feminist and LGBT movements’ inner struggles. Fisher (1984) and Locke (2007) revise and reflect on the effects of shame and shaming for feminist communities, using as one example white feminists’ shame over racism and exclusions. Neither of them denies the ethical importance of shame felt in this context, but both suggest that shame has limited capacities: it “narrows our range of political options and weakens our sense of our own capacities to employ them” (Fisher 1984: 205), and “risks displacing disagreement as it [shame as a common ethical framework] offers up shame as solace” (Locke 2007: 156). This last quote from Locke is also significant as it flags up the risk that the recognition and performance of shame might be perceived as a
sufficient social act and, hence, might serve to prevent positive work for change. This interpretation coincides with Sara Ahmed’s above-cited reading of the effects of national shame in Australia. Finally, in her examination of the LGBT movement, Holmes (2015) points out that here shame feeds into both identity politics and the pride discourse that she resists. In other words, the political employment of shame manifested as an urge to substitute shame for pride might help to normalize certain used-to-be marginal identities, but that in turn opens the way for other exclusions: “pride discourse belies the very ambiguities that a broad movement for genuine sexual and social freedom might entail” (Holmes 2015: 416).

Thus, the politics of shame is rather ambivalent and problematic. Shame is attached unevenly to different social groups, but a political strategy of its public disclosure might not bring them emancipation. The reasons for this are manifold: mere acknowledgement of wrongdoing and injustice does not necessarily lead to real structural change; shame/pride dynamics can constitute other lines of separation and become part of a new system of inequality; finally, the very urge to eliminate shame can serve to confirm the existing norms and privileges rather than challenging them.

I would like to conclude this section with some positive re-evaluation of the politics of shame that is informed by the criticisms outlined above. Amanda Holmes (2015) calls for experiencing shame as shame without an urge to substitute for other, positive, feelings or the necessity to construct any kind of identity on that experience. As she puts it, “the only thing left to shame is shame itself... And one modality of such a practice would entail taking up shame as a resource for refusing the distinctly capitalist impulse to assert oneself through a positive assertion of identity” (2015: 421). This claim resonates with Christina Tarnopolsky’s criticism of a contemporary conception of democratic freedom as being shameless and her notion of “respectful” shame as a practice that she sees as important for democratic politics (2004). For Tarnopolsky, “respectful” shame is
exemplified in Socratic dialogue and is opposed to “flattering shame” in its way of treating the other. Tarnopolsky argues that, instead of appealing to an illusionary consensus and the search for recognition, a “true democratic politics... is one that preserves the openness to this kind of discomforting and perplexing experience so central to the experience of being shamed out of one’s conformity and complacent moralism” (ibid.: 485).

The Birth of a Patriot in the Absence of the Nation? Speaking of Shame in Belarus, Post-19 December 2010

In the next section, I analyze various accounts of shame produced in response to the violent suppression of the protests of 19 December 2010. I collected the empirical materials from independent internet media (svaboda.org, belaruspartisan.org, nn.by, and charter97.org), blogs, and social networks. I selected these by searching for the terms “shame” or “being/feeling ashamed” used explicitly in texts (articles, comments, posts) in order to describe, reflect on, and evaluate events related to the 2010 protest. The sample consists of 35 texts that can be divided into three groups: (a) opinion pieces by journalists, analysts, and public figures; (b) internet discussions; and (c) reports from court hearings and press conferences by politicians. Fifteen of the texts are in Belarusian and twenty are in Russian. As supportive material I also discuss the interviews that I conducted with political activists during my fieldwork in Minsk in 2015–2016. For the purposes of this analysis I use only those accounts that are related to the protest of 2010.

Before turning to the analysis I would like to make add some initial contextual comments. First, shame is not the only emotion named in the texts under study here; in fact, it is usually paired with fear and terror. I have nevertheless chosen to focus on shame, in part because this is a topic that has been rather neglected in this
kind of context. Instead, high-risk protests\footnote{Following Goodwin and Pfaff (2001) I prefer to use the term “high-risk protests” to describe the Belarusian context, as an alternative to making reference to “authoritarianism,” a concept which I find insufficiently heuristic. By contrast, the notion of “high-risk social movements” allows Goodwin and Pfaff to do a comparative study of the US and East German social movements. This term captures the fact that different social movements might experience similar pressure and threats of persecution from the governing bodies and the police irrespective of the labels put on political systems.} are mainly studied by addressing the question of managing fear of participation (for example, Flam 2004, Goodwin and Plaff 2001). Second, it is important to note that the articles and reports originally written for a particular website were usually reposted across multiple oppositional media and social networks. This repetition adds to the emotional dynamics, as this is the very mechanism that defines accumulation of an affective value (Ahmed 2004). Lastly, the period of time under study was also characterized by a wave of negative international reactions to the events of 19 December that were eagerly reported in independent internet media. Extensive media attention was paid to the fact that European and American politicians, parliaments, and ministries had denounced the treatment of the political opposition and peaceful protesters (for example, Charter97.org 2010b; 2010c; 2010d). As such these texts are an example of the international politics of leverage (Friman 2015) that use the formal rhetoric of condemnation and regret. At the same time this discourse also created Belarus as an exceptional state in Europe. For instance, in the article “Lukashenko the Loser” (Bildt et al. 2010) the foreign ministers of Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Germany claimed that the violation of European values that had been committed in Belarus on 19 December and in the aftermath was unprecedented in recent European history. Therefore, the international context was favorable to the revelation of shame by Belarusians themselves. It indicated a failure in the eyes of the Other—a condition that is formative for shame (Ahmed 2004, Barbalet 1998, Probyn 2005).

To analyze the sample I employ the method of discourse analysis in which texts are understood as social practice and are
approached with the aim of revealing how language is used and what words do (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001). Investigating emotion through language is an established approach in social studies and anthropology (for example, Flam and Kleres 2015, Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, Wetherell 2012). As Margaret Wetherell (2012: 19) emphasizes, “it is the discursive that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel.”

The structure of my analysis draws on the understanding of emotions in their dynamics as a form of contact between a subject and an object (Ahmed 2004). This conceptualization emphasizes that emotions neither reside inside a person, nor come from outside, but rather define orientation of the subject in relation to a particular object, which may be imaginative (for example, an idea, a concept), and/or physical. The orientation is both generative for power relations, as it fixes social boundaries and distances, and normative, as it carries the social history of contacts with the object (ibid.). Thus, first I look at how objects defined by the relation of shame are constructed in the discourse. Next, I inquire into the positioning of the subject articulating shame. I aim to uncover how shame functions in the structure of Belarusian society. Finally, I ask what shame does, in order to scrutinize its effects.

Shameful Objects

The data indicate that the articulation of shame posits its object in two different ways: as an external and as an internalized object. The first strategy clearly dissociates the speaking subject from an object perceived as shameful. It is predominantly various governmental bodies and officials—law enforcement officials, the juridical system, politicians and officials supporting Lukashenka, and Lukashenka himself—that are designated as the objects that are invested with shame. This mode of relating to the object of shame is expressed in the direct questioning and shaming of officials, for example, when then Minister of Internal Affairs
Anatol’ Kuliashou was asked during his press conference whether he felt shame over his subordinates’ violent actions towards peaceful protesters (Svaboda.org 2011). It is also manifested in the articulation of the subject’s shame, felt on behalf of those seen as wrong and guilty in the context of Lukashenka’s re-election and the suppression of the protest. In the latter case the shameful objects are also constructed as in some way morally inferior, and thus this discourse creates a kind of hierarchy among Belarusian people and structures. Consider, for instance, these salient examples of such discursive construction:

It’s shameful to say that you are from Belarus abroad, as you need to explain that you’re not like “those people.” I’m ashamed for the president who is a clown, for the parliament and for the council of ministers. As a result it’s not shameful to be only a peasant or a simple worker (user 11111 2010).

Belarusians are ashamed of the low living standards, the unemployment, the pretense of justice, the overcrowded prisons, and the behavior of law enforcement officials. Belarusians are ashamed of the bureaucracy, the submissive and helpless government, the deception of the people, the ignorance of the language, the artists who care only about their salaries; of the Belarusian state television, of the undignified behavior of the ministries’ staff, of the low cultural level of the state leaders, of the highest rate of militia per capita in the world... (Mirzaianova 2011).

It is worth noting that in the second quote the object of shame is enlarged to include not only corrupted political structures, but socio-economic indicators and cultural problems, such as the absence of the Belarusian language in public usage. The way that all these objects are listed posits them as equally important and connected to the affect of shame.

Both of these quotes represent the socio-political reality in Belarus as an opposition of the (bad) state and (good) society whereby the actions and qualities of the former look morally disturbing and shameful, so that dissent is justified. This strategy is symptomatic for civil resistance that lacks conventional political mechanisms of influence (Schock 2015). Researchers analyzing different nonviolent campaigns have pointed out that the moral
arguments used by such campaigns are twofold: they function both as an instrument for establishing the agency of activists in a situation of asymmetrical power, and as a political tool aimed at fighting for broader support (Vinthagen 2015, Schock 2015).

The second, internalizing, strategy of directing shame and defining its object turns the focus inwards, so that a part of the subject becomes an object of shame because of its relation to Belarus. If the former strategy creates a clear boundary between the shameful object and the subject investing their shame in it, the latter blurs this distinction. The following quotes exemplify this:

Belarus has been flooded with lies. A tsunami of lies. Vile lies. And fear. And terror—one part of the population against the other... and for the first time in my life I was ashamed to be Belarusian (Dashuk 2011).

I’m ashamed in front of my children and grandchildren: over 18 years we haven’t succeeded in building for them a state in which they can live and develop, a state where good people can feel comfortable. [A state] where professionalism is respected, where freedom and justice are valued and cherished (Nasanovich 2012).

Contrary to the previous one, this strategy lacks a blaming gesture directed at external objects. In the Nasanovich quote above, the subject even speaks from the inclusionary and general position of “we.” The very belonging to the nation-state becomes filled with shame. Unlike other abovementioned narratives of national shame that look at collective wrongdoing from a historical distance (Ahmed 2004, Corcoran 2004), shame in the Belarusian context shapes the national present or is even projected into the future, as in the following fragment from an online discussion:

I am convinced that Belarusians will be ashamed [emphasis added—AM] of this page in our history, like the Germans were ashamed of fascism; we have subjected ourselves to the will and caprice of a semi-literate humanoid (user Dina 2012).

You’re not right, Dina... [w]e are not ashamed in front of other countries as Germans still are. We have only one shame—shame in ourselves, for having allowed ourselves to become victims of the regime. But this is self-torture, not the persecution of other citizens (user Itog 2012).
Here, then, it is not “the regime” as such that represents the object of shame, but rather the shared responsibility for its establishment and existence. In addition, this dialogue is interesting in its positioning of shame within a national timeframe. The temporality of shame presented as not yet fully present in Belarus (user Dina), on the one hand, corresponds to the construction of national consciousness as a trait of the few. Those who articulate shame perceive themselves as different from other Belarusians who have yet to recognize the shamefulness of the existing political system—an issue elaborated at length below. On the other hand, the dynamics of the shame felt by Belarusians, as the quote by Itoq suggests, is not fed by any harm or wrongdoing that has been directed outwards; rather, it is presented as an internal process. Itoq’s understanding of shame as self-torture echoes the idea of its isolating dynamics described in the academic literature (Ahmed 2004, Holmes 2015). In this fragment, the experience of shame for Belarusians is about their responsibility for the shameful actions (such as being compliant with the system) that have caused their own suffering as “victims of the regime.” I have thus reached my next question: how is the position of the subject constructed in the discourse of shame?

Ashamed Subjects

The quotes above exemplify some differences in how the speaking subjects relate to the ashamed subjects in terms of the linguistic means used to position them in the texts. These include: (a) the ashamed “I”—reflections in which the subject who feels shame coincides with the speaking subject (user 1111, Dashuk); (b) the ashamed “we”—expressions that construct a generalized inclusive ashamed subject (user Itoq, Nasanovich); and (c) ashamed Belarusians—statements built as speaking about and for others who are ashamed (Mirzaianova, user Dina). My approach towards this issue is informed by feminist and postcolonial critiques of the politics of representation that have emphasized the issue of agency and empowerment as expressed through the possibility to speak
for oneself (e.g. Spivak 1988, Alcoff 1992). Therefore, while the first-person accounts of shame might be seen as utterances of agency, the second and, to a larger extent, the third strategies of articulating shame represent an enactment of privilege manifested as speaking on behalf of others. As Alcoff (ibid.: 22) stresses,

> The practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a re-inscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies.

So the question is, then, which social differences are played out in the discourses of shame circulating in Belarus? And how are those social differences produced? As the quotes above show, the position of the subject articulating shame is constructed through different types of estrangement. First of all, there is a separation from everything perceived as related to the official power. More important, though, is the fact that this discursive distancing is hierarchical as it also belittles its objects’ abilities and qualities. Thus, for example, in Mirzaianova’s article (2011) the cultural level of state officials is defined as low and their behavior as disgraceful. This evaluation implies that the subject has the ability to judge and is therefore superior in terms of their own cultural level and behavior. A similar position can be found in an interview with Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian writer and a laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, devoted to her open letter to Lukashenka (Alexievich 2010). In the letter, written in response to the events of 19 December, Alexievich condemned the violence and continuing repressions, questioned the official representation of the event as a riot and mass disorder, and called for dialogue between the opposing sides (ibid.). She explained her position in the interview in the following way:

> I listened to that press conference [held by Lukashenka on 20 December 2010—AM] and I was ashamed. I was ashamed of those who were sitting in the hall and listening to this, I was ashamed of the president. As a writer, I
would like to know how people can fail to understand what they are doing. There is such a thing as history, one can’t escape it (cited in Sous’ 2010).

Here, then, Alexievich articulates shame as something that is felt by a person who is aware of the transient nature of any order or power in history.

In these two examples the subject of the shame discourse speaks from the position of an intellectual constructed by references to knowledge, broader understanding, and cultural background as underpinning and authorizing the subject’s affective response to the suppression of the protest. However, there is another line of tension inside the constructed position of being an intellectual. The subjects articulating shame distance themselves not only from state officials, but also from other intellectuals who are silent and passive about the situation in Belarus. This can be illustrated by the following quote:

On 19 December the country was publicly and cynically raped. The cultural and educated cattle keep their silence, they’ve submitted and are enjoying this. The rape of the country has being going on for a month already, but the cultural cattle are silent... (Ozernyi 2011).

These sentences are then followed by a list of professionals, from school teachers and university professors and through to medical doctors, writers, and musicians. All of these groups are labeled by the derogatory term “cultural cattle” [kul’turnoe bydlo], implying contempt for their passivity, and in this way they are opposed to the subject that feels shame and sees itself as resisting.

Another ambivalent line of distinction that defines the position of the subject articulating shame is the opposition between nationally minded and ashamed intellectuals and “the people” (narod in Russian and Belarusian). On the one hand, as the quote from user 11111 presented above suggests, there is a feeling that “the simple people” can be respected, as hard-working and untainted by any direct access to power. On the other hand, there are a number of texts that juxtapose ashamed subjects to the people, as they blame precisely the ignorance and political
passivity of ordinary Belarusians for the unending presidency of Lukashenka. Consider, for example, this blog post:

The Belarusians are a nation of slaves, a nation... that is destined to live in shit for all time of its existence. I’m ashamed of being a Belarusian. I spit upon these people, let them do what they want. When they disappear, no one will notice. You, single individuals, who are trying to change something, are good, conscious people with dignity... (user niecha 2010).

This kind of presentation of low national consciousness, parochialism, and the absence of democratic culture as supposed characteristics of the Belarusian people, put forward by national intellectuals as a kind of explanation for Belarusian history, has been scrutinized by Elena Gapova (2010). Gapova looks at the discursive alienation between “intellectuals” and “the people” that she observes in her analysis of Belarusian expert interpretations of the protest that followed the presidential election in 2006. Critical towards the argument that weak national identity is the key to the Belarusian political situation, she proposes an alternative explanatory framework for understanding the basis of Lukashenka’s electoral support. Gapova argues (2004, 2010) that behind the urge for national (re)birth articulated by oppositional intellectuals is the claim for a different, market-based system of resource distribution. This claim is supported by social groups (including intellectuals) that see themselves as potential winners in the liberal transformations that were in fact suspended by Lukashenka’s economic policy. She states (2010: 207) that:

[I]t was not language or culture per se that were rejected [by “the people”], but the new system of economic inequality, and thus the Belarusian division can be perceived as “class struggle” between the groups possessing different economic and—most importantly—cultural and “cognitive” assets.

Thus, the shame discourse directed at “bad Belarusians” not only reveals the expectation that ordinary Belarusians will fall short in sharing and performing democratic values and national consciousness. It can also be seen as a way of normalizing a different system of resource distribution that creates opportunities
to convert love for and knowledge about Belarus into economic capital and power.

Effects of Shame

To reflect on my final question—what does shame do?—I engage with the theoretical perception of emotions as pointing to human relationality and, therefore, creating the social world as experienced and lived. As Ahmed writes (2004: 12), “[m]y argument about the cultural politics of emotions is developed ... as a critique of a model of social structure that neglects the emotional intensities, which allow such structures to be reified as forms of being.” I look at the work of shame, therefore, as revealing what the protest is in the Belarusian context and how its elements relate to each other.

Looking at the protest in 2010 in its dynamics reveals that the work of shame differs depending on the stage of the protest. Before the protest, shame was employed to mobilize supporters of the opposition candidates. For instance, presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov was reported (Charter97.org 2010a) as saying at one of his campaign meetings that:

Today it is shameful to live under the dictatorship, it is shameful that we are represented by the dictator who is called “the last dictator in Europe.”
That’s why we’re meeting on the square in Minsk at 8 p.m.

In a similar way shame was evoked by user Budzimir (2010) in his blog on svaboda.org the day before the protest: “I find [it] shameful to observe it [the protest] from a safe distance created by the computer screen while having the possibility to go out and personally participate in the protest.” In anticipation of the protest shame was employed to frame the current situation and define the only moral (not shameful) path of action.
During the protest itself, shame changed its function, object, and linguistic signifiers. In my observation, the Belarusian term"Han'ba!" ("Shame on you!") was consistently chanted at every protest by speakers and protesters in relation to actions of the militia, special forces, and official media (if present). Instead of soram, another Belarusian term for shame that refers to the personal or collective emotion in the accounts analyzed above, han’ba uses the space in the protest to condemn injustice and violence and put the blame on others. This linguistic possibility to differentiate between shame as a subjective feeling (soram), and the act of shaming, or shame in the eyes of others (han’ba) is conspicuous in the entry for the word han’ba presented in Radio Svaboda’s Slounik Svabody (Dictionary of Freedom) (2012). In this project, Belarusian writers, journalists, artists, scientists, and politicians were invited to choose and reflect on key terms considered important for contemporary Belarus. Han’ba was selected as one such key word, and glossed as follows by prominent Belarusian philosopher, literary critic, and theorist of Belarusian national identity, Valiantsin Akudovich:

[W]hen rows of special forces attack protesters and there is no way out... we all—Belarusians, Russians, Jews, Polish—shout in unison one word “Han'-ba”! [Shame on you!]”... But... why does [the crowd] scream “Han’ba”?!... Perhaps we use this word first because it is always with us. Shame in a broken destiny, in the humiliated country, lies like a heavy stone on the heart of everyone who dares to protest. We don’t need to bend down to look for stones on the ground, we take them from the mound of our heart and throw them at the militia shields that stand in our

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11 Although Russian and Belarusian, as official state languages, are both used by the Belarusian opposition (for instance, in the independent media and interpersonal communications), Belarusian is the preferred language here. This is so for political and historical reasons. The Russian language that is currently dominant in state policy, the education system, state media, and everyday life is seen by the national opposition as a legacy of the politics of Russification brought first by the Russian Empire, then by the USSR, and symbolizing the continuing dependence of the Belarusian authorities on Russia. More about the language issue as a political question in Belarus can be found in, for example, Bekus (2014), Gapova (2008), Goujon (1999).
way, separating shame [soram] in ourselves from pride in ourselves (Akudovich 2012).

This quote is instructive for the dynamics it presents: shame in oneself that one bears inside is transformed into the shaming of others, who are seen as an obstacle to restoring one’s pride. Importantly, it is not shame, but rather the act of shaming, or externalizing personal shame in the symbolic act of throwing a word, like a stone made of emotion, that is portrayed as liberating. To put it differently, in order to overcome the isolating experience of shame, an external body is framed as responsible for blocking one’s move towards positive self-evaluation.

Furthermore, the very expression of shame is generative, as it functions as a marker of a patriot. Whereas those groups that are identified as the objects of shame are ignorant, the subject is able to feel shame for them and this feeling is what makes his/her relation to Belarus special. Thus, the mother of a political prisoner Liudmila Mirzaianova (2011) writes that, “A patriot is a person who is not only proud of his/her country, but also ashamed of it."

Consider another telling example of this work of shame, this time in the form of an online article by Aleksandr Feduta, a literary scholar who was a member of Lukashenka’s first presidential campaign team in 1994, and then an author of his unauthorized biography, before joining the presidential campaign team of oppositional candidate Uladzimir Niakliaeu in 2010:

Dmitrii Dashkevich is the guy who in 2004 shouted on Oktiabr’skaia Square “Han’ba!” [“Shame on you!”] ... His “Shame on you!” is a historical fact testifying to the fact that the nation did not exist at that time. Only Dima Dashkevich existed, the person who at that moment felt pain, shame, and ... fear for the fate of his country and his people (Feduta 2012).

Another function of shame that is apparent here is that in the context of unsuccessful protest (Feduta is describing the moment of Dashkevich’s detention) the experience of shame is also the recognition of the absence of the nation as it is imagined it should be. A similar experience was recounted to me by a former activist (interview with Z., 23 October 2015). He was in the front
line when special forces began to push people out of the square. The people around Z. were resisting and were determined to stay. So were all the others behind them, in his imagination. At one moment, he said, he looked back and was shocked to see that the square was in fact almost empty. For Z., this was a moment of disillusionment, a painful encounter with the shameful weakness of the thousands who had come to the square. Thus, in the context of the suppressed protest, the experience of shame moves a person back to the feeling of isolation.

I would like to share two more reflections in relation to the post-protest shame. First, this shame intertwines with the notion of failure. Articulation of failure is widespread not only in activists’ reflections, but also in academic accounts on Belarus, which speak of “national failure” (Snyder 2004); “failure of democratization” (Marples 2009); “failed revolution” (Kalandadze and Orenstein 2009); and “a failure to sustain the development of social movements” (Kulakevich 2014). The overall explanatory framework that can be found in the literature connects the failure of the Belarusians to develop national consciousness to the unsuccessful attempts at democracy (Bekus 2010). Instead of joining my voice to these theoretical discussions, I see them as feeding the politics of shame and contributing to its effects as explicated in the present article. In my interview with a prominent leader of the Belarusian opposition, after five hours of sharing his experience, he exclaimed, “Do you understand what a tragedy this situation is for me?! I’m a Belarusian nationalist and now I’m further from my goal than 20 years ago when I began” (interview with V., 4 April 2016). He and his words have stayed with me as witness to the pressure of shame in the context of a perceived failure. Second, the post-protest shame reveals that the ideal of the Belarusian nation for which one is ready to fight is not yet actually shared even by those who came out on the streets to protest.
Conclusion

This article has attempted to show on both the theoretical and empirical levels that the politics of shame is ambivalent and multifaceted. It is an issue of both privilege and powerlessness, and of the oscillation between the need for pride and the recognition of failure. In the context of the suppressed 2010 protest in Minsk, the feeling of shame becomes formative for a patriotic subject who in a way holds the position of managing the emotionality of the protest. As the article has shown, this process of becoming a national subject translates into the power to divide a community and create social boundaries. Ashamed subjects dealing with their affect relegate blame into external objects (in this case Lukashenka, the government, the people) and articulate their moral superiority over the official power and the politically inactive fellow citizens. The significance of this research is in its focus on social dimensions (class and political views) instructive for this particular dynamics of shame. In this connection the article sets out to demystify the innocence of the patriotic discourse and thus, in turn, to help explain the scarcity of solidarity and support for the protests in societies divided by shame.

At the same time, transnational asymmetries inside Europe should also be taken into account. Belonging to the state that is the target of shaming by the EU and the US adds to the internal dynamics of shame. It animates another line of inequality that is based on international recognition and the standards of nation-building, democracy, and Europeanness. Therefore, shame unfolding in the context of othering produces multiple separations and hierarchies rather than supporting desired social change.

This research revealed a vicious circle in the dynamics of shame for the Belarusian protest movement. If the experience of shame is presented as an initiation for patriots and the very appearance of shame is tied to the moments of the protest’s failure to achieve its goal, then social change become unimaginable from this perspective. Since there is already a quite long history of such failures in Belarus (even after 2010), the stickiness between shame and failure and its detrimental effect for the protest movement is
more and more apparent. Moreover, since the recent return of the politics of cooperation between the EU and the unchanged Belarusian authorities another object of shame has begun to form. As Natalia Radzina (2016), the editor-in-chief of charter97.org, shares,

I have tried to understand my emotions... I don't feel anger, I don't feel resentment, I'm just ashamed... [T]oday I'm ashamed of Europeans coming to Belarus, because from the people representing the Union of democratic values they have turned into regular commis voyageurs.

Contrary to the situation of 2010, when “Europe” was not at all invested with shame, this new dynamic constructs a different political setting in Belarus: it demystifies a former ally by breaking the link between “democratic values” and European politics. Perhaps, then, we are currently witnessing a new stage in the enlargement of the object of shame, and the appearance of yet another line of separation; meanwhile, however, the possibility of imagining political change in Belarus remains elusive.

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