

# How the fathers of the nation became its domestic abusers

The relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism,  
using the case of Aleksandr Lukashenko in post-Soviet Belarus

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## **Abstract**

The starting point for my thesis is the question of how being an authoritarian strongman is a gendered experience and more specifically, why authoritarianism is linked to hegemonic masculinity in post-Soviet space. I have looked at the case of Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus, who can be considered an illegitimate authoritarian leader. His ambivalent position in between Russia and Europe makes him an interesting case to research gender relations and see how and when he instrumentalizes masculinity to gain political legitimacy. I have done a digital ethnography, where I have conducted interviews and focus groups with Belarusian and Russian people, complemented with my observations of online videos, images, etc. I have found that Soviet heritage still plays a big role in discourses on gender, while it is also important to address Belarusian specificities. Anti-Lukashenko opposition groups often deploy similar patriarchal discourses as Lukashenko himself, which points to the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity. I have looked at how feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements have contested these discourses and what is the potential for structural change. Finally, a comparison with Putin contextualizes Lukashenko's performances of masculinity and indicates the geopolitical relevance of using a gendered lens to research authoritarianism.

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## Introduction



Two women kiss under an old Belarusian national flag as opposition supporters gather near the Independence Palace in Minsk, Belarus (Buzhan, 2020, via Associated Press)

Politics is not a gender-neutral practice where rational actors make calculated decisions for the good of the entire population: intersectional power structures underpin political rule and are mobilized to build authority and legitimacy. Therefore, the starting point for my thesis is the question of how being an authoritarian strongman is a gendered experience and more specifically, why authoritarianism is linked to hegemonic masculinity in a post-Soviet space. I have looked at the case of Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus, who can be considered an illegitimate authoritarian leader. But he is far from the only example, which ties into the relevance of this dissertation. How can we relate masculinity to authoritarianism, going beyond Lukashenko? This question will be outside of the scope of this thesis, but Lukashenko's case might provide a framework to inspire further research. I found that there are few academic articles exclusively focusing on

Lukashenko's masculinity and gender relations in Belarus, in contrast to the extensive research on Putin.

This brings me to my main research question, which is:

“How the father of the nation became its domestic abuser: The relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism, using the case of Aleksandr Lukashenko in post-Soviet Belarus.”

This question already references some crucial elements. Firstly, it speaks of a relationship between the private and the public, between domestic abuse and the father of a nation. I will research whether hegemonic gender norms are reproduced and contested in the most infrapolitical spaces of everyday life and vice versa, and how politicians like Lukashenko instrumentalize these norms to seek legitimacy. Secondly, I will conceptualize the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism using the term “phallocracy”. This concept focuses on the performative quality of politics, the aesthetics of power, and in particular the gendered dimension of this performance in an authoritarian regime. I will look at the patriarchal and political relationship between masculinity, femininity, and subordinated masculinities. I will use this theoretical framework to investigate the case of Lukashenko in contemporary Belarus, where I acknowledge both the issues that go together with post-Soviet state-building and the presence of Soviet heritage. I have looked into his performances of masculinity and how they are instrumentalized to build legitimacy and authority, but also beyond him, at how opposition groups and civil society movements reproduce or contest hegemonic gender norms.

To research this, I conducted a digital ethnography, observing online videos, images, and discourses and comparing my findings with interviews and focus groups with primarily Belarusian

and some Russian people and organizations. I elaborate on my positionality and the ethics of doing a digital ethnography during times of state surveillance, extreme violence by the regime, and war.

Can we consider gender an important aspect of Lukashenko's rule? How are women's and LGBTQIA+ movements impacted by Lukashenko's performance of hegemonic masculinity? What are the similarities and differences with Putin, supposedly Lukashenko's big brother and clear example of a phallocratic ruler?



## **1. Theoretical framework**

This dissertation will be about the relationship between the constructed notions of masculinity and authoritarianism. Both concepts need to be problematized and nuanced, which I will try to do in this first part.

Masculinity is a construct that embodies a lot of distinctive realities and is embedded in a lot of different relationships. I aim to politicize gender, and masculinity more specifically, in the realm of political analysis. Politics is not a gender-neutral practice where rational bodies make value-free calculations, taking into account the good of the entire population (Sperling, 2014). Instead, masculinity is a power structure inherent in politics that can be performed or weaponized for different reasons. I will look at how masculinity is instrumentalized as a political tool for authoritarian strongmen, to see if it makes sense to apply it to the case of Lukashenko in Belarus. It will help me understand how masculinity is multifaceted, creating different oppressions and hegemonies in different contexts. I will analyse the relation of masculinity with different hierarchies (i.e., hierarchies of masculinity, hierarchies of sexuality, domination over femininity), hence why I chose to use the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1987).

Since Belarus can be considered an authoritarian state under Lukashenko’s rule, it is useful to conceptualize the relationship between (hegemonic) masculinity and authoritarianism. First, I will look at how states in general are gendered entities (Yuval-Davis, 1997), to then zoom in on the post-Soviet authoritarian state of Belarus. Following Sperling (2014), I argue that it is patriarchy and not the political regime type that produces the instrumentalization of gender norms for political authority-building. This means that in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, gender can be weaponized as a political legitimation strategy. This is important not to assume a

fundamental difference between “the West and the rest” as a “sexual clash of civilizations” (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Yet, in a specific political climate, gender norms can be mobilized differently than in another kind of regime. This is why I introduce the concept of phallocracy, as used by Mbembe (2001), to indicate a kind of authoritarian rule that relies partially on the extravagant and masculine performances of the strongman. Mbembe (2001) used this term in the context of the postcolony, but I aim to demonstrate that it is useful for broader ethnographic studies. The use of phallocracy allows us to focus on the performative aspect of gender, following Judith Butler (2018), in combination with a particular political context.

### *1.1. Definitions of gender*

Before diving into the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), I will first elaborate on the general concept of gender. It is important to note that I do not consider gender a sex-specific biological trait, but rather as historically and culturally constructed through societal relations of domination and subordination, socialization, and the individual’s performance in this context (Butler, 2018). Thus, when referring to gendered terms such as masculinity, it will be from a constructivist or sociological point of view rather than a biological or functionalist one. A consequence of this epistemological perspective is that I consider masculinity a relational category (Yuval-Davis, 1997): it does not exist in an essentialist vacuum but instead interacts with other expressions of masculinity and femininity. The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), as described below, acknowledges this relational power dynamic. Linking gender to hegemony and power necessarily politicizes the concept. Ideological notions of gender and sexuality are important political tools to claim legitimacy and mobilize support (Sperling, 2014). They can be propagandistic weapons and means to delegitimize the opponent. Another

consequence of this perspective is that a performance of masculinity does not require a biologically male body (Dowd, 2008). Women can perform masculinity too, which can only be possible if we make a distinction between sex and gender.

While making the distinction between reproductive anatomy and gender identity, I furthermore acknowledge that both encompass a broader reality than a mere binary one (Butler, 2018). This distinction is not self-evident, as the “gendering of sex” (assigning a sex to someone and expecting them to behave accordingly) is a cultural and historical phenomenon, and not merely a biological given. Yet by separating sex from gender expression, though both cultural constructs and discourses, we can analyse how in order for men to claim rights as such, there is the conventional expectation that “biological males” should present themselves as “men” (and vice versa). In this way, we can address how a particular performance of masculinity can lead to privileges in a culture where this performance is seen as hegemonic (Connell, 1987). It also means we have to continuously reassert our gender identity because it does not result from biological sex. By regarding the world through gendered lenses, we consciously and unconsciously assign masculine or feminine characteristics to a range of objects and subjects, such as people, jobs, activities, behaviours and foods (Sperling, 2014).

I will look at which gender differences are considered socially and politically relevant in Belarus, determined by the structures of domination in which they were historically produced (Weed, 1989). Naturally, perceiving Otherness in a specific culture is rarely confined to sex or gender alone. There are multiple intersectional sources of oppression that are crucial in this process, such as sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and age (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

### *1.1.1. A historical continuum: definitions of gender during the Soviet era*

Western liberal feminists have often had issues understanding Eastern European women and feminism, as they come from a tradition of fighting for the equal status of middle-class White women compared to their White middle-class husbands (Holmgren, 1995). This perspective lacks intersectionality and contextual analysis. Following Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), I will not use the middle-class White Western woman (including myself) as the normative referent against which all other women are measured and thus considered “backwards” or “underdeveloped”, hence why a sociohistorical contextualization is appropriate as a subchapter of my theoretical framework. This will serve as a vehicle to understand the continuum between Soviet times and contemporary Belarus where Lukashenko still propagates similar discourses around gender.

In the Soviet Union, women had equal professional and economic rights, access to the work force and state support for working women (such as paid maternity leave or day care). Some Western feminists sometimes call these instances “triumphs of Soviet socialism” (Holmgren, 1995). Yet an interview from 1980 with different feminists from the U.S.S.R. (Mamonova et al., 1980) exposed that even though there were no specific examples of Soviet laws discriminating against women, there was “a lot of sexist pressure in all areas of society.” They discuss the phallocratic state, a term reflecting the hegemonic masculinity as well as the authoritarianism of that time. I will elaborate further on these concepts below. The Soviet Communist Party demonized feminism and banned feminist organizing (Sperling, 2014), while also establishing cultural norms around men’s and women’s roles in the labour force and the family. Feminism became to be seen as something extremely negative, something that was carried into the post-Soviet era. The feminist movement was not able to grow and instead became associated with butch, unsuccessful, ugly, aggressive,

man-hating lesbians. Naturally, this is pejoratively perceived: something perpendicular to traditional and hegemonic gender norms.

Men did not need to financially support women anymore during that time, but in return the “New Soviet Woman” was not exempt from her domestic duties as housewife under Stalin (Attwood, 1990). There was a demographic crisis of rising divorce rates and declining birth rates, supposedly caused by women entering the work force and gaining more independence. Contrastingly, the solution for this crisis too fell on women; they came to live under the arrangement of the double burden, labouring both in- and outside of the family (Sperling, 2014). Women learnt in school that they were legally equal to men, but this was not an implemented reality. The publicized image of the Soviet woman was that of a happy working citizen, yet the Russian feminists wanted to draw attention to the intimate, domestic spheres and personal stories where patriarchal inequalities still played out (Mamonova et al., 1980). This was not outside of the scope of the state, but very much a continuation of the phallographic order. The Stalinist state sought a rigid separation between state and society, but it became clear that the hegemonic cultural norms seeped through into the smallest cracks of intimacy.

Unmarried women and lesbians were ostracized by society, considered a “psychological abnormality”, and put into mental institutions. Gay men, on the other hand, were often put into prison. Even the difference in punitive institutions can be considered gendered. The feminist movement in Soviet Russia was already focusing on LGBTQIA+ rights, recognition for housework, domestic abuse, reproductive rights, women in government positions and professional places, rights for prostitutes, and so on (Mamonova et al., 1980). The need for this movement indicates that there was no true equality.

Sex was seen as a rigid binary with predetermined biological characteristics (Mamonova et al., 1980). Consequentially, this naturalization of sex legitimized arguments to solidify oppressive heteronormative gender roles and stereotypes. This essentialist notion of men's and women's capabilities led to the unrelieved domestic burden of the housewife, while still having to be included in the workforce. Another example of this, is the idea that lesbians are born with a male mind, being more rational than "hysterical" heterosexual women. Some feminists in the Soviet Union went against this devaluation of "the feminine" and thus wanted to find strength in their "female core".

Discussions on sex and gender were furthermore rendered invisible in the Soviet Union; there were no educational books or public campaigns present (Mamonova et al., 1980). Nonetheless, the state promoted a specific image of womanhood that represented a type of maternal and maidenly chaste construction of femininity (Holmgren, 1995). This image contrasted with the bourgeois construction of femininity that promoted beauty and sexual desirability, which was critiqued in communist Russia. Fashion and beauty products did not reach the domestic sphere and could only be obtained through illegal means. Therefore, actually being able to showcase commodified hyperfeminine beauty and sexuality could be a subversive act in a Soviet communist context of sexual repression. The commodified woman was thus villainized by feminists in the capitalist West and idolized in the communist East. This does not mean that women in the Soviet Union were not critical of this type of capitalist commodification and exploitation of bourgeois femininity and feminism, but due to their context it could be a way to liberate themselves from state-imposed moral norms and exercise creativity in their expressions of sexuality. At the same time, there were women that readily retreated into the home as housewives and accepted the Soviet norms of maternal femininity, and did not want to take up the additional burden of being

pushed into the workforce with men. They were equally frowned upon by Western feminists and considered “backwards” because they did not want to obsessively chase the “career woman” archetype.

When zooming in on masculinity specifically, we can look into Stalin’s ideological fantasy of the New Soviet Man, a “sovietsky chelovek” (Kaganovsky, 2004; Manaev et al., 2011): an exceptionally strong man ready to sacrifice his strength for the state (and would thus become wounded or mutilated). This is not uniquely a Soviet expression of masculinity as this relates to more general concepts like militarism. Yet in contrast to the focus on the individual human freedom in liberal democracies, in Stalin’s ideological fantasy, he himself was the only source of power and strength and the male subjects had to realize that power lay outside of their bodies, namely in the realm of the state (Kaganovsky, 2004). Suffering became a sign of masculinity and heroism, especially if done for the state (“the collective”). Moscow entrenched this idea of the Soviet Man together with a general Soviet identity in Belarus for much of the twentieth century (Manaev et al., 2011). After the Soviet period, there have been mentions of how men became emasculated because of their suffering and dependence of female caretakers, their wives/mothers (Marsh, 2013). In Belarus, post-Soviet nation-building and identity formation have been difficult, as I will demonstrate below, and in his “miniature Soviet Union” Lukashenko still propagates similar discourses around manhood and womanhood as during Soviet times (Dickinson, 2021).

### *1.2. Hegemonic masculinity*

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a larger, cross-disciplinary body of work on masculinities emerged out of feminist and queer theory (Dowd, 2008). The purpose was to question male power and privilege in relation to female subordination, and question gender roles in general. Men were

de-naturalized and de-essentialized, and placed into a contingent context of gender roles. It is through the development of gay and lesbian studies, and later queer theory, that all these naturalized, heteronormative gender structures were questioned. Some scholars argued that men consequentially were facing a crisis triggered by these feminists and queers. Ironically, it is often the perception of such a crisis in masculinity that forges men to reinterpret their masculinity in a way that usually reinforces the patriarchy. So even if there are multiple masculinities possible, there is a constitution of a dominant, preferred masculinity. I therefore argue that the construction of a hegemonic masculinity serves to uphold patriarchal standards in a specific socio-political context.

Hegemonic masculinity is thus the dominant expression of manhood most respected in a culture, opposed to what are considered lower-status enactments of manhood (Connell, 1987). These subordinated masculinities are defined by race, class, and sexual orientation (Dowd, 2008). Even within these subordinated masculinities, there is no singularity, i.e., there is not one “working-class masculinity”, “gay masculinity”, or “Black masculinity” and so on. The concept of hegemonic masculinity draws from Marxist feminism and cultural hegemony theories, translated in the analysis of how men may use their agency to adhere or resist to conventional expressions of masculinity (Waling, 2019). There is potential in the subordinated masculinities to become subversive and forge solidarity with other oppressed groups (Dowd, 2008). Yet there is also the risk that the subordinated masculinities themselves continue to oppress other groups who are lower in the hierarchy of power, such as some groups of women. Higher status expressions of masculinity are obtained by the interaction of the agency of men and the system of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity in turn is sustained through a relational subordination of that



which is deemed “feminine” or “non-masculine” more generally. Femininity cannot reach hegemony when it remains defined and constructed in the context of patriarchy (Sperling, 2014).

In this dissertation, I will focus on this interaction of the strongman’s agency with the gendered structures he is operating in. I will furthermore look at how this hegemonic masculinity is being sustained or contested by the people living under the strongman’s rule. Since a hegemony, though dominant, is contingent and can be contested, I will observe what hegemonic masculinity means for post-Soviet spaces like Belarus. It is important to note here that people reproduce a kind of hegemonic masculinity with different degrees of intentionality. Our choices are constrained by hegemonic discourses in which we are immersed, and if we do not have access to alternative (feminist) analyses, we can unconsciously reproduce similar patriarchal norms. This is not to erase accountability or agency, but rather to understand from a structural perspective how people can intuitively engage in oppressive hegemonic norms. We can of course employ these norms intentionally, reproducing or subverting the hegemonic order. A quintessential example from post-Soviet Russia is the feminist group Pussy Riot, who have purposefully satirized Putin’s machismo in many different ways (Sperling, 2014). I will further elaborate on their example when comparing opposition in Belarus and Russia.

The subversive public display of Pussy Riot is exemplary of the importance of reproducing or contesting gender norms in a public arena (Sperling, 2014). Though tightly related to domestic situations, it is through these public performances that patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity are conferred upon men by one another. Men seek and receive each other’s approval and women learn to either embody a subordinated femininity or adapt to masculine norms. Hegemonic or non-subversive masculinity and femininity are rewarded publicly whereas non-traditional gender roles

are punished. When talking about the link between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism, I will elaborate on the term “phallocracy” (Mamonova et al., 1980; Mbembe, 2001), which illustrates the performative quality of hegemonic masculinity. It also illustrates the public authority-building strategies of hegemonic masculinity, where it is used to gain legitimacy and delegitimize opponents (Sperling, 2014). It finally politicizes the concept of masculinity, since political actors invoke and perform ideas about gender in the political realm, such as the nation.

### *1.3. Gender and the nation state*

In the main title I mention how the “fathers of the nation” became its “domestic abusers”. Here I refer to two main things. Firstly, it alludes to the process of post-Soviet nation-building and the issues around identity formation it accompanies (Smith & Law, 1998). Liberal democratic state-building and nationalism are often associated with pro-European discourse and oppositionists, also by Lukashenko (Astapova, 2021). Belarus has an ambivalent position between Western Europe and Eurasian civilizations such as Russia (Manaev et al., 2011). It had an unformed national identity for a long time, which has historical and cultural reasons, like the unity with Poland in the seventeenth century and the Russification in the following centuries, which entrenched cultural similarities between Belarus and Russia. Some authors argue that there is a kind of Soviet-Belarusian patriotism, inherited from the Great Patriotic War or World War II (Manaev et al., 2011; Rudling, 2008). Lukashenko has, for example, changed Independence Day from July 27 to July 3: originally celebrated to commemorate Belarus’ independence from the Soviet Union, it then became a holiday to remember how the Red Army liberated the country from Nazi troops in 1944 (Balmforth, 2011). Yet since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russia, Belarus has softened its regime and furthermore allowed a kind of nationalism/ “Belarusization” to grow

(Astapova, 2021). At that time, Lukashenko became a strategic partner for Europe to establish peace in the region, which proved useful for him since European sanctions against his regime were lifted. Belarusian nationalism has grown more since the protests in 2020, though not so much from Lukashenko's side, which has polarized the political field. Soviet-Belarusian patriotism seems to be dominant again, as Lukashenko symbolically silenced protesters in 2020 with Soviet songs and discourses. Belarusians changed the public political landscape through symbolic discourses and performances of Belarusian national identity, which reached the international stage. The title of this dissertation secondly hints at the way nations are gendered and the kinds of violence that are considered legitimate herein (e.g., violence against women or LGBTQIA+ people) due to the institutionalization of gendered power relations (Connell, 1990). This is the focus of the remainder of this subchapter.

Out of the ashes of the Soviet Union, new nations and leaders emerged, creating their own political hegemony and institutions with particular characteristics of masculinity. Marsh (2013) discusses for instance the gendered representations of the post-Soviet (Russian) nation state. "The state" is embodied in a masculine *individual*, whereas the "the nation" is represented by feminine symbolism ("Mat' Syra Zemlia" or "Moist Mother Earth" for example). Strong men protecting vulnerable women is a common discourse in nationalism and helps to mobilize military men to fight for their nation. Mies (2014) furthermore argues that there is an active gender politics in post-revolutionary nationalism. Patriarchs are central to the image of a nation state being guided by a strong leader. Following Yuval-Davis (1997), I acknowledge that a crucial difference between gendered bodies can be their membership to a particular nation state. In an intersectional analysis, nationality is one of the markers of possible oppression. Acknowledging this, we face the

conclusion that nation states are gendered entities, and that the historical relations between nation states also produce these gendered differences.

The nation state can be conceptualized through nationalist ideologies and movements on the one hand, and through more materialist analyses of state bureaucracies and institutions on the other (Yuval-Davis, 1997). They shed a conceptual light on both discursive and institutional ways that the state is gendered. Following Foucault (2005), I argue that these discourses and institutions are co-constitutive, as they both delineate the ways in which things can be understood and done, which truths are seen as valid and which sources of power are legitimate. The state is not merely reproduced via rational-legal sources of power, but through symbolic repertoires that give meaning to political actions (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Strauss & O'Brien, 2007). These are equally important in establishing power and providing or denying access to material and natural resources and weapons. State rituals (e.g. ceremonies, elections), collective theatres (e.g. protests) and individual performances (e.g. a dramatic speech) engage emotional attachments between state and society and establish power structures that privilege some groups and oppress others.

Besides public discourses, institutions and symbolic performances, the state is reproduced by actual women who are often hidden in theories of nationalism that mainly focus on nationalist ideologies, bureaucrats, or the intelligentsia (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Precisely because women are crucial in the social reproduction of the state, this function is often legally and socially inscribed in the national order. Yet since social reproduction is often placed in the private sphere, women are not considered relevant politically. They remain in the private realm of their naturalized position as mother, whereas the fathers of the nation stay in the public realm of politics. Here we find the artificial divides of nature/culture and private/public. In the binary symbolic system of masculinity

and femininity, the world becomes dichotomized into polar opposites (Sperling, 2014). I argue that these divides are arbitrary and leads to incomplete analyses of the political realm in its totality: we need instead to look at how they interact and create systems of oppression and privilege.

Another interesting division is one of scale. We can differentiate between the nation state, civil society and the family or kinship relations (Yuval-Davis, 1997). They are all interconnected though there are often oppositions and contradictions in these three different spheres, especially in authoritarian states with high rates of repression (Linz & Stepan, 1996). The state, according to Yuval-Davis (1997), consists of centrally governed institutions that use control and coercion for its organization. Civil society, with its own institutional and social groupings, in turn informs and is informed by this state, yet lies outside of the formal rubric of state parameters. The family, finally, includes personalized networks organized around kinship or friendship relations, but can nonetheless still be social, economic and political. Through the analysis of these three interrelated spheres, we can observe where and how women are included or excluded from having rights or a voice. The subordination and control of women by men has often been the basis for social order (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The differentiation between family, civil society and the state comes into play when we want to grasp who has access to specific functions or resources of the state. Merely looking at civil society relations does not represent the full power dynamic existing in modern-day nations. Therefore, I will observe and interview people who are (in)visible in different spheres, while simultaneously acknowledging that this separation is mainly artificial. Despite that, these social and political spheres are important in our understanding of the relation between gender and the nation if we want to look into the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism.

#### *1.4. The authoritarian state of Belarus*

Belarus, ruled by Lukashenko since 1994, has reverted to authoritarianism after a short flirt with democracy between 1991 and 1994 (Manaev et al., 2011). This challenges the assertion of Fukuyama (2006) that the final instalment of liberal democracy will overcome the “twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning.” We did not reach “the end of history and the last Man” after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratization projects around the globe. Without making assumptions on liberal democracies as the ideal regime, I will investigate whether we can categorize contemporary Belarus as an authoritarian regime. It can be interesting to contrast this with the Western liberal democracy, which Lukashenko intentionally revolts against: he would not mind being called “the last dictator of Europe” for such strategic geopolitical reasons (Astapova, 2021).

Linz and Stepan (1996) define authoritarianism as a political system with limited political pluralism, in which a leader or a small group exercises power within poorly defined yet predictable norms. Lukashenko can be considered an autocrat, ruling the country with a centralized power, controlling every aspect of decision-making (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Rudling, 2008). The ill-defined yet predictable norms allude to a form of arbitrary rule that appears under authoritarian systems; rule that is not checked or questioned by other parties, institutions, or civil society. Conflicts are solved not through democratic deliberation, participatory councils or referenda, but through authoritarian means such as electoral fraud, the manipulation of public discourse or the use of violence against opposition. Security demands do not take human rights or liberty values into account. Belarus is one of the most militarized post-Soviet countries, yet power is distributed in a way that is not transparent and therefore unclear to the people (Astapova, 2021).

In the context of democratic transition, Linz and Stepan (1996) make a differentiation between liberalization and democratization, which need to complement each other. Belarus did not complete the democratic transition in the post-Soviet period: when Lukashenko came to power he quickly committed to return to a particular socialism, with the KGB, bureaucracy and blaming the West for Belarusian troubles (Astapova, 2021). As abovementioned, the Belarusian political climate can be described as a kind of Soviet-Belarusian patriotism with an ambivalent position towards the West (Manaev et al., 2011). Surveillance was justified, as it would prevent protests, terrorism and foreign intervention. This is the opposite of liberalization, which generally entails a mix of policy and social changes, largely evolving around tolerating opposition individuals and groups. In Belarus, tens of thousands innocent Belarusians have spent time in jail since and leading up to the (fraudulent) presidential election of August 2020 (*Political Prisoners in Belarus*, 2022). The conditions in jail are reprehensible, with prisoners being tortured or denied access to necessary medical care, worsened by intersectional markers such as gender, age, ability and sexuality (*VIDEO: презентация фонда BWF / члены фонда / С днем рождения!*, 2021). Prisoners are furthermore often unable to be represented legally due to the regime's reprisals against defence lawyers. Democratization goes beyond this tolerance for opposition, and entails a wider political concept (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Merkel, 2014). Universal voting rights, exercised in open and free competitive elections, constitute popular sovereignty. From this minimalist electoralist definition, Belarus cannot be classified as a democracy. Yet free elections are not the only parameter of a functioning democracy, otherwise Belarus' regime could be regarded as "electoral authoritarianism" (Astapova, 2021). Complementing liberalizing changes are also necessary to guarantee political, civil and human rights for all groups of the population, including an independent civil society. The decisions of the authoritarian leader furthermore need to be

checked by an independent judiciary system, which is not the case in Belarus. Therefore, Belarus neither completed democratizing nor liberalizing changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

An authoritarian system is finally one which is not supported by the population, not only in the electoralist sense, but also meaning that a significant portion of the people does not consider the current political system or regime ideal to govern the country. We have seen that a large portion of the population in Belarus have gathered on the streets to protest against the outcome of the elections in 2020, wanting to overthrow the dictator and his regime. There is thus a crisis of trust and legitimacy. Even an authoritarian regime, ruled through repression and force, needs and uses legitimation strategies to assert hegemony and undermine opponents (Sperling, 2014).

#### *1.5. Phallocracy: conceptualizing the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism*

We can ask ourselves finally if we can usefully conceptualize a relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism. The patriarchy is an oppressive structure that is not exceptional to non-democratic regimes, but is very much present also in democratic societies (Sperling, 2014). Leaving the question somewhat open for my own research, I will see what has been said on a possible relationship between a kind of masculinity and authoritarian politics.

When conceptualizing authoritarianism in relation to hegemonic masculinity, the term “phallocracy” can be relevant to describe a performative governance that is etched on a kind of masculinity. The phallus has often been the symbolic yardstick for power and truth, whereas everything that is not shaped according to this form, is considered lacking, negative, non-existent (Davis, 1995). Audre Lorde (1993) acknowledged the power of the erotic and urges womxn to reclaim this resource as it has often been suppressed or distorted. Eroticism as deep, full feeling



can be a potent form of resistance against the disaffection of modern life and the oppression of phallographic structures trying to distort sexualities and lives that cannot be measured by this phallic yardstick. These symbolic notions allude to how hegemonic masculinity obtains (bio)power in the patriarchy and uses this to discipline and control bodies.

Mbembe's (2001) also uses the term "phallogracy" in his work, "On the Postcolony". Herein, he conceptualizes postcolonial authoritarian regimes as "the commandement" and more specifically "the authoritarian modality". This modality is characterized by structures of power and coercion and a rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey, which ought not to be questioned. To achieve this, the commandement creates a world of meanings which become embodied in people's daily lives and common sense. This is the "banality of power", a power that is not just institutional or bureaucratic but also discursively embedded in everyday life. These discursive meanings become non-negotiable, naturalized, and disciplined (see also Foucault, 2005). The commandement seeks to institutionalize itself and establish hegemony. Mbembe (2001) describes this authoritarian modality as a kind of fetish, needing to be obeyed and made sacred. It holds power over everyone who carries it intimately within them and interiorizes this specific power structure. This means that not only the autocrat carries this fetish, but also the agents of the state and its inhabitants.

Besides the banality of power, Mbembe (2001) also speaks of the "aesthetics of vulgarity". To assert hegemony and reproduce this authoritarian power modality, the commandement seeks legitimacy through extravagant (hypermasculine) performances. The grotesque and the obscene are important elements for the state to dramatize its own magnificence. It uses objects, monuments, and festivities to materialize its majesty, while outcasts and infidels are being

punished on a public stage. All these spectacles need to be captured by an audience in order for the subjects or citizens of the state to interiorize these symbolic messages. Yet the subordinates themselves also reproduce the phallocratic state by making obscene jokes, using phallocratic symbols and metaphors in their language, and accepting or rejecting specific cultural codes. They are not mere passive victims, but important agents of the commandement who equally contribute to the vulgarization of power. Often the authoritarian ruler ironically undermines his own legitimacy due to these excessive displays of power, which become the object of ridicule by the subordinates (Mbembe, 2001; Sperling, 2014).

We have to point out that Mbembe's (2001) concept of phallocracy, used in his book "On the Postcolony", is written for a particular context. Therefore, we have to uncover whether it can be conceptually stretched for other sociohistorical contexts, such as post-Soviet Belarus (arguably also a postcolonial state). Mbembe (2001) argues that in the commandement, the state is embodied in a singular person: the authoritarian ruler. This leader controls all aspects of the state and on his own grants or abolishes liberties. Connecting this to Stalin's conceptions of masculinity and the state and continuities with post-Soviet Belarus, we can already sense the potential to apply the concept of phallocracy beyond the African postcolony. This personalized type of rule also comes with targeted images of the leader, and rumours and jokes about private and intimate aspects of his life. Mbembe (2001) gives the example of the Togolese people chanting slogans about the presidential phallus, how the powerful key of their president penetrated the keyhole, and so on. Metaphors referring to genital organs, odours, the belly and general orifices became a main focus of popular speech. The eroticization of the political leader and discourse makes the sexual sphere relevant to politics (Sperling, 2014). The obesity of men in power, or their impressive physique, is also a metaphor for grandiosity and domination. The physicalities of the strongman, his body, face

and posture, become primary signifiers, sending out meanings to the people, which are reinterpreted and reproduced. Though Mbembe (2001) used the phallocracy in this particular context, I will demonstrate that we can use this concept beyond this sociohistorical framework. Elizabeth Wood (2011), for example, describes how Putin's masculine "political spectacle" is crucial for his image as a solo ruler who commands the political realm, a realm that is characterized by failures of governance and an increasingly non-democratic system. She also gives the example of how Putin vulgarly refers to bodily excretions when making public statements about political opponents. Thus, the term phallocracy is interesting for ethnographic research beyond *The Postcolony*, and to analyse the gendered performances of masculine state leaders and the way the audience shapes this performance in turn.

Finally, Mbembe (2001) acknowledges that there is a need to go beyond rigid binaries, such as those of hegemony versus counter-hegemony, state versus civil society, totalization versus detotalization. There is rather an intimate link between the authoritarian state and the subordinates who interact to create and sustain a world of meanings. He argues that the commandment and its subjects live in a relationship characterized as convivial, instead of by collaboration versus resistance. The familiarity and domesticity inherent in this relationship can explain the way in which a kind of hegemonic masculinity has been dominant in both the public and private sphere, and how these spheres are actually interconnected. The domestic sphere is also where the banality of power becomes present and where this can be challenged in infrapolitical ways (Mbembe, 2001; Scott, 1990). Scott (1990) furthermore stated that the stricter or more authoritarian the regime is, the richer political folklore becomes. One example supporting this is the high number of political jokes during the Soviet period, extending into post-Soviet Belarus (Astapova, 2021). Jokes, rumours, gossip, etc. are consequentially important research techniques for me to uncover

the supposed phallocratic type of rule in Belarus. Counter-discourses against hegemonic masculinity (e.g. in the form of mockery) by the people are important to understand how the ruler represents his power as well as how it can be undermined (Sperling, 2014). There is however a plurality of counter-discourses, beyond the binary between hegemony and counter-hegemony, therefore the question remains which counter-discourses truly subvert traditional power structures and whether this is enough to unseat both the political and ideological status quo. It might in any case reveal the agency of the Belarusian people living under political repression. Belarusian society has often been analysed through the lens of victimhood and passivity, which changed substantially when Ackermann et al. (2017) challenged this idea by emphasizing the agency of people living under Lukashenko. They wanted to do away with the excessive focus on Lukashenko's "one-man show" and instead reveal the hidden subjectivities of ordinary Belarusian people.

*"Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it first in laughter?"* – Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985)

## 2. Methodology

*“They say to me: Well, memories are neither history nor literature. They’re simply life, full of rubbish and not tidied up by the hand of an artist. The raw material of talk, every day is filled with it. These bricks lie around everywhere. But bricks don’t make a temple! For me it is all different... It is precisely there, in the warm human voice, in the living reflection of the past, that the primordial joy is concealed and the insurmountable tragedy of life is laid bare. Its chaos and passion. Its uniqueness and inscrutability. Not yet subjected to any treatment. The originals. I build temples out of our feelings... Out of our desires, our disappointments. Dreams. Out of that which was, but might slip away.”* – Alexievich, 2018, p.xxi

This touching quote of Svetlana Alexievich (2018) from her book “The Unwomanly Face of War” describes the raw beauty of collecting ethnographic data. It emphasizes the historicity of knowledge and the puzzle we can make out of this, even in an entropic environment of clashing voices. Doing a digital ethnography, I have found the joy in this, while also noticing the limitations of doing research without physically being in the field.

My main methods for data collection have consisted of observing digital materials and conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups, mainly online through Facebook, Zoom or Google Meet, held between November 2020 and May 2022. Some of the people were residing in Belgium and therefore we could meet up in person in an office or library space. It has been an iterative process of going in and out the field, although this separation is artificial, especially while doing digital ethnography (McLelland, 2002; Robben & Sluka, 2007). My field is furthermore multilocal (Hannerz, 2012), because I did not merely focus on Belarusians living in Belarus; I included Belarusians living abroad and other people coming from and living in post-Soviet countries. I

furthermore talked to researchers in the themes of my study, i.e. gender, authoritarianism, (post-)Soviet politics. I find it important that my theoretical framework and methodology are (in)formed and adapted by people in my field.

### *2.1. Sampling method and participants*

I started my fieldwork via my own personal and academic network. I contacted the people I knew from Belarus and Russia to ask them whether they wanted to participate in my research. Many of them consented to this and invited their friends and acquaintances to join, initiating the snowball sampling method. I have also posted a request to participate in interviews about Belarusian politics and gender relations in a Facebook group with Belarusian people, which has also gained me some contacts. Finally, I have actively looked for feminist, women's and LGBTQIA+ organizations online, of which I have reached some. When starting my research, I had doubts about people wanting to share their political views out of fear of repression, but I actually found participants quite easily. They do not represent the whole Belarusian population, but a distinct sample of people who are most of the time highly educated, engaged in politics and having lived or studied abroad. Other noteworthy demographic information is that there were remarkably more young people (20-30 years old) who were mainly women (13 women, 9 men). This sample is contradicting with findings of Astapova (2016, 2021), who conducted many interviews in Belarus about similar topics. She found much more men to interview, assuming politics is seen as a male business and the state discouraging women to participate in political life. One of her interviewees said "I am a girl and I do not interfere in politics" (Astapova, 2021, p.15). Of course, this is not an absolute reality, and she found that she could talk politics with women in more informal, private settings. Perhaps this is due to a division between the public and private, which in my case is more

blurred by doing a digital ethnography with a snowball sampling method starting from my personal network. The political climate has arguably also changed for women after the 2020 presidential election, where women have been leading oppositional protests. All these factors contribute to different fieldwork experiences with female participants from Belarus.

Since I have promised anonymity to my participants, I cannot enclose more than basic demographic information about them. Nonetheless, their specific positionality was important in order to adapt my questions to every new interview or focus group. The annex shows all the different versions of interview guides with relevant information about the positionality of each participant or group of participants.

The bulk of the participants are Belarusian, who can be classified in three categories, following Yuval-Davis' (1997) categorization of people in relation to their country of origin. There were people who are Belarusian and still live in their homeland, and therefore often have nationalist and/or ethnic ties to their country. Secondly, there were political exiles or refugees planning to return to their home country once the situation gets safer. They often have nationalist ties to their country as well. Lastly, there was a mostly diaspora community represented in my interviews: people who emigrated to another country and remain ethnic or kinship ties, but do not have an immediate wish to return permanently. Considering the current political situation and my inability to go there, I found more people from the latter two categories. They were currently residing in Belgium, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Spain or the United States. I have also included Russian people in my research, though all were living abroad, to analyse similarities and differences in post-Soviet phallographic regimes. Soviet heritage and Lukashenko's ambivalent dependence on

Putin are important factors for my case study, therefore including Russian people helped to contextualize Lukashenko's rule.

## *2.2. Methods for data collection and analysis*

I have conducted a digital ethnography, which means that I have immersed myself in a digital field while gaining access to people digitally. I have analysed Lukashenko's public discourses and behaviours through videos via social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube), documentaries, written statements, and journalistic articles, which I also shared in some interviews as visual elicitation method (see annex). Online, these discourses do not exist in a vacuum, so I also took a look at the reactions and discourses of people in the "comment sections." In this sense, I did not only use digital tools, but also entered a digital field. I have to be conscious of this (how does this (not) connect with the "real world"), as well as of my position. I had to make my presence as researcher known, so I was not just lurking, doing a covert observation. This was not the case when information is made completely accessible publicly, without the need for any registration (log-in).

Entering the digital field, I could not overlook the abundance of visual materials and merely focus on written discourses. In a world of global communication, visual images are everywhere and constitute important political representations (Bleiker, 2018). Analysing gendered performances of a strongman remains meagre when merely reading journalistic articles, quotes and Facebook discussions. I was inspired by Strauss & O'Brien's (2007) notion of the performativity of power, where they analyse the state as a performance on different levels. They draw attention to how the state mythology is articulated through visual discourses, also going beyond actors: art, monuments, parades, etc. can all express power struggles. Visual discourses teach us something



about who is included or excluded in a staged setting, for example many photos of Lukashenko with his son at military parades surrounded only with men in uniforms (*Is the Boy with the Golden Gun Being Groomed to Rule Belarus?*, 2015). Digital spaces form a particular public stage, where you can manipulate your discourses even more than on the streets. Mbembe's (2001) work on the aesthetics of vulgarity similarly inspired to me to look at how an authoritarian regime is a stage where sometimes obscene and gendered performances play out, which become reproduced or contested by the audience (the citizens). My notion of state and gender as intersecting performances informed my choice to use the framework of these authors and look at my ethnographic material as a theatre play. In the data analysis, I looked for common themes and threads in the story. I was a spectator observing the visual discourses, and when showing the material to my participants, I observed them as being an audience as well.

The images, videos and discourses I have analysed online and used for visual elicitation in interviews have been selected based upon different criteria. The first was the frequency in which I came across a particular discourse or image when I explored Lukashenko's discourses and gender relations in Belarus online. The infamous quote of Lukashenko saying "It is better to be a dictator than gay" (Frear, 2021) was the most frequently found statement online, which I therefore also often used in interviews. A second criterium comes from the iterative process of doing ethnographic research while writing and adapting your theoretical framework and methodology. I included or excluded visual materials according to the positionality of the interviewee, but also to the reaction of previous interviewees. Some materials turned out not to be that useful for my research, which is why they were quickly left behind. One example of this is the use of gendered Soviet propaganda posters (Zakharov, 2007): this would be an interesting analysis on its own, but one which goes a bit beyond the focus of my research. The third criterium is related to the second

one, namely that my participants provided me with pictures to include in my visual discourse analysis. To ensure anonymity, I will not refer to these images here, as they often show friends or family members or are found on their personal social media accounts. The final criterium is more deductive, meaning that I looked for particular discourses online to provoke my participants, based upon prior research. An example of this is a video I found when looking for the discourse of Lukashenko as “father of the nation”, where a Belarusian rapporteur for the United Nations spoke about how Lukashenko sees himself as “the father of the nation, the protector of the Belarusian people and the owner of the Belarusian country” (*Lukashenko: The story of “Europe’s Last Dictator”*, 2020). I wanted to see what my participants thought of this statement, and it provoked some interesting discussions. The annex provides an overview of which memes, videos, images and quotes I have used for each interview or focus group.

I have conducted four focus groups, one in English, one in Dutch and two in Russian with a translator. The translator already knew one of the participants in the focus group, who in her turn invited the other participants. This facilitated a relationship of trust. In these focus groups and interviews, I used the semi-structured or in-depth interviewing technique, loosely following an interview guide with open-ended questions, which was more topical than a strict list of questions to follow absolutely (Russel Bernard, 2006). In a focus group, it is not just me extracting information from one person at a time, but an open discussion with different voices (multivocality; see Robben & Sluka, 2007), taking the time to learn from each other. Instead of individualistic one-on-one interviewing, a focus group could be a moment of democratic, collective deliberation where an opinion is formed by multiple voices (Rudolph, 2005). It could be a moment of solidarity and healing from traumatic experiences under authoritarian rule. This was something I left space for during the interviews, yet I was unsure whether it could be a constructive space of

healing due to the distance created by the computer screens and the language barrier in the Russian-speaking groups.

Astapova's (2016, 2021) work has been a great inspiration for me, both in terms of methodology and content. She has researched how rumours, gossip and jokes about Lukashenko assume different meanings and importance within a contested political sphere. This is in line with Mbembe's (2001) writings on phallocracy; arguing how the strongman's performance got reproduced and interpreted through jokes, folk tales, gossip, etc. In my interviews, I have specifically asked about such rumours and gossip about the strongman to see which popular stories circulate and resonate with people. I believe this is an interesting and useful way to decipher social reality.

Because qualitative data is dependent on interpretation, the separation between data collection and analysis is often artificial (Alhojailan, 2012). My research consisted of an iterative process of being informed by my field, the literature review and the Thematic Analysis of the data I have gathered in these two instances. I did not write any of my chapters separately or in a specific chronological order, but built everything along the way. Since I did not record and therefore could not transcribe my interviews, I did not do a classical Grounded Theory analysis, even though I was inspired by this method (Charmaz, 2014). To analyse my data, I have printed my interview notes and used colour coding to inductively find themes in the answers. I first read through my interview notes a couple of times before coding them, i.e. discovering recurring themes and then assigning them a particular colour. Finally, I have coded and analysed my data after every few interviews, discovering themes and theories I deepened in the following interviews, which is instead a more deductive research process. While my thesis depended mostly on inductive research, the iterative

process of analysing my data and going back in the field with new presumptions and preliminary theories indicates the thin line between induction and deduction.

### *2.3. Reflexivity and situated knowledges*

Finally, reflexivity has been a key aspect of my methodology. I constantly assess the relationship between knowledge, the ways of doing knowledge and who provides me with knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Everything I have read, observed and heard has generated an opportunity for me to understand a social reality, without considering this as an established truth. When I observe content of Lukashenko online, I have to be aware of the source that uploads the videos. I have learnt that Belarusian media is under strict state control (and strongly influenced by the Russian state), so the information I would collect would be biased, though this does not mean it will not be useful. I am more interested in the representations of Lukashenko, his regime and opposition (in plural) rather than “politically correct discourses”. An example could be the documentary film “Krestny Batka”, released in July 2010 by Russian media to paint a very specific negative picture of Aleksandr Lukashenko (Travin, 2010). I am also applying this reflexivity to the participants in my study. Using Donna Haraway’s (1988) concept of “situated knowledge”, I acknowledge that my interviewees are rooted in historical and cultural value contexts. I have come across different opinions around the topic of gender in politics: some people thought it was completely irrelevant to look at Lukashenko with a gendered lens. They just wanted to overthrow Lukashenko’s rule, some even stating they would not mind the establishment of a new dictatorship. These were mainly cisgender, heterosexual men. Others, contrastingly, actually felt oppressed under the patriarchy Lukashenko reproduces. They were mainly women and queer folk. This is not to essentialize people’s identities, but to acknowledge that we cannot separate

knowledge from one's societal position. When writing my case study, I actively took this meta-knowledge into account.

### **3. Positionality and ethics**

My research topic, broadly speaking, is about gender and its relation with power and politics. This is a topic that interests me deeply, and one I would have spent time looking into anyway if it were not for my dissertation. It is important to note my positionality to reflect upon the biases built into my research. Neutrality is both impossible and undesirable, yet making the assumptions I have about my research topic explicit is necessary (Russel Bernard, 2006; Robben & Sluka, 2007). I will inevitably feel sympathies and emotions towards certain stories and people, which is ethnographic information on its own (McLelland, 2002). My position as a White, queer, middle-class, cisgender woman from Western Europe allows me easy access into some spaces whereas I will need to negotiate that access in others. This background will possibly give me easier access to specific organizations, groups or activists working around gender issues. It will help to build rapport and trust and create a space of mutual understanding. My own queerness allows me to be sensitive to issues of gender and sexuality yet at times I had to perform being straight and laugh at homophobic jokes in order to obtain certain information. My positionality from Western Europe also means I have some biases and presumptions about gender and feminism in Eastern Europe. I had to read and listen with an open mind to do away with these prejudices and not deepen a supposed divide between “the East and the West”.

I chose post-Soviet countries as my field for a couple of reasons. First of all, I already wrote on the women’s movement in Belarus after the elections of 2020, because I found it an urgent and interesting situation to understand deeper. I had the opportunity to conduct a digital ethnography at that time and chose Belarus for that reason. Secondly, I have followed courses on gender, and I found that often this region is excluded in many of the conversations (though lately more because

of the public resistance and solidarity of the LGBTQIA+ community in Eastern Europe). On the other hand, I have to be careful not to observe my topic in a pristine vacuum (Bourgois, 2007), but situate it in a broader literature of masculinity and authoritarianism. Otherwise, there is the risk of seeing “the other” as completely distinct, strange and traditional in comparison to “ourselves”. It is furthermore also important not to consider post-Soviet masculinity in a historical vacuum, but as a continuum with earlier patriarchal structures. The reason I focus on post-Soviet countries is also motivated by the desire to acknowledge this particular sociohistorical context. This also means that I do not consider the post-Soviet space as one bloc without regional, national or local specificities. The final reason for choosing this topic is to nuance Lukashenko’s rule in Belarus and not simply equate it with Putin and Russia, a much wider known and researched topic.

Even though I have a strong interest, I do not consider myself an expert on the region or subject, giving me doubts about my positionality and motivation to research this topic. Yet, I was curious and open to learn, not only before going “into the field”, but also from the research participants. They played a pivotal role in shaping and changing my research (question, design, outcome). The research question has undergone changes as consequence of knowledge I have gathered through reviewing literature and speaking with people in the field. It is also important not just to define the theoretical framework myself, but also to learn what the definitions and assumptions are about masculinity and authoritarianism in Belarus or similar post-Soviet spaces. My hope is that my research will be relevant for my research population and not just an intellectual exercise for me.

The regime has been and continues to be so brutal for opposition that I have to be cautious and sensitive about the lived experiences and traumas when asking about participants’ opinions and stories. The ongoing war Russia is waging against Ukraine also influences the way I approach

participants and vice versa. For me, it might be a one-year engagement to write a master's thesis, but for them, it is a lived reality with grave consequences. I have done some volunteering work since the outbreak of the war to "give something back" to the region, however small. I felt a moral responsibility that went beyond mere academics. I furthermore believe it is important to listen and not try to "theorize their emotions away". The digital aspect of this ethnography made it difficult at times to show understanding and empathy when people told me their experiences with the police or in prison. This made the interviews feel distant at times, and shows the limitations of doing digital fieldwork. When the war had just broke out in Ukraine, I was hesitant to ask my participants about their feelings and opinions about it, so I was very cautious bringing it up online. When the interviews progressed, I felt it was actually important to ask some concrete questions about the war and Lukashenko's position in it. Being overly sensitive may not always be the best route, as many participants were actually willing to speak about the war.

When selecting participants, I mainly started from my own personal network in- and outside of academia, as abovementioned. I wonder how this snowball sampling technique could confirm power imbalances or skew the representation of people I include in my study. Starting from my own social network is useful to get into the field (Russel Bernard, 2006), but I have to be conscious of which voices are not heard. I noticed that there was a certain anxiety among the participants who were still residing in Belarus. Even though I quickly got a bunch of responses, many were sceptical about talking to me at first and some ultimately rejected talking to me. Many deeds, especially linked with politics or foreigners, can be interpreted as risky. Therefore, people employ self-discipline and self-censorship to avoid the possible risks of perpetual state surveillance (Astapova, 2021). In this context, it has sometimes been difficult to conduct a digital



ethnography. To facilitate a relationship of trust, I have decided not to record any interviews, but merely take notes.

When conducting interviews and writing down what my interviewees have shared with me, I have to safeguard their safety by ensuring anonymity. I have asked informed consent whenever relevant, meaning when I am using information from research participants outside of the immediately accessible public digital field (without the need for a log-in). I have always asked oral consent during interviews and focus groups, after providing them with all the information needed to be able to give informed consent (how I will make sure everything remains anonymous, how the information will be used, making sure they could withdraw at any time).

#### 4. Case study: Aleksandr Lukashenko

Based on digital ethnography and my literature review, I have observed and analysed different performances of Lukashenko as authoritarian strongman. This will be the first part of my case study. I will give an overview of how Lukashenko seeks legitimacy and asserts himself as an authoritarian strongman using hegemonic gender norms, whether intentionally or not. In the second part of my case study, I will look at this strategy beyond Lukashenko and see how other groups in society also deploy gender as political strategy. I will share how Lukashenko's rule and hegemonic masculinity influences gender relations in civil society. I have looked into some women's and LGBTQIA+ movements and activists and their experience with Lukashenko, before and after the protests of 2020. Because hegemonic masculinity in Belarus is connected to other post-Soviet countries, especially Russia, I will include examples of Putin as well. The war Putin is still waging on Ukraine currently also influences this supposed "brotherhood". Comparing with Russia frames Lukashenko's rule in a broader context, yet acknowledging that I cannot deeply analyse all post-Soviet countries and other geopolitical relations within the scope of this thesis.

##### 4.1. Lukashenko's performance as a strongman

*"The autocrat is lying down, on his side. But not quite. Crushed up against the pillow, his right cheek is totally invisible. Of his eye on that side, practically nothing can be seen, only a hint of an eyebrow quickly lost in a wide forehead, slightly scowling, as well as one side (and half the other) of a moustache, split by a short cleft beneath a nose not snub enough. The autocrat is close-shaved. From this third of a face convoluted and variegated, just where the hair and the far cheek meet, the left ear emerges abruptly — sticking up, as if on watch, like the leaf of a kapok tree. The cheek itself droops, like a cluster of grapes — or, we might say, a bag full of wine, milk, and fat all*

*at once. The whole lower body is wrapped in a thick blanket. This clings so closely to the form's rough lines that it clearly hints at where the flesh sticks out, where it protrudes, and where it curves—in short, its excess.*” – Mbembe (2001, p.149)

Since the early 2000s, there is a joke circulating on the Internet, saying “Why do all dictators have moustaches?” (Astapova, 2021). Indeed, if we look at the history of dictators, quite a few of them seem to share similar facial hair styles (Vassigh, 2022). While the aesthetics of power have been a crucial aspect of my methodology, I do not open this section with this joke to suggest any historical determinism about dictators. I believe this joke can generally point at two main things: (1) the performative relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism and (2) the way that people in authoritarian regimes still crack political jokes. Jokes can be a way to resist the authoritarian state in a symbolic and infrapolitical way (Scott, 1990), though they can also normalize horrendous situations, rendering them mundane and hegemonic (Astapova, 2021). The quote of Mbembe (2001) above also points at how autocratic rule is symbolic and vulgar and becomes vulgarized by peoples’ stories. In this section, I will describe political discourses and vulgar performances Lukashenko deploys which constitute and reproduce hegemonic gender relations as well as how people react to and interpret these performances.

#### *4.1.1. Political homophobia and the promotion of family values*

Because hegemonic masculinity operates through the hierarchical subordination of other masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1987), homophobia and misogyny are instrumentalized politically to assert authority. Lukashenko is exemplary of this in multiple occasions. In an interview from 2012, Lukashenko said it is “better to be a dictator than gay” (Frear, 2021), in response to European sanctions against human rights abuses in Belarus and meeting Germany’s

first openly gay Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. He appealed to his electorate and criticized the European Union for being degenerate, a place where traditional heteronormative values are in decay. Framing yourself as a dictator whenever needed while simultaneously cooperating with the West can be a political strategy to expose hypocrisies in the European Union (Astapova, 2021). Belarus has often been portrayed as the “last dictatorship of Europe” by the West, getting sanctions as a consequence of human rights abuses. Yet, when it is convenient to cooperate with Belarus, these sanctions are lifted. An example is during the peace talks in Ukraine in 2014, where Lukashenko was put forward as mediator between Russia and Ukraine. All of a sudden, the United Nations seemingly forgot the political prisoners in Belarus.

Increasing attention has been paid to homophobia in post-Soviet spaces such as Russia and Belarus, particularly after Russia’s “anti-gay propaganda” law from 2013 and violent persecutions of LGBTQIA+ people in Chechnya since 2017 (Frear, 2021). In Belarus there is no similar legal framework that explicitly criminalizes gay people, and homosexuality was actually decriminalized in 1994. Yet, there is still a framework of political homophobia which plays out in similar ways. Authorities do not acknowledge violence against LGBTQIA+ people as hate crimes; they are considered separate cases, framed as “misdemeanours” (Levitskaya & Mancewicz, 2017). Same-sex marriage is not legally recognized, with Article 32 of the constitution stating that marriage needs to be between a man and a woman (*Equaldex*, 2022). Lukashenko has vowed that, while he is president, same-sex marriage would never be legally recognized. He has furthermore attacked universities and centres that work around gender issues, closing them for their openness and independence and therefore halting research about the topic. While there is repression against sexual minorities on all levels of society, people still organize in the grey zones of social activity. One feminist and LGBTQIA+ researcher has told me:

*“Between 2005 and 2015 we could not organize seminars or we did it clandestinely. The police regularly terrorized members of the Gay and Lesbian Association in Minsk. In 2010 we organized a gay picket which was banned by the state and all of us were arrested for 3 days. Obviously all this was controlled by the Lukashenko regime which did not want to authorize any kind of feminist and especially gay and lesbian activities. The Belarusian regime is conservative, authoritarian, heavily influenced by the Russian regime and the Orthodox Church, so it is anti-gender from the start.”* (Interview 13, online, 09.05.22)

Other interviewees have recognized that political homophobia is something that exists in Belarus and that this is actively propagated by Lukashenko. Someone stated in a focus group:

*“It seems as if the whole Belarusian propaganda is against gays and people who have anal sex.”* (Interview 8, online, 30.03.22)

to which someone replied:

*“Sex toys and lube are supposedly only used by gays and this is equated to Europe. Lukashenko’s supporters let their emotions be triggered by queer topics.”* (Interview 8, online, 30.03.22)

A similar example is Putin’s notorious term “Gayropa”, indicating the degeneration of heteronormativity in Europe (Frear, 2021; Sperling, 2014). Many participants indicated a divide between progressive, democratic Europe and conservative, authoritarian Russia, in which Lukashenko ambivalently positions himself. On the other hand, these homophobic discourses and practices are not merely a reaction to the “decadent West” on the international stage; they are also a way to divide the country and use a minority as a scapegoat in domestic politics. And not just the leaders themselves are responsible for this homophobic political climate: because these traditional

values resonate with people, they can reach hegemony. Contestation is difficult in an authoritarian regime, and the weakening of feminist or LGBTQIA+ movements (or civil society opposition groups in general) also explains the lack of widespread contestation by the people (Sperling, 2014; Frear, 2021). Civil society organisations in Belarus have to register with the Ministry of Justice in order not to be criminalized, yet the decision to grant registration is often arbitrary and highly politicised. This means that in practice, very little opposition is tolerated. And the opposition often uses homophobic and misogynist discourses as well, as I will demonstrate below. Finally, the West has played a significant role in deepening fractures in post-Soviet societies and linking gender equality with Western liberal democracy. Lukashenko and other Belarusian elites strategically instrumentalize this divide to weaken the local feminist movement. This is thus an assumption we need to overcome in order to render local activism and struggles visible.

In recent years, Lukashenko has made less openly homophobic statements, perhaps in an attempt to occasionally normalize relations with the European Union when he sees fit (Frear, 2021). Instead, he started to focus more on traditional family values; LGBTQIA+ people are not explicitly mentioned anymore, but are indirectly attacked or rendered invisible through this rhetoric. As in Russia, there can be a link between the Orthodox Church and conservative anti-LGBTQIA+ values (Sperling, 2014). The church is an important institution to gain political legitimacy, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, due to people's emotional attachments. They propagate heteronormative family values and binary notions of masculinity and femininity according to sex-based biological determinism. The lack of separation between church and state also leads to huge influence of the church, as one participant told me. For example, they have prevented the passing of legislation against domestic violence. Another example is that even though abortion is legal in Belarus, there are different groups trying to criminalize it, out of pro-

natalist or traditional Christian values. This is partially stimulated by a moral panic that there will be a demographic crisis if the traditional family unit will collapse, with declining birth rates as consequence (Frear, 2021; Kourou, 2020; Sperling, 2014). The traditional-conservative sector of the Belarusian population seems to resonate with these religious values, which was mentioned in many interviews. The younger generation, more influenced by Western media, are considered to be more open for LGBTQIA+ issues. According to my respondents, it is oftentimes the older generation and/or those who consume Russian media that are considered to be more receptive to conservative values propagated by Lukashenko.

The political importance of family values can furthermore be seen in Lukashenko's relationship with his son, Kolia (Astapova, 2021). Lukashenko and Kolia have often been seen side by side in important political institutions or wearing military gear at parades. He wants to consolidate his regime through his male offspring and teach his son what it means to be a leader according to him: masculine, militarist, phallocratic. When the Financial Times asked Lukashenko what makes a good father, he answered:

*“It is very important for a father to teach his son about a real man's life. And when Kolia turned one year old, I took him by the hand and brought him to a steam room. Of course he complained and ran out. But now that he is four years old, he can endure temperature differences from 100f to 28f in the swimming pool. Plus, he endures ice baths. In Belarus, this is called fatherhood. Everywhere else, it's called child abuse.” (Jensen, 2013, p.95)*

Here we see different themes which will be further elaborated below, such as the idea of a “real man” in a post-Soviet space (a “muzhik”), the sauna as a kind of “man cave” and cure-all, the socialization of young boys into a kind of (hegemonic) masculinity, and a paternal identity that

can well be considered abusive. It is furthermore interesting that he only excessively shows this father-son relationship with his youngest son, who was born out of an extra-marital affair with his personal doctor. Supposedly there are more children of Lukashenko out there born out of wedlock. There are furthermore many rumours circulating about the whereabouts of his wife and two other (officially recognized) sons, who almost never appear publicly with Lukashenko. If we were to believe the rumours, his wife could be residing in a cattle farm, monastery or mental institution (Astapova, 2021).

#### *4.1.2. Public misogyny and Lukashenko's Herculean sexual appetites*

Instead, Lukashenko is often publicly surrounded with young, beautiful women. When I asked for rumours about Lukashenko, this was the main answer participants gave me. They consider this public performance as a clear sexist objectification of women: he treats them like dolls. One person said he really tries to uphold this image of the alpha male, when in reality many people do not consider him in this way. Heteronormativity and sexism are important markers of this alpha male machismo. It is interesting to juxtapose his political instrumentalization of traditional family values with his extra-marital affairs, exposing hypocrisies in the discourses he tries to impose.

Lukashenko's public obsession with beautiful women is not just a funny rumour, but can and should be politicized as well. Claiming attractive women for one's own political side and denigrating the attractiveness of the women affiliated to the opponent is something we find back in different phallogocracies, from Lukashenko to Putin to Berlusconi to Trump (Sperling, 2014). The other party is accused of having no taste in women or women are being directly accused of not being feminine or beautiful enough. This kind of public misogyny is common in a phallogocracy, where such insults are considered damaging for your reputation. Yet it can also go overboard and



undermine one's own legitimacy by appearing obscene and excessive, which is the case for Lukashenko and his beautiful women. My participants ridiculed this public show and some expressed frustrations at his lack of respect and professionalism. He mainly surrounds himself with Miss Belarus pageant queens, who he often appoints into various positions in his presidential service, except if they resist to his rule and rapprochements (*Belarus Women's Foundation*, 2021; Luxmoore, 2020). He has described these women as his weapon in difficult negotiations. "I raise my head – there go my beauties: one White, another Black. Everyone forgets about everything, opens their mouths and stares at them" (Luxmoore, 2020).

Astapova (2021) described a joke commonly told about a beautiful girl driving around in a different fancy car every day. A traffic policeman stops her every day to ask where she gets these expensive cars from. She answers him they are a gift from Sasha, the one she is speaking with on the phone. One day, the policeman snatches her phone and asks the mysterious Sasha where he got the money for such cars. Sasha replies: "for someone I am Sasha, for others, I am Alexander Grigor'evich Lukashenko!" (Astapova, 2021, p. 99). There is a similar joke going around about Putin. In any case, the point is that there are different rumours and jokes circulating about both Lukashenko's personal wealth and his relationship with young, beautiful women. This illuminates the disparity of power between the strongman and the people, and how women may claim resources in this environment by behaving in traditional, heteronormative norms of femininity (i.e. subordinated to and dependent on men). Women experience even more inequality in a system that already knows huge disparities, despite claiming to be socialist.

This connects to other rumours of his supposedly Herculean sexual potency and appetites. The relationship between his masculine sexuality and his political power has been a legitimization

strategy which also generated more rumours. Attractiveness, virility and toughness all constitute a hegemonic masculine image of an autocratic strongman (Astapova, 2021). In his early years as president, a newspaper supporting Lukashenko stated that he is the only “potent” candidate. Astapova (2021) has furthermore recorded rumours of young girls, brought to Lukashenko’s palace every evening, where he chooses who he likes. Age, gender and class intersect in ways that uphold a hegemonic masculinity that performs dominance and exerts control over the population. Young girls learn how to survive in a system that commodifies their bodies and considers them as objects. As abovementioned, womxn have been robbed of their erotic creativity and their bodies got disciplined by a phallographic power. Through these rumours, jokes and statements of Lukashenko, we can see how the erotic has symbolic relevance for the political realm and needs to be taken as a field of struggle.

This image of a sexual powerful and strong man coexists with other propaganda, namely the image of Lukashenko as a healthy sportsman who loves football and hockey (Astapova, 2021). Many sports arenas were built during his rule and kept open for matches with attending supporters during the COVID-19 pandemic. As I will elaborate below, Lukashenko’s machismo and Herculean attitude is not separated from real-life consequences on public affairs such as citizen health.

On the other hand, this public performance of a fit leader is contested with other rumours, such as those about his older age and deteriorating health condition (Astapova, 2021). His age is the object of popular ridicule: many participants have referred to him as an old madman or inadequate grandpa who has lost all his wit. Supposedly, the official media have been demanded to conceal this by only taking flattering pictures from a certain angle to hide his baldness and other markers

of an ageing man. Here we see the difficulties in trying to perform as a macho strongman: you have to constantly prove yourself over and over again, otherwise people will not take you seriously anymore. Yet by trying too hard to prove yourself, you could be ridiculed and lose legitimacy (Sperling, 2014). This is the curse of the phallocracy: the obscene and extravagant can turn around to undermine legitimacy. Nonetheless, Mbembe (2001) would argue that it is not just the strongman's impressive and fit physique, but also the obesity of men in power that can serve as a metaphor for grandiosity and domination. In this regard, not all is lost for the ageing autocrat.

#### 4.1.3. *How the father of the nation becomes its domestic abuser*

The patriarchal image of “father of the nation” (“bat’ka”) is a title Lukashenko openly enjoys (Burgis, 2006; Manaev et al., 2011; Travin, 2010): he sees himself as the father of the nation, the protector of the Belarusian people and the owner of the country (*Lukashenko: The Story of “Europe’s Last Dictator”*, 2020). Yet, few people seem to take him seriously as the leader of the national household. All my interviewees have told me they do not see him as a legitimate leader and many consider his fatherly image as a joke, though one with perhaps a grain of truth... Multiple respondents have indicated that they see their own household situations reflected in the authoritarian strongman. Domestic abuse is a common issue and many have encountered abusive patterns growing up. One participant mentioned that they did not have a choice in both cases: to have their father as their father nor to have Lukashenko in office. These answers allude to a connection between the private and the public: domestic situations are not isolated from public politics and vice versa. The image of a stern father leading the family feels familiar and can therefore breed legitimacy; Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule has remained more or less accepted for a long time, even if people were suffering.

Some of my participants explained that Lukashenko took the reins and gained popular legitimacy as a typical strong father figure during a time that the country was yearning for a strong leader. Belarus was facing shocks after the collapse of the Soviet Union and sought a strong hand to stabilize the country in 1994 (Luxmoore, 2020). Others also mentioned that during the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Lukashenko was again seen as a strong figure who would not let something similar happen to Belarus. This is in line with Mies' (2014) argument that there is an active gender politics in post-revolutionary nationalism. The image of the patriarch is central to the nation being guided and protected by a strong leader. In one speech, Lukashenko compared Belarus to a little girl, carried in his manly arms (Brzozowska, 2003, p.12). He represents himself as a strict yet good parent, leading the child by the hand, disciplining them if they do not follow his righteous rules because they are not mature enough to make their own decisions and should be protected from external influences. Comparing himself with a father functioned as a public legitimization strategy for Lukashenko, one we recognise from Stalin, e.g. by receiving or giving flowers from or to little girls. The little girl serves as the symbolic image of the gendered nation, held in the father's robust arms, the same arms that are strong enough to incite serious violence. Lukashenko embodies the Belarusian state as an autocrat. These discourses might have gained him the legitimate title of president of Belarus a few times, but after the first two presidential elections, most people started doubting his rule fundamentally. Lukashenko has lost all legitimacy, already since the beginning of 2000s and especially since yet another fraudulent election in 2020. During the current war in Ukraine, he is not considered an appropriate strong father figure anymore who can protect the country from external threats. Instead, the threat is internal: it is domestic abuse of Belarus and its citizens as well as the cooperation and dependence on another abuser, Putin.

During the protests in 2020, there were quite some feminist activists in Belarus such as FemGroup who reported striking similarities between the state-sponsored violence during the protests and the violence towards women at home (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, 2021). Out of an interview with a women's centre in Belarus, I gathered that the discourse of Lukashenko holding Belarus hostage and having an abusive relationship with the country was used dominantly during the protests in 2020. Lukashenko reacted to the protesters in ways that are deemed typical for domestic abusers. He established as much control over citizens as possible, framing the protesters (the victims) as the real culprits and seeking support from other perpetrators such as Putin. One protest poster represented these parallels with domestic violence, rephrasing a popular apologist saying from "If he beats you, he loves you" to "If he beats you, he goes to jail!" (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, 2021). For Lukashenko, ruling with a strong hand can be a way to play into the existing patriarchal family relations. One respondent said in a focus group:

*"We are used to fathers behaving this way. We are fine with the situation, because this is normalized."* (Interview 8, online, 30.03.22)

to which another person added:

*"Everything he (Lukashenko) does, is behaving like an ordinary post-Soviet man: abusive and masculine. He is just a regular old man becoming mad."* (Interview 8, online, 30.03.22)

Being an authoritarian father or strongman seems to fit into the framework of hegemonic masculinity in Belarus. The legitimation strategy of the elites seems to resonate with popular cultural productions of machismo (Sperling, 2014). Culturally familiar norms breed legitimacy, whether intentionally or unconsciously adopted. This does not mean everyone considers it normal,

nor that women passively accept this situation. There are many women's organizations and activists fighting against gender inequalities as domestic abuse, which will be elaborated further below. Especially since the protests in 2020, there has been more public awareness of this topic.

As mentioned above, the phallocratic political legitimization strategy can be dangerous, both for the legitimacy of the strongman himself as for his clientele, the citizens (Mbembe, 2001; Sperling, 2014). Since gender is a social construct that needs to be reasserted every time, the strongman can feel a constant insecurity of emasculation, of discovery as a fake. A desperate remedy to this gnawing insecurity is to violently assert their position over those subordinated under this hegemonic masculinity (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, 2021). This naturally poses a threat to women and sexual minorities, who do not accept or fall into his hegemonic framework of masculinity and femininity and are consequentially violently abused or rendered invisible.

#### *4.1.4. Why do all dictators wear moustaches: militarized masculinity*

Svetlana Alexievich, Belarusian winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015, has written a touching book named "The Unwomanly Face of War" in 1985 where she describes the many wars Soviet Belarusians fought in the 20th century from a female perspective (Alexievich, 2018). Before The Great Patriotic War, in which about a million Soviet women fought, no feminine terms existed for infantryman, tank driver and machine gunner. Yet many more (Soviet Belarusian) men than women died throughout the 20th century. Due to this, women always had a very dominant position in society. As Alexievich said it best in her book: "The village of my postwar childhood was village of women. Village women. I don't remember any men's voices. That is how it has remained for me: stories of the war are told by women." (Alexievich, 2018, p.xiv). Yet even if

women historically had such a strong position in and outside wars, they were silenced: “Everything we know about war we know with “a man’s voice.” We are all captives of “men’s” notions and “men’s” sense of war. “Men’s” words. Women are silent.” (Alexievich, 2018, p.xv). Therefore, Alexievich took it upon herself to write a history of Belarusian women in war. A history with its own colours, smells, textures and feelings. Alexievich had to flee the country in 2000 under Lukashenko’s rule.

Hegemonic masculinity is not just about subordinating other kinds of masculinity and femininity, but also about rendering femininity invisible and irrelevant. I often found this to be the case in Belarus when talking with participants. They claimed that Lukashenko does not usually intentionally apply gender as a lens and that he just does not take women serious at all. One female respondent said in this vein:

*“Lukashenko is just poorly educated. The topic of minorities – be it sexual, racial, etc. – is very alien to him. European values in general are alien to him.”* (Interview 10, Brussels, 25.04.22)

With his “strong” image of militarized masculinity, Lukashenko is downplaying the role of women in politics and “weaker” masculinities. We can find a lot of images online of Lukashenko (and his son Kolia) in military gear attending military parades, being surrounded by other military men, such as on July 3rd (the Independence Day that Lukashenko chose; Balmforth, 2011). Not just his own son, but many Belarusian boys are socialized into militarism from a young age. Participants showed me personal photos of young male family members or acquaintances wearing military costumes for holidays. This is considered something light-hearted and funny, while simultaneously teaching little boys to “man up”. A couple of participants have told me how militarism is engrained in education and how gender norms deeply pervade both institutions. Boys

are thought to enjoy guns and warrior games, whereas girls should play “feminine” games and rely on “the male” who will protect them.

Gender stereotypes pervade all institutions, including the military (Sperling, 2014). Militarized notions of masculinity relate to toughness and the protection of weaker citizens, especially women. Here, Yuval-Davis (1997) work is relevant, to see how gendering the nation state penetrates state institutions such as the military. Lukashenko served in the Soviet army himself, something that supposedly increases his legitimacy as a strongman. The Soviet ideal of the New Man, as described in the theoretical framework, still seems to live in Lukashenko’s Belarus. After the Soviet Union, there was the conception that men had become passive and emasculated and that masculinity was in crisis (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2016). During times of war, discourses and images of militarized masculinity appear, mobilizing the male population. The rehabilitation of the soldier, especially in the leader of the country, was supposed to symbolize strength and survival. Ironically enough, a great portion of the military does not consider Lukashenko a legitimate leader anymore. Military service is still mandatory for men in Belarus, which is the reason one of my participants fled the country. He spoke about this subject:

*“The military is subordinated to Lukashenko but he is very paranoid about the military because many have opposed political views.”* (Interview 2, online, 14.11.21)

Even though the Belarusian army is not actively participating in the ongoing war against Ukraine, Lukashenko still allows Russian troops to cross their border to Ukraine. This is another example of Lukashenko’s feigned neutrality and dependence on Russia. At the same time, some Belarusian soldiers have been volunteering to fight together with the Ukrainian army against Russia. There is a discrepancy between Lukashenko’s position and that of “his” soldiers. The Belarusian army is



protecting the state, not Lukashenko's regime, even if Lukashenko is propagating this image of a historic war hero.

I have chosen to discuss militarized masculinity as the last subchapter of Lukashenko's performances, because this is often one of the first things that comes up when connecting authoritarianism and masculinity. Through a militarized image of masculinity, the state portrays the image of strength and security, while also justifying violence and war (Eichler, 2014). I wanted to show in this chapter that Lukashenko's hegemonic masculinity goes way beyond militarism and seeks to control Belarusian society in a variety of ways.

#### *4.2. Gendered politics in Belarus beyond Lukashenko*

In the following part, I describe how opposition groups and civil society also deploy gendered discourses. Lukashenko is not the individual embodiment of the patriarchy or hegemonic masculinity, but these structures penetrate all levels of society. I will first describe how opposition groups also instrumentalize political homophobia and public misogyny. Then I will describe women's movements, mainly since 2020, to look how they position themselves in this political climate. I have talked to activists, researchers, feminists, queer people and representatives of the NGO sector to find out how Lukashenko impacts them and vice versa, how they contest his rule in the current regime.

##### *4.2.1. Opposition waging a similar culture war*

Lukashenko is not the only one to deploy homophobic or misogynist discourses to further political goals. On all sides of the political spectrum, political groups have used gender rhetoric to seek legitimacy or delegitimize their opponents (Frear, 2021; Sperling, 2014). Examples are youth

organisation “Youth Front” (“Malady Front”), the Belarusian Christian Democracy party (“Belaruskaia Khrystsiianskaia Demakratyia”), and the youth wing of the Belarusian’s People’s Front (“Belaruski Narodny Front”). They have openly expressed anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments, excluding them from human rights or pro-democracy marches, using homophobic slurs for political opponents, or in some cases completely ignore and rendering LGBTQIA+ matters invisible. Most of them are right-wing nationalist forces with Orthodox or Catholic Christian values, although many of their followers are Protestant. It is important to note that this is not limited to Belarusian right-wing nationalists, but that there is a global rise of the far right, who often tend to employ homophobic discourses (Kourou, 2020). But again, gender rhetoric is not limited to right-wing patriarchs. More leftist opposition groups who reject Russian influence in Belarus are often not openly homophobic, but also not ready to embrace LGBTQIA+ rights (Frear, 2021). Until 2020, the so-called democratic opposition remained conservative to gender issues. Some interviewees have confirmed this by stating that even the most liberal people from the opposition in Belarus and Russia are not as open-minded as “people in the West”. One activist researcher speculated about what gender relations and movements in Belarus would look like if democratic opposition would come to power right now:

*“The opposition was and remains more open and influenceable, including in terms of gender, because it actively collaborates with Western partners who impose more tolerance and feminist openness. That is why I think gender activities would probably be much more numerous, heterogeneous and diversified in Belarus without Lukashenko. With this I always think of the factor of local conservatism, including within the Belarusian political opposition, and I have no illusions about local opposition parties and movements.”* (Interview 13, online, 09.05.22)

The influence of the West, specifically Europe, has been returning in many answers, though there may be a bias in who I have interviewed, namely many people who live outside of Belarus and oppose Lukashenko's views. Below I will reflect more upon the influence of Western discourses and how we should be careful not to deepen a supposed East-West divide.

The protests in 2020 are an interesting event to observe gender relations in Belarus. They have been portrayed in the Western media as progressive and democratic. Yet, anti-Lukashenko protesters from all political affiliations used homophobic slurs in group chats or on the streets to describe Lukashenko and his entourage, including the police. Many participants told me that they fear that there will be a similar authoritarian leader replacing Lukashenko when failing to tackle the structural issue of homophobia and patriarchy. Interviewees have mentioned that it seems more important for many people to overthrow the dictator than to change the ideological status quo. In this vein, one of my interviewees said:

*“Some people might think that getting Lukashenko out of power might change all their problems. People say a lot nowadays that the main priority is to overthrow the current government so we do not have the energy or resources to pay attention to gender-based violence. But this exactly answers the question; authoritarianism is thriving on social (gender in this case) inequality and power corruption.”* (Interview 8, online, 30.03.22)

Another respondent confirmed this observation from another standpoint:

*“We do not think about Lukashenko's masculinity. We do not care. Our biggest problem right now is the war.”* (Interview 6, online, 24.03.22)

These two quotes are similar in the sense that they acknowledge that many people in the population might not explicitly care about sexual politics. Yet the first one expresses the fear that another authoritarian leader will replace Lukashenko once he will be out of office if we do not tackle structural power issues, whereas the second one does not care about these underlying structures himself. When we situate their positionality, this difference can possibly be explained. The first is a young woman who moved out of the country to study abroad, whereas the second is a middle-aged, heterosexual Belarusian man with an agrarian background. This is not to essentialize their identities, because many women embody patriarchal values and stereotypes about politics and feminism, as different participants told me. Yet, I noticed a pattern within my participants, where men generally did not seem to think the gendered lens was relevant, whereas women and queer people felt and applied this lens themselves. Some interviewees saw this trend in the streets during the protests of 2020 as well, where queer and anarchist groups were marginalized for trying to structurally attack the power structures penetrating society.

#### *4.2.2. Phallocracy and civil society: gender movements in Belarus*

The absence of a strong women's or feminist movement can leave the patriarchy unchecked and therefore allow masculinity to be mobilized as an effective political strategy (Sperling, 2014). If there are no movements or organizations to put a brake on public misogyny, the strongman can instrumentalize the hegemonic norms without facing counter-discourses. On the other hand, it is through the perpetuation of these dominant gender norms that movements are repressed or cannot gain a large following. This creates an uncontested, hegemonic field of sexist stereotyping in political, cultural, social and economic spaces. This hegemony is reflected in the domestic, intimate spheres as well; I consider activism on all fronts as relevant to create (infrapolitical)

counter-discourses. Scott (1990) calls them hidden transcripts: the way in which subordinated people defy an authoritarian hegemony in the smallest cracks of intimacy. For women in Belarus, it is also a survival tactic since they have not been taken seriously in public politics. One researcher has confirmed that Belarusian feminists could often not make their identity public and biographers simply hid the feminist part of their lives.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the Soviet Communist Party demonized feminism and banned feminist organizing (Sperling, 2014). Feminism became to be seen as something extremely negative and connected to the capitalist West, which is something that was carried into the post-Soviet era. The feminist movement was not able to grow and instead became associated with butch, unsuccessful, ugly, aggressive, man-hating lesbians. The participants who identify as feminists told me that they experience similar prejudices in Belarus. They usually hide that they are a feminist to not provoke hate or ignorant insults. One participant told me that people always have an opinion of what a feminist is without understanding what they are fighting for and that Lukashenko himself is equally ignorant about feminist issues. Another interviewee told me that feminists are called “women who do not open the door (for men)”, hereby confirming the stereotype of feminists as man-hating lesbians. Men being feminists are even more shocking in the eyes of the public, according to a feminist male respondent.

When talking about the demonization of feminism by the Soviet Union, we have to be cautious to consider gender activism and equality as something solely Western. There is a history of feminist organizing in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states, and it would be dangerous to deepen a supposed “sexual clash of civilizations” between the West and the East (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Liberal feminists’ conception of gender equality often does not resonate with feminist objectives

in other parts of the world or by other strands of feminism in the West, but this does not mean that there are no other battles being fought. Gender issues are strategically framed by some post-Soviet leaders as something Western and imperialist, against traditional or national values, as abovementioned. Western liberal feminists confirm this stereotype by exporting and projecting their views onto local feminist movements. Western donors have promoted gender equality after the fall of the Berlin Wall with a very colonial attitude (Koobak et al., 2021), which created fractures within local populations, where people perceived feminists as a pawn of the imperialist West. The fight against the patriarchy is ongoing in different parts of the world, not just the West, and a postcolonial perspective can help to acknowledge local histories and struggles. Women historically had a strong position in Belarusian society and should not be considered passive victims, even if they have to operate under a repressive regime. They held dominant positions during the wars in the 20th century, as Alexievich (2018) taught us, and were self-organizing after the disaster of Tsjernobyl, so unsurprisingly they were at the forefront of the protests in 2020.

The presidential elections of 2020 and subsequent protests have reinvigorated gender activism in Belarus through a symbolic and collective spectacle of performance art in Lukashenko's phallocracy (Mavrodieva, 2021; Strauss & O'Brien, 2007). While the movement did not originate as a feminist project but as a reaction to the arrests of male opposition leaders, a political consciousness still seems to be awakened in response to years of economic stagnation, lack of alternatives and gender inequalities. This got enhanced by international media jumping on the topic and framing it as "a revolution with a female face" (Paulovich, 2021). My participants doubt how truly transformative or feminist the protests have been, but feel that people have become more progressive towards gender issues and that women are treated better and taken more seriously. Women and their political grievances became more visible, which sparked a public

debate and made the feminist movement less elitist (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, 2021). An example of this is the viral photo of two women kissing under the old red and White nationalist flag of Belarus, with a line of police officers standing behind them, as seen in the introduction of this thesis (Buzhan, 2020). Another example is the way in which the public recognizes the connection between violence on the streets and in intimate settings (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, 2021). As mentioned above, the metaphor of Lukashenko as domestic abuser of Belarus was an important discourse during the 2020 protests, seen on many protest banners. Some other respondents used the term “benevolent patriarchy” to explain how women have utilized different notions of femininity under the patriarchy to protect themselves and their men from police violence. There was a story of a policeman that was about to hit a woman with his baton, when his colleague said: “No, don’t hit her. She is a baba.” The police hereby considered the female protesters as weak and therefore refrained from hitting or detaining them in some instances. Sometimes women formed a “solidarity chain” around male protesters to avoid them from getting detained (Paulovich, 2021). Yet women were detained and abused as well, so the patriarchy turned out not to be so benevolent after all. On the other hand, the protesters used their femininity in a more symbolic way to restructure Lukashenko’s aesthetic power. Extravagant performances of traditional femininity – white and red dresses and flowers, chants, dances – contrasted with Lukashenko’s military dictatorial moustache. Yet these non-violent performances were violently disciplined on the public stage, a typical characteristic of a phallocracy. Furthermore, as abovementioned, many patriarchal discourses were reproduced by the protesters themselves, thereby not changing the ideological status quo. They still fell under the same notions of hegemonic gender norms, though played out in a different field. A female face of the revolution

does not inevitably overthrow the patriarchy (Gaufman, 2021); agency is not a synonym for resistance.

Nonetheless, women were demanding their place in the public realm of politics, even if Lukashenko disregarded them and did not take them seriously. He has literally stated that “The constitution was not written for women” (Luxmoore, 2020), and assumed that the rise of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as opposition leader would not succeed as her gender and lack of political experience would delegitimize her candidacy in the eyes of an electorate used to the macho strongman. He calls the three women leading the opposition (Maria Kolesnikova, Veronika Tsepkalo and Tikhanovskaya) unfortunate little girls who do not understand what they are doing (Luxmoore, 2020). Yet even before this group of opposition leaders, there were already instances of public sexism against female politicians. Tatsiana Karatkevich was a candidate for the 2015 presidential election, even though opposition candidates are a performative façade for a system of electoral authoritarianism. She received a lot of sexist backlash for her candidacy. People focused on her role as mother a lot, claiming that her child may become “a hostage in the hands of authorities” (Astapova, 2021, p. 136). On Twitter, a joke circulated about her physical appearance, saying that Karatkevich would refuse to rule the country when she has nothing to wear. These kinds of jokes are common when a woman publicly participates in the political life of Belarus. There are women in local governments, but the higher up you go, the less women are present. The national government consists mostly of men. This is also visualized by the images circulating of Lukashenko surrounded by his political allies: he usually stands in between all men wearing military gear or suits, an exemplary image of political male bonding (Sperling, 2014). He does not consider women fit for politics, at least not on “his level”. One participant mentioned that due to the many wars Belarusian men fought, there are more women in Belarus and they always had a



dominant position in society. In 2020, 53.44% of the population in Belarus were indeed women (TRADING ECONOMICS, 2022). Belarusian women occupy key positions in society, being teachers, nurses and counting the electoral votes. Lukashenko ought to keep them satisfied, which seems to have failed... Instead, he calls them pigs, sheep, rats and prostitutes. For someone who supposedly does not consider women a political threat, he seems to react very aggressively to the women's movement: sexist discourse, police violence, and the liquidation of feminist civil society associations in 2021-2022 demonstrate that he may care more than he wants to propagate.

Lukashenko's supposed devil-may-care attitude is losing its allure and legitimacy with the people: none of my participants actually seemed to take him seriously and they all mocked or despised him, sometimes using homophobic or misogynist discourses themselves. Following Sperling (2014), strong women's movements are important to keep public misogyny in check. Yet, as mentioned above, it is not sure whether the dominant opposition groups truly want to subvert gender inequalities on all fronts and attack the heteropatriarchy as a system. We have yet to see what the future brings, both for the presidential seat as for the structural power relations that make it up.

#### *4.3. Similarities and differences with Putin*

When conducting my digital ethnography, I found that Lukashenko's performance of masculinity was often compared with that of Putin. Therefore, I believe it is relevant to contextualize Lukashenko's rule in relation to Putin, especially during the current war with Ukraine, yet this will only be a limited overview. It is wrong to interpret Lukashenko, being a post-Soviet authoritarian strongman, as an exact copy of Putin. This needs to be nuanced, which I will already do in the first subchapter.

#### *4.3.1. Lukashenko's ambivalent instrumentalization of gender*

Political movements in Belarus use political homophobia and public misogyny in ways that are similar to Russia, yet without being an exact copy (Frear, 2021). Authorities use these discourses in times that are politically expedient for them domestically. It would be too simplistic to assume that the contemporary situation in Belarus is only influenced by Russian politics, rather than by domestic politics and social values or other geopolitical influences. There is influence from Moscow, but there is also a Belarusian nationalism or Soviet-Belarusian patriotism that employs conservative values as political strategy. Political legitimation is not solely about gender, as economic policy, military power, nationalist pride, family values, constructions of ethnicity and race, etc. also need to resonate with people. Yet here too gender norms come into play, specifically with regard to nationalism (Sperling, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 1997). The nation is not a gender-less given, but constructed around ideas of femininity and masculinity, which interact with organizations and institutions. This is not at all exclusive to post-Soviet states and even though there are useful comparisons to be made, Belarus has its own specificities that need to be addressed.

My participants have indicated that they experience many prejudices from people in the West about Eastern European politics, especially when comparing Belarus with Russia. Belarusian participants often take offense from a generalized comparison with Russia, and find it very important to establish a separate identity. Quite some participants focused on the peaceful and tolerant temperament of the Belarusian people in comparison with the supposedly aggressive nature of Russians. When I asked one male Belarusian participant about stereotypes about Eastern European masculinity, he said:

*“Belarusians are constantly told they are the same as Russians, but there are important differences. Belarusians are not very aggressive, compared to Russian people, probably due to oppression for generations. People here are very passive. The most aggressive people in Belarusian society are the ethnic Russians.”* (Interview 5, online, 22.03.22)

As abovementioned, the passivity of Belarusians is emphasized, whereas recent movements, secretive meetings and hidden transcripts attribute them more agency. In any case, the frustration of being compared with Russians returned in various interviews, combined with the feeling of being misunderstood by Europeans:

*“Belarusians know more about European life than Europeans know about Belarus.”* (Interview 6, online, 24.03.22)

Participants acknowledge Russian influence on Lukashenko, yet mainly see Lukashenko as a submissive dog who needs to follow Putin’s orders to survive. Some participants believe the two leaders actually hate each other but engage in dominant power play for survival. I will elaborate on this dynamic below. Many participants nonetheless observed similar styles in performing masculinity and the anxiety to reassert this over and over again as phallocratic rulers. One person said:

*“Putin and Lukashenko both try to replace leadership with masculinity.”* (Interview 5, online, 22.03.22)

#### *4.3.2. A lethal fraternity or a homoerotic romance*

Besides Lukashenko framing himself as the “bat’ka” of Belarus, there is the comparison with Russia as big brother. Yet, many Belarusian people (among which my participants) do not like this

comparison that much: they do not identify with Russia and take offense to the comparison as abovementioned (Gaufman, 2021). We can spot that both leaders tend to identify each other as male family members, and this may be reflected in their phallocratic performances. Putin also sees himself as the father of the nation protecting Russia's sovereignty from foreign, Western invaders. Feminized Mother Russia can be seen as a damsel in distress needing to be protected by a strong father. Sperling (2014) analyses Putin's masculine portrayal as a political leader in different terms, amongst which male bonding with the vice president or other men in his political circle. Yet this may be under the influence of U.S. or Western politics, where we see similar behaviour, as it was not until mid-Putin era that Putin showed himself with his own Russian political allies such as prime minister Medvedev.

In any case, the supposed brotherhood between the two Slavic strongmen has not been without challenges. Lukashenko's ambivalent position towards the West has given Putin doubts about his loyalty to his Russian empire (Maheshwari, 2017). To diversify the Belarusian economy and rely on different trading partners, Lukashenko has turned towards the West before. In response, Russia had introduced a cut-back on supplies of gas and oil for Belarus, an agreement popularly known as "gas for kisses" (Maheshwari, 2017). This is an interesting example in the gendered analysis of the relationship between both authoritarian leaders. Opposition groups have been interpreting their relationship as homoerotic (a bit incestuous), usually making jokes with a homophobic undertone to undermine their legitimacy. Public demonstrations of male bonding can send the message that politics is a man's job, yet it can also leave open insinuations of homosexuality.

Putin and Lukashenko have often been seen doing different kinds of fun trips, such as hanging around on a yacht together. The people often receive this differently than intended. Having to

reassert your masculinity in excessive ways often leads to the opposite effect: people start mocking you and use homophobic or misogynist slurs against you, such as “f\*g” or “pussy” (Sperling, 2014). These slurs stem from a general devaluing of the feminine, reproducing a phallographic order. Ironically enough, the self-identified feminist collective Pussy Riot have played into similar misogynist and homophobic discourses to delegitimize Putin (Sperling, 2014). For example, in the last verse of their song “Putin Light Up the Fires”, they suggest that Putin “go and take father Lukashenko as his wife”. The war against Ukraine has surely not diminished such discourses. Multiple participants from Russia and Chechnya, who live abroad, have given similar comments on Putin’s masculinity. They have stated that he tries to uphold this macho image while being a weakling in a bunker now. One respondent from Chechnya commented the following:

*“Putin acts like a macho but he goes sitting in his bunker when something like a war happens. He acts like a war hero who defeated the Chechnyan jihadis, yet this is all propaganda. He is just a pussy.”* (Interview 3, online, 08.03.22)

Another Chechnyan respondent said:

*“Putin sits in a bunker, afraid and paranoid of everyone, firing everyone. He is a pussy. He is jealous of Zelensky, who actually is actually fighting on the frontline.”* (Interview 7, Ghent, 28.03.22)

Here the Ukrainian president Zelensky is mentioned, who has gained a lot of worldwide attention on social media platforms such as Twitter and TikTok about the way he performs his masculinity. He is praised for not being the typical machismo strongman, and appears to be very trustworthy to the international community, especially in the West. An extended analysis of Zelensky would be even more outside of the scope of my thesis, but a comparison between the three post-Soviet

leaders could be an interesting route for further research. I will already provide a first example of such a comparison when talking about COVID-19 responses in the three countries.

#### 4.3.3. *Machismo and COVID-19 responses in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine*

Ho & Maddrell (2020) have linked high death rates of the virus – though sometimes still underreported – with a political culture of machismo in some countries. The machismo denial of the seriousness of COVID-19 by strongmen could have grave consequences for citizen health. We see this rhetoric in Lukashenko’s response to the pandemic (Åslund, 2020). He denied the existence of the virus yet told people they should go to the sauna, drink vodka and ride tractors through the fields to keep the virus at bay. It can be interesting to compare Russia, Belarus and Ukraine in terms of the COVID-19 response, since they share similar a Soviet past with unreformed health care systems while pursuing different policies, so too during the pandemic. Belarus and Russia have done poorly in terms of health, whereas Ukraine has done much better with strict quarantines and a centralized policy. Putin and Lukashenko share much more similarities in terms of hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism than Zelensky, which can be contributing factors to their machismo response to the pandemic. Tadeusz Giczan, expert on Belarusian politics at King’s College London, has furthermore stated that during the pandemic “everyone expected him (Lukashenko) to take decisive action. That’s why he’s called “bat’ka”” (Luxmoore, 2020). One respondent from my interviews stated that she would have preferred to have a woman in charge during the pandemic instead of Lukashenko. She claimed that countries with female leaders deal better with COVID-19 and have higher reported life satisfaction in general. Leaving in the middle whether this is truthful or what this implies, this statement can reveal how gender intersects with every political crisis; women have felt the consequences of the

pandemic the most, working at the most essential joints of society (also unpaid or underpaid), being more vulnerable to losing their jobs, but also suffering from an increase in domestic abuse and sexual violence (*A Crisis with a Woman's Face*, 2021; Ho & Maddrell, 2020).

#### 4.3.4. *Lukashenko is the fly to Putin's meatball: a play of submission and dominance*

Even though Belarus and Russia share some historical and political similarities, Lukashenko and Putin's relationship is as ambivalent as Lukashenko's geopolitical position. Whenever something happens between Russia and the West, Lukashenko carefully observes and adapts his political performance accordingly. Putin does not like this unreliability, and punishes Belarus in different ways for this, exposing Lukashenko's dependence on him (see the example "gas for kisses" above). He forces Lukashenko to react as an equally strong head of state and trustworthy ally to Russia. The 2022 war against Ukraine has painfully entrenched this dynamic, reducing Belarus to a geopolitical pawn of Russia. As one interviewee stated:

*"Currently Lukashenko tries to play the macho, the equal of Putin, the master of the situation, but it is clear that he has become Putin's shadow. Lukashenko lost; the country is being used by Russia to attack Ukraine. This clearly showed that Belarus is not an equal partner of Russia, but its colony. And Lukashenko is no longer a competitor for Putin, but a classic vassal."* (Interview 13, online, 09.05.22)

This is confirmed by another statement of U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan:

*"The Kremlin can distinguish, in the end, only vassals and enemies, and the neighbours of Russia, if they do not wish to be one, must reconcile themselves to being the other."* (Dempsey, 2022)

Lukashenko's vision of a supranational union of Russia and Belarus with a rotating presidency already went into flames when Putin's famously remarked that "Belarus is the fly to Russia's meatball" (Maheshwari, 2017). The two have been engaging in machismo power play since the beginning of Putin's presidency in 2000, performing within their phallographic notions of masculinity. Belarusian media headlines once read that Lukashenko's catfish is bigger than Putin's pike, alluding to actual fishing the two men were comparing (Maheshwari, 2017). They compete with each other over almost boyish games, with popular ridicule as consequence, especially in Belarus. The same respondent added to this:

*"Between the Russian and Belarusian dictator there is a kind of competition like the one we often observe in the patriarchal world between guys, between boys: guys compare their strengths, the size of the penis, etc. The same tendencies are observed, but at a rather symbolic level in the conduct of two dictators."* (Interview 13, online, 09.05.22)

Athleticism and showing off his physique are some of Putin's markers of masculinity. It seems Lukashenko wants to adhere to this but often in a weaker version. Putin's bare-chested display of power shows political counterparts, also outside of Russia, that he is the physical embodiment of the nation's strength, the silverback of the imperial troop (Sperling, 2014). Lukashenko can tag along sometimes, but he should always remember his place as side character to Putin's more dominant masculinity.

According to Sperling (2014), Putin undoubtedly represents a kind of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Russia, considered a post-Soviet exemplar of seductive and reassuring virility. Putin has often been called a sex symbol, an example of (political) potency. Russian media has reported women having erotic dreams about him and polls demonstrated that many women supposedly



wanted to marry him. This was in 2012, it would be interesting to see how this has evolved throughout the years, especially since the war in Ukraine in 2022. Focusing on Lukashenko, this analysis falls outside the scope of my thesis. In my research, I have not registered any participants with erotic dreams of Lukashenko: on the contrary, he is seen as a clumsy, ignorant madman. Lukashenko wants to uphold an image of an attractive, strong man as well, if we believe the rumours that the media can only show him from a specific angle to hide his baldness for example. As abovementioned, there were also rumours about his sexual appetites and relationships with young women, but they remained rumours rather than fantasies. People do not fetishize Lukashenko's authoritarian rule as they do with Putin, at least not to the same extent.

There are some more contrasting differences in the two strongmen's performances of masculinity. While Putin's trademark leather jackets, black suits and turtlenecks mimic the zooty style of Bond villains, Lukashenko still wears his old-school East European dictatorial and military moustache (Maheshwari, 2017; Vassigh, 2022). Pussy Riot mention in their song "Putin Light Up the Fires" that Putin is "the one who botoxed his cheeks and pumped his chest and abs", symbolically referring to his artificial, superficial and feminized version of masculinity (Sperling, 2014). Putin furthermore presents himself as an aberration from the "regular Russian man" who drinks a lot, as his predecessor Yeltsin, and likes to show off his (relative) sobriety. The concept "muzhik" can finally help us to better understand hegemonic masculinity and its aberrations in both countries throughout the years.

#### 4.3.5. *The post-Soviet "muzhik"*

The concept "muzhik" translates to something like "real man" in English, and has similar connotations of traditional notions of masculinity. In the Soviet past, it meant being a man of the

people, usually from the peasant social stratum. Lukashenko often shows himself as a peasant man of the people, emphasizing his own background. There are images circulating on the internet of Lukashenko, Putin and other post-Soviet leaders sitting in a wheat field, riding a tractor and ploughing the ground, hereby visualizing Soviet heritage and the idea that the leaders remain close to the land and the folk (Astapova, 2016). One interviewee has told me that Lukashenko sometimes uses peasant expressions to publicly bash someone, for example by saying that “the cows are covered in shit”. They added that this public image of a peasant contributes to his performance of being a “muzhik”, who was raised on the countryside and is physically strong. Yet the Belarusian peasants themselves do not support him anymore. When Lukashenko visited a Tractor Factory in Minsk in 2020, he was faced with a crowd screaming for him to leave (Luxmoore, 2020). In that same visit, he told the workers that the president will be a man and that society is not ready to vote for a woman. History has taught us something else.

Whereas the female version “baba” gained a negative connotation throughout the years, “muzhik” actually became a compliment for men, signifying their strength. It became less about being a hard-working peasant and more about being strong, not crying, wearing masculine clothing, lifting weights, not playing golf, fixing cars, drinking coffee without milk or sugar, not doing housework, having hard-core straight sex with women, and so on. The concept became internalized in a new generation of Russian and Belarusian boys and girls, who have learnt what it means to perform masculinity and femininity. One Belarusian respondent told me that kids learn these things at home and transfer that to school, where boys are being bullied for not being “muzhik” enough and girls are being bullied for being a “baba”. As abovementioned, the police sometimes used this word to describe the women who they would spare their baton.

These gendered expressions are intertwined with misogyny and heteronormativity but also with notions of ethnicity and nationality. A real “muzhik” should not play Western sports like golfing and should not be an egoistic, politically correct liberalist (Sperling, 2014). Instead, tough language and comradeship (“tovarishchestvo”) are central and allude again to the kind of male bonding that political figures like Lukashenko and Putin have shown. They may both have been a “muzhik” once in their political career, but Lukashenko right now is mainly regarded as an “inadequate grandpa” (quoting my participants). “Byt’ muzhikom” (being a real man) may be the phallocratic type of rule that Lukashenko and Putin have mobilized, but the curse of masculinity and phallocracy has also fallen upon them. They seem to no longer be able to perform and reassert their hegemonic masculinity convincingly, and instead merely cling to an anxious kind of phallocratic authoritarianism. As one of my participants stated:

*“The image of a clumsy Lukashenko with a rifle outside his residence in the fall of 2020 quickly became a true caricature of an aged dictator.”* (Interview 13, online, 09.05.22)

## **5. Conclusion: points of relevance and limitations**

### *5.1. Points of relevance*

Based on literature review and the conversations I had with participants, I found four main reasons for why it is relevant to look into the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authoritarianism in post-Soviet Belarus.

First of all, it sheds a light on gender and masculinity in the realm of political analysis. Politics is not a gender-neutral practice where rational actors make value-free calculations for the good of the entire population. Instead, masculinity operates as a gendered power structure, inherent in politics. In my thesis, I have tried instead to critically engage with the concept of masculinity in politics. The in-depth exploration of the Belarusian case can serve as an example of the way in which gender is mobilized as a tool of political legitimization strategies in different countries. Masculinity is at play in all politics, from democratic to authoritarian regimes. In authoritarian regimes, however, public misogyny and political homophobia can be stronger due to the repression of a strong women's movement (Sperling, 2014). Nonetheless, we should be wary not to view the question of gender in international politics as a "sexual clash of civilizations" (Inglehart & Norris, 2003), where sexual liberalisation is considered a pertinent fault line between whole regions. The danger lies in seeing the world yet again as "the West" versus "the rest"; a universal, liberal modernity that is on the "right" side of history versus a backwards, religious, traditional intolerance that needs to develop. Instead, we have to critically assess the role of patriarchy in its interaction with different contexts. The West has its own issues with opposition to gender equality and sexual liberalisation, especially from a postcolonial and intersectional perspective. We should furthermore be careful not to contribute to the essentialization of binary gender norms by equating

individual men with the heteropatriarchy and women with being innocent victims. Masculinity and femininity need to be considered in plural and intersecting with other power structures. Women can equally embody or reproduce the patriarchy, as we have seen in opposition movements in Belarus. Vice versa, many masculinities (e.g. queer, Black, working class, etc.) are oppressed under the framework of a hegemonic masculinity that can survive and thrive under patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism and other interconnected systems.

Secondly, since masculinity is part of all political power structures, there is a need to address this when looking at opposition tactics. In other words, when unseating the political status quo, do we automatically unseat the ideological status quo? In multiple interviews, it came back that there were worries that there will just be another strongman instead of Lukashenko and that the same authoritarian, patriarchal system would continue to exist because many people were merely focused on surviving and overthrowing Lukashenko. We see that both pro- and anti-Lukashenko groups deploy gender as a tool in politicizing their organizing efforts. Hegemonic gender norms, that oppress parts of the population and can contribute to a certain authoritarianism, may not be subverted by merely overthrowing the current dictator. My thesis is therefore relevant to emphasize the difference between mere agency versus actual resistance against oppressive structures.

Yet, we have to take into account that it in a hostile and non-democratic political sphere, it is rather difficult for feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements to find the resources and energy to overthrow cultural patriarchal power structures that are employed for political legitimation on all sides of the political spectrum. This argument is part of the third point of relevance, namely that there are specificities to authoritarian regimes in terms of how hegemonic masculinity and gender

norms are mobilized to further political goals. The weakening of the feminist movement in Belarus is a way for Lukashenko to assert phallocratic power: creating or reproducing a hegemony that becomes internalized in people's daily understanding of the world and therefore breeds legitimacy. The curse of the phallocracy, however, is that you need to perform your masculinity time and again, whilst publicly punishing those who do not obey to your type of rule. The obscenity and extravagance with which the phallocratic ruler asserts his dominance on the public stage becomes the object of popular ridicule, as seen in the many rumours and jokes circulating about Lukashenko (and Putin). This is a way for people to contest the dictator's rule in a more infrapolitical way, though it can also reproduce similar homophobic and misogynist discourses, especially when feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements are repressed under authoritarian rule. When I asked one Belarusian activist LGBTQIA+ and feminist researcher whether gender is a relevant lens to look at Lukashenko's authoritarian power, he answered:

*“In my opinion, gender is the best lens through which to view and analyse Lukashenko's dictatorial regime. Gender has long been a useful category for defining the level of development, openness and democracy in society. In democracy, we often use the gender index to see how society works, how the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people are evolving. Gender as a focus of analysis of non-democratic societies is also valid: it helps to identify and analyse the level of conservatism, homophobia and misogyny of dictatorships.”* (Interview 13, online, 09.05.22)

Finally, the Belarusian case ties in to a widespread phenomenon, where masculinity serves as a vehicle for power under the patriarchy (Sperling, 2014). It goes beyond an isolated context of war where militarized notions of masculinity are used to mobilize the male population to fight for their country. My thesis sheds a light on how different scales (nation, civil society, family) are

interconnected and how hegemonic masculinity derives its power in all these scales as a political tool in the structural context of patriarchy. It is used not only as a tool to achieve political legitimacy but also to assert authority and discredit opponents. In the long run, mobilizing traditional and hegemonic gender norms for strategical purposes reinforces the subordination of women to men and restricts people's personal and political freedom, which undermines the idea of a democracy more broadly (Sperling, 2014). Anti-gender politics is not exclusive to post-Soviet spaces, but appears to be a global phenomenon (mainly of the far right), in democratic and non-democratic spaces (Gökarıksel et al. 2019; Löffler et al. 2020).

### *5.2. Limitations and suggestions for further research*

Finally, I will go over four limitations in this thesis which can inspire me or others to conduct further research on the topic. I derived most imitations from applying a reflexive methodology, where I am conscious of the positionality of everyone included and excluded in my research and the way knowledge is situated accordingly.

The first limitation is the physical distance created by conducting a digital ethnography. By not really “going there”, I was automatically unable to reach some people. The COVID-19 pandemic, the migration tragedy at the Belarusian border with Poland, and the threatening presence of Russian troops at the border with Ukraine which turned into a war were all factors that made me feel unsure going there as a master's student. It felt like a dangerous climate for researchers and journalists and I furthermore did not want to put extra stress on the participants there. On the other hand, I also felt I had to be careful not to bring people in danger through online interviews. Stories of surveillance leave deep impressions on people (Astapova, 2021), thus I found it very important to create a safe environment online. Even if about 80% of Belarusians have access to internet (as

for 2018), not everyone wants to communicate through this medium. The distance was always looming and posing limitations on the relationships I could build and the rich ethnographic information I could have gathered. As Astapova (2021, p.3) said it accurately: “Research into autocratic regimes has often had to rely on distant analysis or retrospective views gleaned from memoirs, archives, and testimonies, which has certainly posed limitations on the results.”

A second limitation is the language barrier: I do not speak Russian nor Belarusian. I overcame this barrier with the help of a translator in two Russian-speaking focus groups. Some things got lost in translation, even though the helpful translator was willing to go over the interview with me afterwards to see if I had understood everything and to discuss any non-verbal communication (connotation, timing, reactions to the others in the focus group) I had missed. We even texted some of the participants afterwards to verify our understanding of something they had said. We had discussions on positionality of the participants that I was not able to grasp out of the mere translation of the words: sometimes your positionality is revealed through non-verbal language such as interrupting someone at a telling moment, disdain for particular people or opinions, a silence that is a bit too long, etc. Even though this non-verbal information can mean different things, it was important for me to take them into account in my analysis of their words. The rest of the interviews and focus groups were in English, Dutch or French. Rarely there was a language barrier where the participants were not completely comfortable speaking those languages. Most of them were as good as fluent speaking a foreign language, which already indicates another bias in participants.

The third limitation comes as a consequence of the first two: only certain voices were heard in my research whereas I did not reach other groups. I managed to include a wide range of people from



different sectors and groups of the Belarusian society, but nonetheless there is still a bias. I complemented this with my own digital ethnography and reading ethnographic articles and interviews on the topic (see for example Astapova, 2016, 2020; Mamonova et al., 1980). I further indirectly included particular groups who were underrepresented, such as older and/or more conservative people, by asking about them to my participants. Yet the women, queer people, activists and researchers proved to be crucial for my thesis through their positionality and sensitivity with the topic. They were the main target group which I have gladly spoken with. Yet when talking to older, more conservative, or strongly religious people, I often witnessed the homophobia, misogyny, or general gender-blindness that my other participants struggled with. The insights generated from those conversations are important as well to think about effective tactics for structural change. An interesting route for further research could be to focus exclusively on the position of feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements and look at tactics and challenges to generate change in a phallocracy such as Belarus. This was an initial idea of mine, but I decided to first write a general overview of the gendered politics in Belarus under Lukashenko, with merely a limited chapter on gender movements.

Finally, due to the limits of writing a master's thesis, I was not able to include a broad sociohistorical contextualization which takes into account different post-Soviet countries, let alone an in-depth geopolitical analysis. I have made a limited comparison between Putin and Lukashenko, which is something that can be elaborated upon in further research. An interesting route is to also include Zelensky more and see how their trajectories are influenced by and intersecting with gender. Even broader, one could conduct a comparative study looking at different post-Soviet countries and analyse what patterns of masculinity exist, how they interact with each other throughout the years, and how certain political leaders (especially Putin) influence

other leaders. Finally, the role of the West throughout history is an interesting and important postcolonial lens to see how gender struggles became villainized and considered as anti-patriotic in post-Soviet spaces.

### *5.3. Conclusion*

With my thesis I hope to contribute to the literature on masculinity and authoritarianism in Lukashenko's case. I have found different academic articles on the historical continuum of Soviet gender relations, Putin's machismo, and the protests in 2020 with a "female face", yet almost none of the articles zoomed in on Lukashenko's masculinity specifically. The question I have asked throughout my thesis was: is gender a relevant lens to look at Lukashenko's power? And at the end of this dissertation, I can answer this question positively. Even though many Belarusian people seem not to care about gender relations and would much rather just overthrow the current dictator, his presidential seat rests on gendered power structures which he – intentionally or not – deploys. I have used thick descriptions of Lukashenko's performances of masculinity to demonstrate the range and impact of such discourses on different domestic levels (the nation, civil society and private sphere) and geopolitically (though this was only limited in my thesis). Gender, as well as other intersectional markers of identity, permeate all aspects of everyday life and cannot be separated from power and politics. I have chosen a gendered lens for Lukashenko because of two main reasons: (1) the public debate on gender in Belarus since the women's movement in 2020 and (2) to look at a less-discussed submissive ally to Putin. These reasons informed my choice to look into the specificities of Lukashenko's rule and how it is informed by a kind of hegemonic masculinity which subordinates other kinds of masculinities and femininities.

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## **Annex: interview guides**

### **Interview guide 1: focus group 1, November 2020**

*Positionality interviewees: young, female employees at a women's rights centre in Belarus*

#### **Introduction**

- Anonymous, no recording, consent
- Can you tell me something about yourself and your position in the centre?
- Can you please describe what the main goals and functions of the centre are?

How is the situation right now in your organization with regards to the current crisis in Belarus? (I read that the government accuses the centre of funding the protests, although you don't identify as a political organization.)

- What are some differences you notice in the organization and the people coming to you in comparison to before the elections this year?

How was the role of women before this uprising? (Also ask about the economic opportunities in the past 26 years)

How do you think these protests might change the role of women in Belarus? Do you think it will set about a fundamental shift from traditional gender roles to more possibilities for women?

Is it mainly men being hit or detained by the police? Why do you think this gender difference exists? It is not like Lukashenko is generally more friendly towards women... I looked at some videos or posts of witnesses or family from victims being tortured or hit by the police. It seems to me that the physical violence is predominantly aimed at men, and men are usually the ones being detained. For instance, I heard about a story of a policeman that was about to hit a woman with his baton, when his colleague said: "No, don't hit her, she is a "baba"".

Do you agree with this? Are men the victims of police brutality whereas women are being "spared" by this? Why do you think this is? Is it because he still doesn't see them as a political threat?

What are some of the things the protesters use in their protest? What kind of symbols, or resources? For example, the flag, ...

Are there any (alternative) media outlets that are being used that support the movement?

How do men react to this in the protests?

What do Lukashenko and his administration use in response?

What symbols did he use during his period in office in the past 26 years to claim legitimacy?

To continue on the symbols being used by both Lukashenko's administration and opposition, I'd like to talk a bit about the masked policemen who anonymously violate human rights by beating up and sometimes killing protesters (like Roman Bandarenko). The vision of a mask seems so different there than here. Of course, a balaclava is different from our surgical masks. Do you recognize this in any way or is this more anecdotal?

How is the current situation with the covid virus? Is this in any way a worry right now, and how does the government try to contain it (if at all)? How does Lukashenko frame the covid crisis?

Why do you think the movement started now, as opposed to anywhere in the past years or elections? He has been detaining people since the end of the '90s, although now it seems to be a bit more extreme. He has also been circumventing the constitution more than once to extend his presidency. His sexism has been blatant for many years. Regardless of international criticism, the majority of people still seemed to agree with his policies. What was the catalyst now for this (female) uprising, according to you? (He finally allowed a woman to run against him for president.)

How do you see the future of Belarus? Do you have any predictions of what will happen in the coming weeks, months and even years?

Do you have any specific wishes for the country, or for what other countries could do to help?





## **Interview guide 2, 14.11.21**

*Positionality respondent: personal acquaintance, young Belarusian man, currently living abroad, fluent in English, politically active*

This interview will be about Belarus and the current president Lukashenko, but will be based on your personal experiences and interpretations. Feel free to share as much personal information as you want to and to refuse to answer any question. If I would use your testimony for my thesis, I will not use your name, except if you explicitly ask so. I will not record the interview. Do you consent to me using your answers anonymously in my thesis? You can withdraw any information at a later time if you want to.

Do you want to share how you identify yourself, based on gender and sexual orientation before we start? (Myself: pronouns she/her/they, queer/bisexual/pansexual, I experience the specific labels rather contextual)

Where were you born and where did you grow up? How long did you live in Belarus? Did you follow higher education there? Did you work there? Do you often return there? Do you still have a lot of close ties there?

How did you experience the rise of Lukashenko? How did you experience living under his rule?

What do you think of the movement after the 2020 elections? (Do you consider it specifically a women's movement?) In what ways were you engaging with the movement?

Did you engage in any activism when you lived in Belarus or connected to Belarus? (What kind of activism, how was that for you?)

How is sexual and gender education in Belarus? What is missing from the curriculum?

Do you have any friends that are in the LGBTQIA+ community in Belarus? How do they experience the political climate? Do they engage in activism?

Do you know any immigrants in Belarus, and how are they perceived in the country? (Also depending on race and ethnicity, where do they come from, what was their migration journey)

Perhaps a more politically technical question, but do you consider Lukashenko a populist? How would you describe Lukashenko's rule politically (populism, dictatorship, authoritarianism, ...?)

*(Ask these questions if they are showing proficiency in political topics, don't call them out on the spot just like that and rather focus on personal experience otherwise)*

Any more questions or comments for me?

## **Interview guide 3 (Dutch), 08.03.22**

*Positionality: young Chechnyan man who lives in Belgium, old friend from high school, active in the Chechnyan community*

### **Introductie**

- Hoe gaat het?
- Ben je nu thuis? Welk werk doe je nu? Wat doet je vrouw van werk? Heb je al kinderen?
- Ik ga alles volledig anoniem opslaan en verwerken. Mag ik juist wel je toestemming om je antwoorden te gebruiken in mijn thesis?
- Ik neem het interview niet op, maar ik zou wel ondertussen notities maken op mijn laptop als dat oké is, dus je zult me misschien soms horen typen.
- Eerst eens willen checken hoe je je voelt ten opzichte van de oorlog? Wil je daar iets over kwijt?

### **Beeldmateriaal**

- Om het gesprek wat meer op gang te krijgen, ga ik eerst wat afbeeldingen tonen, en als je wilt mag je daar op reageren zoals je wilt. Even nadenken of direct zeggen wat je erbij voelt of denkt. Dit mag echt heel ver gaan, je mag gewoon alles delen wat er in je opkomt.
- Afbeelding 1 (Stalin meme 1: “Look into my eyes and see the soul of the man who made Mother Russia his bitch”)

- Afbeelding 2 (Lukashenko: “It is better to be a dictator than gay”)
- Zie je een gelijkenis tussen deze twee figuren? Waarom wel/niet? Wat zijn de verschillen?
- Zie je gelijkenissen met Putin vandaag? Welke? Wat zijn eventuele verschillen?
- Ken je misschien gelijkaardige voorbeelden van foto’s of uitspraken die je wilt delen?
  - o Ik beseft dat dit meer feitenkennis is, dus zeer begrijpelijk als je niet direct een voorbeeld weet.

#### Onderzoeksvraag

- In mijn onderzoek stel ik me de vraag of er een verband is tussen mannelijkheid en autoritaire politiek/autoritarisme, en als dit verband er is, op welke manier. Zie jij hier een mogelijk verband? En waarom of waarom niet, volgens jou?
- Kun jij op jouw eigen manier autoritaire politiek/autoritarisme definiëren? Of delen wat het betekent volgens jou om een autoritaire leider te zijn?
- En mannelijkheid? Wat betekent het voor jou om een man te zijn?

#### Gender

- Ik zou dan nu nog even iets verder willen gaan op het onderwerp van gender, als dat goed is voor jou.

- Denk je dat er bepaalde verwachtingen of stereotypen zijn over Oost-Europese, bijvoorbeeld Tsjetsjeense, mannen en vrouwen die mensen hier in België of in het Westen hebben?
- Ervaar je zelf uit de Russische of Tsjetsjeense gemeenschap of familie hier bepaalde verwachtingen of stereotypen over gender?
  - o Wat vind jij hiervan? Hoe ga jij hiermee om?

#### Provocatie

- Om te eindigen, zou ik nog willen vragen of je zelf nog bepaalde geruchten, verhalen, anekdotes, roddels, ... kent over Putin, Lukashenko of een andere post-Soviet leider die je wilt delen?
- Mag ook iets zijn zoals bijvoorbeeld hoe Putin halfnaakt was gaan vissen en jagen en daar overal foto's van zijn verschenen.
- Het mag ook over iemand anders zijn uit de regio, als het maar een berucht verhaal of schandaal is.
- Opnieuw, ik begrijp het volledig als er nu niks in je opkomt, feel free om mij altijd te sturen als je nog verhalen of voorbeelden weet of tegenkomt.

#### Conclusie

- Heb je dan voor de rest nog vragen of opmerkingen voor mij?

- Dan wil ik je heel hard bedanken, was fijn om nog eens met je te praten. Ik wens je veel geluk en zoals ik al zei, stuur me gerust als je nog iets wilt delen.

## Interview guide 4, 19.03.22

*Positionality interviewee: Belarusian woman living abroad, friend of a friend, feminist, politically active*

“Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, specifically Belarus”  
(*but actually... Relationship authoritarianism and masculinity in Lukashenko/post-Soviet leaders*)

### Introduction & ice-breakers

- Welcome, thank you, consent to record/use information, ensuring anonymity unless explicitly asked otherwise
- First of all, I would like to take a moment to check in (with you/everyone). How are you doing? *Wait a moment, perhaps they already elaborate here.* Do you want to share any feelings or thoughts about the current situation in Ukraine?
  - o *If they want to answer:* thanks for your openness. *Shortly share your own feelings (not opinions) if appropriate and then move on to the next part of the interview.*
  - o *Also leave room to not talk about the war:* we can also move on to the interview, that is completely fine.
- Before we go to the main topics of the interview, I would like to know more about you. Can you tell me a bit about your background, where you are from, where you grew up, where you live now, what you study/studied and/or what you do for work?
- How do/did you experience living under Lukashenko (or Putin, ...)?

## Photo/video elicitation

- *Showing an image, video, meme, Tweet, etc. and just asking an open question about it*
- *Examples: Lukashenko in military gear, Lukashenko and his son, Lukashenko stating that it is better to be a dictator than gay, Lukashenko and Putin (e.g. hugging each other on a yacht), Putin on a bear half naked, ...*
- What do you think or feel when you see this (image, video, ...)?
  - o *In a focus group, I could project a white board on which participants can type/write words themselves, after which we can talk about what they have written down.*
- Did you know this picture/video already? Do you know other similar examples?
- In what ways do you see that Lukashenko is similar to other post-Soviet leaders?
  - 1) Soviet poster: emancipated woman/don't chatter
  - 2) Stalin meme 2: "for Mother Russia"
  - 3) Lukashenko: "It is better to be a dictator than gay"

## Research question

- My research is concerned with a possible relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism. Do you see a link there at all? If yes, why and how so? If not, why not?



- How do you consider authoritarianism? How would you define or frame it in your own words? What associations do you have with it?
- How do you consider masculinity? How would you define or frame it in your own words? What associations do you have with it?

## Gender

- I would now like to zoom in more on gender relations in general in (your country of origin).
- How did you get educated on topics concerning gender and sexuality?
- Can you give some examples of stereotypical gender roles that exist in your country?
- How is gender represented in the media in Belarus (or Russia, ...), according to you?
- Do you experience specific issues in your country because of your gender? Which ones, and how do you experience this? How do you deal with this?

## Provocation

- To finish off, are there any funny or extravagant stories, gossip or rumours about Lukashenko, Putin, ... that you know of? I am not interested in facts, I am just curious about which stories are being shared “on the street”, so to speak.
- *Give an example yourself:* Lukashenko’s “supernatural sexual powers/Herculean sexual appetites”, the whereabouts of Lukashenko’s wife, his relationship with the young miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich who is also appointed a member of the House of Representatives

in Belarus, Lukashenko's own education and parents (absent father), whether Lukashenko has a mental disorder like Stalin, ...

## Conclusion

- I have asked everything that I wanted to know so far. Do you want to share anymore comments or questions yourself?
- Thank you, a lot of strength in this difficult period, you can always contact me with more questions or remarks later

## Interview guide 5, 22.03.22

*Positionality interviewee: middle-aged Belarusian man, from Facebook group, politically active*

“Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, specifically Belarus”  
(*but actually... Relationship authoritarianism and masculinity in Lukashenko/post-Soviet leaders*)

### Introduction & ice-breakers

- Anonymous, no recording, consent
- Background
- First of all, I would like to take a moment to check in (with you/everyone). How are you doing? *Wait a moment, perhaps they already elaborate here.* Do you want to share any feelings or thoughts about the current situation in Ukraine?

### Photo/video elicitation

- 1) Lukashenko: “It is better to be a dictator than a gay”
- 2) Meme: “Manliness level: Russian”

### Research question

- My research is concerned with a possible relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism. Do you see a link there at all? If yes, why and how so? If not, why not?
- How do you consider authoritarianism? How would you define or frame it in your own words? What associations do you have with it?

- How do you consider masculinity? How would you define or frame it in your own words?  
What associations do you have with it?

## Gender

- I would now like to zoom in more on gender relations in general in (your country of origin).
- How did you get educated on topics concerning gender and sexuality?
- Can you give some examples of stereotypical gender roles that exist in your country?
- How is gender represented in the media in Belarus (or Russia, ...), according to you?
- Do you experience specific issues in your country because of your gender? Which ones, and how do you experience this? How do you deal with this?

## Provocation

- To finish off, are there any funny or extravagant stories, gossip or rumours about Lukashenko, Putin, ... that you know of? I am not interested in facts, I am just curious about which stories are being shared “on the street”, so to speak.
- *Give an example yourself:* Lukashenko’s “supernatural sexual powers/Herculean sexual appetites”, the whereabouts of Lukashenko’s wife, his relationship with the young miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich who is also appointed a member of the House of Representatives in Belarus, Lukashenko’s own education and parents (absent father), whether Lukashenko has a mental disorder like Stalin, ...

## Conclusion

- I have asked everything that I wanted to know so far. Do you want to share anymore comments or questions yourself?
- Thank you, a lot of strength in this difficult period, you can always contact me with more questions or remarks later

## Interview guide 6, 24.03.22

*Positionality interviewee: middle-aged Belarusian man, from Facebook group, agrarian background*

“Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, specifically Belarus”  
*(but actually... Relationship authoritarianism and masculinity in Lukashenko/post-Soviet leaders)*

### Introduction & ice-breakers

- Introduce yourself!
- Anonymous, no recording, consent
- First of all, I would like to take a moment to check in (with you/everyone). How are you doing? *Wait a moment, perhaps they already elaborate here.* Do you want to share any feelings or thoughts about the current situation in Ukraine?
  - *If they want to answer:* thanks for your openness. *Shortly share your own feelings (not opinions) if appropriate and then move on to the next part of the interview.*
  - *Also leave room to not talk about the war:* we can also move on to the interview, that is completely fine.
- Before we go to the main topics of the interview, I would like to know more about you. Can you tell me a bit about your background, where you are from, where you grew up, where you live now, what you study/studied and/or what you do for work?
- How do/did you experience living under Lukashenko (or Putin, ...)?

## Photo/video elicitation

- *Showing an image, video, meme, Tweet, etc. and just asking an open question about it*
- *Examples: Lukashenko in military gear, Lukashenko and his son, Lukashenko stating that it is better to be a dictator than gay, Lukashenko and Putin (e.g. hugging each other on a yacht), Putin on a bear half naked, ...*
- What do you think or feel when you see this (image, video, ...)?
  - o *In a focus group, I could project a white board on which participants can type/write words themselves, after which we can talk about what they have written down.*
- Did you know this picture/video already? Do you know other similar examples?
- In what ways do you see that Lukashenko is similar to other post-Soviet leaders?
  - 1) Lukashenko: “It is better to be a dictator than gay”
  - 2) Meme: stereotypes about Eastern European men

## Research question

- My research is concerned with a possible relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism. Do you see a link there at all? If yes, why and how so? If not, why not?
- How do you consider authoritarianism? How would you define or frame it in your own words? What associations do you have with it?

- How do you consider masculinity? How would you define or frame it in your own words?  
What associations do you have with it?

## Gender

- I would now like to zoom in more on gender relations in general in (your country of origin).
- How did you get educated on topics concerning gender and sexuality?
- Can you give some examples of stereotypical gender roles that exist in your country?
- How is gender represented in the media in Belarus (or Russia, ...), according to you?
- Do you experience specific issues in your country because of your gender? Which ones, and how do you experience this? How do you deal with this?

## Provocation

- To finish off, are there any funny or extravagant stories, gossip or rumours about Lukashenko, Putin, ... that you know of? I am not interested in facts, I am just curious about which stories are being shared “on the street”, so to speak.
- *Give an example yourself:* Lukashenko’s “supernatural sexual powers/Herculean sexual appetites”, the whereabouts of Lukashenko’s wife, his relationship with the young miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich who is also appointed a member of the House of Representatives in Belarus, Lukashenko’s own education and parents (absent father), whether Lukashenko has a mental disorder like Stalin, ...



## Conclusion

- I have asked everything that I wanted to know so far. Do you want to share anymore comments or questions yourself?
- Thank you, a lot of strength in this difficult period, you can always contact me with more questions or remarks later

## Interview guide 7: focus group 2 (Dutch, offline), 28.03.22

*Positionality interviewees: Russian and Chechnyan students living in Belgium*

“Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, specifically Belarus”  
(*but actually...* Relationship authoritarianism and masculinity in Lukashenko/post-Soviet leaders)

### Introduction & ice-breakers

- Mondelinge toestemming dat ik jullie antwoorden mag noteren en gebruiken in mijn onderzoek. Iedereen blijft anoniem en je mag op elk moment kiezen om niet meer mee te doen, dus je mag me ook achteraf sturen. Niets wordt opgenomen.
- Nu kunnen we misschien even een rondje doen om te zeggen wat onze achtergrond precies is.
- Voor we beginnen aan het specifieke thema van mijn thesis, wou ik even checken of jullie iets over de oorlog kwijt willen. Zo niet, gaan we gewoon verder naar de vragen.

### Photo/video elicitation

- *Showing an image, video, meme, Tweet, etc. and just asking an open question about it*
- *Examples:* Lukashenko in military gear, Lukashenko and his son, Lukashenko stating that it is better to be a dictator than gay, Lukashenko and Putin (e.g. hugging each other on a yacht), Putin on a bear half naked, ...
- What do you think or feel when you see this (image, video, ...)?

- *In a focus group, I could project a white board on which participants can type/write words themselves, after which we can talk about what they have written down.*
- Did you know this picture/video already? Do you know other similar examples?
- In what ways do you see that Lukashenko is similar to other post-Soviet leaders?
- 1) Meme: stereotypes about Eastern European men
- 2) Lukashenko: “It is better to be a dictator than gay”

#### Provocation

- Are there any funny or extravagant stories, gossip or rumours about Lukashenko, Putin, ... that you know of? I am not interested in facts, I am just curious about which stories are being shared “on the street”, so to speak.
- *Give an example yourself:* Lukashenko’s “supernatural sexual powers/Herculean sexual appetites”, the whereabouts of Lukashenko’s wife, his relationship with the young miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich who is also appointed a member of the House of Representatives in Belarus, Lukashenko’s own education and parents (absent father), whether Lukashenko has a mental disorder like Stalin, ...

#### Gender

- I would now like to zoom in more on gender relations in general in (your country of origin).

- How did you get educated on topics concerning gender and sexuality?
- How is gender represented in the media in Belarus (or Russia, ...), according to you?

#### Research question

- My research is concerned with a possible relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism. Do you see a link there at all? If yes, why and how so? If not, why not?
- How do you consider authoritarianism? How would you define or frame it in your own words? What associations do you have with it?
- How do you consider masculinity? How would you define or frame it in your own words? What associations do you have with it?
- Wat denken jullie van de verwoording “how the fathers of the nation become its domestic abusers” – of hoe de vaders van de natiestaat er huiselijk geweld op plegen? Denken jullie dat zo’n verwoording, met de verwijzing naar vaderschap en huiselijk geweld, relevant of gepast is voor Lukashenko en Putin?

#### Conclusion

- I have asked everything that I wanted to know so far. Do you want to share anymore comments or questions yourself?
- Thank you, a lot of strength in this difficult period, you can always contact me with more questions or remarks later.

## **Interview guide 8: focus group 3 (Russian, translated to English), 30.03.22**

*Positionality interviewees: young Belarusian women, some living in Belarus and some living abroad, feminists*

“Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, specifically Belarus”  
(*but actually...* Relationship authoritarianism and masculinity in Lukashenko/post-Soviet leaders)

### Introduction & ice-breakers

- Introduce yourself (University of Ghent (Belgium), master’s degree Conflict and Development), also Alina as translator (also how she knows me and one participant, this can build trust)
- Ethics & consent
  - o Ensuring anonymity unless explicitly asked otherwise
  - o Nothing will be recorded, I will take notes if you consent to that, also ask consent to use answers in the thesis
  - o At any time you can leave or withdraw, you can also text me later if you don’t want me to use your answers in any way
  - o I also want to emphasize you don’t have to answer anything you don’t want to answer
- After one hour in Google Meet, I will send a new link in the group chat.

- First of all, I would like to know more about you. Would you like to tell me a bit about your background (name, age, where you were born and grew up, what you study or do for work)?
- Before we go to the main topics of the interview, I would like to take a moment to check in with everyone. How are you doing? Is there anything you already want to share about yourself or about the current situation in Ukraine? No worries if you don't want to talk about it right now, we can also move on to the interview questions.
- How did/do you experience living under Lukashenko?

Photo/video elicitation

1) Lukashenko: "It is better to be a dictator than gay."

Russian article with the same quote in the title:

Staff, R. (2012). *Лукашенко: лучше быть диктатором, чем геем*. U.S. Retrieved 12 May, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/orutp-belarus-president-dictatorship-idRURXE82303920120304>

*In a focus group, I could project a white board on which participants can type/write words themselves, after which we can talk about what they have written down.*

- What do you think or feel when you read this statement?
- Did you know this picture/video already? Do you know other similar examples?

- Why would he compare being a dictator with (not) being gay? (Why is he so bothered by this?)
- Do you see ways that Lukashenko is similar to other post-Soviet leaders, such as Putin, in this case?
  - o *Follow-up:* How do you think Putin influences Lukashenko?

## 2) Lukashenko as father of the nation

*Lukashenko: The story of “Europe’s Last Dictator”*. (2020). [Video]. YouTube.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRSxxdLtXNM&ab\\_channel=euronews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRSxxdLtXNM&ab_channel=euronews)

In this video (0:53), Anaïs Marin, who reports on Belarus for the United Nations Human Rights Office (UN OHCHR), states that Lukashenko sees himself as the father of the nation, the protector of the Belarusian people and the owner of the country.

- Do you think my statement is appropriate in the context of Lukashenko and Putin?

## Research question

To continue on my research title, it investigates the relationship between Lukashenko and gender relations.

- Do you think Lukashenko’s rule has a particular influence on gender relations in Belarus, and if so, how?

## Gender

- How did you get educated on topics concerning gender and sexuality?
- How is gender represented in the media in Belarus, according to you?
- Can you give some examples of stereotypical gender roles that exist in your country?
  - o *Follow-up:* How does this influence you personally, and how do you deal with this?

### Provocation

- To finish off, are there any funny or extravagant stories, gossip or rumours about Lukashenko, Putin, ... that you know of? I am not interested in facts, I am just curious about which stories are being shared “on the street”, so to speak.
- *Possibly give an example yourself:* the whereabouts of Lukashenko’s wife, his relationship with the young miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich who is also appointed a member of the House of Representatives in Belarus, Lukashenko’s own education and parents (absent father), whether Lukashenko has a mental disorder like Stalin, ...

### Conclusion

- I have asked everything that I wanted to know so far. Do you want to share anymore comments or questions yourself?
- Thank you, a lot of strength in this difficult period, you can always contact me with more questions or remarks later



## Interview guide 9: focus group 4, 06.04.22

*Positionality interviewees: Russian students, living abroad, politically active, queer, feminist*

“Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, specifically Belarus”  
(*but actually... Relationship authoritarianism and masculinity in Lukashenko/post-Soviet leaders*)

### Introduction & ice-breakers

- Welcome, thank you, consent to record/use information, ensuring anonymity unless explicitly asked otherwise
- First of all, I would like to take a moment to check in (with you/everyone). How are you doing? *Wait a moment, perhaps they already elaborate here.* Do you want to share any feelings or thoughts about the current situation in Ukraine?
- Even though I know most of your backgrounds already, I would like to do a quick introduction round. *Start with yourself.* Can you tell me a bit about your background, where you are from, where you grew up, where you live now, what you study/studied and/or what you do for work?
- How do/did you experience living under Putin?

### Gender

- Relevant to look at gender in power structure of Lukashenka/Putin?
- Can you give some examples of stereotypical gender roles that exist in your country?

- How did you get educated on topics concerning gender and sexuality?
- How is gender represented in the media in Russia, according to you?
  - o Does Putin (or Lukashenko) influence this, according to you?
- Do you experience specific issues in your country because of your gender? Which ones, and how do you experience this? How do you deal with this?

#### Photo/video elicitation

- 1) Lukashenko: “It is better to be a dictator than gay”
- What do you think or feel when you hear this statement?
  - Did you know this quote already? Do you know other similar examples?
  - Why would he compare being a dictator with (not) being gay? (Why is he so bothered by this?)
  - Do you see ways that Lukashenko is similar to other post-Soviet leaders, such as Putin, in this case?
    - o *Follow-up:* How do you think Putin influences Lukashenko?

#### Provocation

- To finish off, are there any funny or extravagant stories, gossip or rumours about Lukashenko, Putin, ... that you know of? I am not interested in facts, I am just curious about which stories are being shared “on the street”, so to speak.

- *Give an example yourself:* Lukashenko's "supernatural sexual powers/Herculean sexual appetites", the whereabouts of Lukashenko's wife, his relationship with the young miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich who is also appointed a member of the House of Representatives in Belarus, Lukashenko's own education and parents (absent father), whether Lukashenko has a mental disorder like Stalin, Putin saving a crew of journalists from a Siberian tiger, zooming around in a Formula-One race car, garner a skin sample from a grey whale with a cross bow, showing off martial arts skills, ...

## Conclusion

- I have asked everything that I wanted to know so far. Do you want to share anymore comments or questions yourself?
- Thank you, a lot of strength in this difficult period, you can always contact me with more questions or remarks later

## **Interview guide 10 (offline), 25.04.22**

*Positionality interviewee: politically active former Belarusian woman living abroad*

### Introduction

- Introduce yourself: student Conflict and Development at the University of Ghent, focus is mainly on gender issues. I chose the topic of Belarus, because I have already conducted a digital ethnography on Belarusian women's movements in 2020, during the protests. I have been following politics more closely since then and so this was a logical topic for me to continue on for my thesis. I also feel Eastern European feminism is often not truly included in classes.
- Before starting, I would just ask for your oral consent for me noting down and using your answers for my research; you can withdraw from the research anytime you want, or ask me to not use specific information. Anonymous, no recording.
- Ask about background and work interviewee

### Civil society in Belarus

#### *NGO sector and movements*

- How was it for you working with the NGO and civil society sector under Lukashenko's rule? Which challenges did you face?
- What are currently some pressing issues that need to be tackled, according to you? Which gender inequalities need to be addressed?

#### *Protests 2020 – women's movements*

- How was your experience with the protests after the presidential election in 2020? Were you involved in any way?
- How did the women's movements in Belarus change since the protests in 2020?
- I have learnt that even since the protests in 2020, the label "feminist" is not always widely used, and even despised. Do you also have this impression, and if so, why do you think this is?

#### Research question

- My research broadly talks about the possible relationship between gender and authoritarianism in Belarus.
- Do you personally think that gender is a useful lens to look at Lukashenko's power, and if so, in which ways? If not, why not?
- Do you feel that there is a platform in society right now to speak about gender issues? In other words, do you feel people care about this? Should they care about this?

#### Provocation

- To finish off, I always ask participants whether they want to share a rumour, joke or gossip about Lukashenko. I personally believe that they can help us decipher social reality and it is therefore a core aspect of my methodology.

#### Conclusion

- Any more comments or questions from your side?

- Thank you for your time and energy, pleasure speaking with you and getting to know you a little bit. It was fascinating to learn about your work.

## **Interview guide 11: focus group 5 (Russian, translated to English), 01.05.22**

*Positionality interviewees: young Belarusian women, feminists, studying or working abroad*

### **Introduction**

- Anonymous, no identifiable answers in notes or thesis, no recording
- You can withdraw at any time, you can also contact me later if you want to change something about your answer for example
- Consent to using information in this way? Type yes in the chat please
- Introduce myself, introduce Alina
  - o Some questions which are different from last time mostly, will last about an hour but you can leave whenever you need or want to
- First round: how do you feel? Anything you want to share about yourself? For the new people, I would just like to ask to introduce yourself shortly, sharing things about your background/study/work that you would like to share.

### **Feminism**

- Do you label yourself as feminist? (*Maybe ask to raise hand/type in chat*)
  - o Why/why not? What does feminism mean, according to you?
- How is this perceived in Belarus?

### **Protests 2020 and women's movements**

- Do you think women's movements etc. changed after the protests of 2020?
- How is the public debate on gender and sexuality since the protests? Do you feel this has shifted somewhat?

#### War 2022 and "brotherhood" between Putin and Lukashenko

- Do you feel that Lukashenko's attitude towards Putin has changed since the invasion in Ukraine by Russia? In which ways?
- In Russia, the expression *byt mujyk'om* (*muzhik* – "be a man") is often used to describe a kind of masculinity. Do you know this expression and do people around you use it sometimes?

#### Provocation

- To finish off, I usually ask people if they know any funny or notorious rumour, joke, gossip about Lukashenko's relationships, marriage, background, children, Putin, etc.

#### Conclusion

- Any questions or comments for me?
- Thank you, you can always text me later with more comments or questions, or if you want to withdraw from the research



## Interview guide 12, 04.05.22

*Positionality interviewee: female researcher on post-Soviet politics and gender*

### Introduction

- Oral consent: consent to me noting down and using her answers for my research anonymously; you can withdraw from the research anytime you want, or ask me to not use specific information
  - o Anonymous, no recording
- Introduce yourself shortly again
  - o Student Conflict and Development at the University of Ghent, focus is mainly on gender issues. Chosen Belarus, interesting case, we don't hear a lot about it (<-> Russia), a lot of prejudices about the whole post-Soviet space; already written a paper on it 2yrs ago
  - o I will ask some broad questions about your research as well as a couple of questions related to gender and post-Soviet politics. I will check the time so we won't exceed the 40-45 minutes

### Her research on gender

- Would like to start by ask a bit about you; Can you tell me a bit about your personal background and your choice to do a PhD on gender politics in post-Soviet spaces?

- Have you come across the assumption that you are deepening the East/West divide again with your research? (“Sexual clash of civilizations”) How to overcome this?
  - o What is particular about doing gender research in the post-Soviet context?

#### Influence of Putin

- Do you think that many post-Soviet countries are influenced by Putin’s style of machismo or type of rule, or do you think this exaggerates his imperialistic influence?
- Do you think the ongoing war has changed this? For instance, Lukashenko protecting Putin more now; or other leaders taking his machismo less serious anymore.

#### Research question

- So, my research broadly talks about the possible relationship between gender and authoritarianism in Belarus.
- Do you personally think that gender is a useful lens to look at Lukashenko’s power, and if so, in which ways? If not, why not? If you want, you can compare again to your own research.
  - o Do you think there are other lenses more relevant?
  - o Does this lens interact with gender structures as well do you think? If so, how?
- Do you feel that there is a platform in society right now to speak about gender issues? In other words, do you feel people care about this? Should they care about this?

- Is gender inequality a popular grievance (in post-Soviet countries)?
- The perhaps more Western-perceived label of “feminist” is not usually widely used in post-Soviet countries, at least in Belarus, not even since the protests and women’s movement in 2020. Do you also have this impression, and if so, why do you think this is?

#### Provocation

- To finish off, I always ask participants whether they want to share a rumour, joke or gossip about Lukashenko. I personally believe that they can help us decipher social reality and it is therefore an important part of my methodology.
- Do you know an example of any kind of extravagant or funny story you want to share?

#### Conclusion

- Thank you for your time and energy, pleasure speaking with you and getting to know you a little bit.
- Any more comments or questions?
- You can always contact me later if you have a remark or if you don’t want me to use something you have said

## **Interview guide 13 (English and French), 09.05.22**

*Positionality interviewee: LGBTQ+ and feminist activist and researcher from Belarus, working abroad*

### **English interview**

Can you please indicate your consent for participating in my research: yes/no. Everything will be anonymized and you can withdraw any information at any point. Your answers will be used for my master's thesis only.

#### **Their work**

- Can you tell me a bit more about the work you are doing in activist and academic circles?
- What challenges have you faced under Lukashenko's rule? How does he influence gender activism and gender relations in Belarus?
  - o What would Belarusian gender activism look like without him, according to you?

#### **Feminism**

- Would you describe yourself as a feminist? Why (not)?
  - o *If yes:* How is this received? What presumptions exist around feminism?
- How strong is the feminist movement in Belarus?
- How have women's and LGBTQIA+ movements changed before and after the protests?  
There is perhaps more visibility, but do you feel they are also more repressed?

- What are the most pressing feminist and queer issues in Belarus right now, according to you?

#### Gender and Lukashenko

- Do you feel gender is a relevant lens to look at Lukashenko's power?
- How has Lukashenko's masculinity changed throughout the years?

#### Putin

- Some people make the comparison with Putin as big brother, others talk about a homoerotic relationship where Lukashenko is the submissive "bottom"... Do you think Putin influences Lukashenko's masculinity, and if so, how?
- How does Lukashenko position himself towards Putin now, during the war?

#### **Entretien français**

Pouvez-vous s'il vous plaît indiquer votre consentement à participer à ma recherche: oui/non. Tout sera anonymisé et vous pourrez retirer toute information à tout moment. Vos réponses seront utilisées uniquement pour ma thèse.

#### Son travail

- Pouvez-vous m'en dire un peu plus sur le travail que vous faites dans les milieux militants et académiques ?
- Quels défis avez-vous rencontrés sous le règne de Loukachenko ? Comment influence-t-il l'activisme de genre et les relations de genre en Biélorussie ?

- À quoi ressemblerait l'activisme de genre biélorusse sans lui, selon vous ?

## Féminisme

- Vous décririez-vous comme une féministe ? Pourquoi (pas) ?

- *Oui* : Comment cela est-il reçu ? Quelles présomptions existent autour du féminisme ?

- Quelle est la force du mouvement féministe en Biélorussie ?

- Comment les mouvements de femmes et LGBTQIA+ ont-ils changé avant et après les manifestations ? Il y a peut-être plus de visibilité, mais avez-vous l'impression qu'ils sont aussi plus réprimés ?

- Quels sont les problèmes féministes et queer les plus urgents en Biélorussie en ce moment, selon vous ?

## Genre et Loukachenko

- Pensez-vous que le genre est une lentille pertinente pour examiner le pouvoir de Loukachenko ?

- Comment la masculinité de Loukachenko a-t-elle changé au fil des ans ?

## Poutine

- Certaines personnes font la comparaison avec Poutine en tant que grand frère, d'autres parlent d'une relation homoérotique où Loukachenko est le "submissive bottom"... Pensez-vous que Poutine influence la masculinité de Loukachenko, et comment ?

- Comment Loukachenko se positionne-t-il vis-à-vis de Poutine maintenant, pendant la guerre ?

