

WHEN THE PRESIDENT COMES

Potemkinist Order as an Alternative to Democracy in Belarus

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The Potemkin village is a metaphor for the cases of conscious, yet false construction or beautification for the sake of presenting something as better than it is, usually in front of high officials. Enumerating multiple cases and possible applications of the term (and its synonyms), I base my research on Belarus, a former Soviet and still socialist independent state governed by the same president since 1994. Going there for fieldwork at least twice a year, I noticed the extreme popularity of stories about Potemkin villages erected for the visits of the president, high officials, or foreigners. Analyzing vernacular attitudes toward Potemkinism, I argue for the multidimensional understanding of it, suggesting that in a socialist state, Potemkinist order becomes a viable alternative to democracy and a significant means for the country's self-representation.

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The *Potemkin villages* phenomenon owes its name to what was perhaps the most famous case of building façades to hoodwink important visitors. In 1787, Catherine the Great (the Empress of Russia) departed to see her newly conquered territory of Novorossiia and Tavrida. To show this territory in the best possible way, General Grigory Potemkin ordered the construction of mock-up villages along her route. After multiple arguments, historians have agreed that this was a “myth”, but this myth has not appeared out of nowhere and definitely reflects political tendencies of that time (Panchenko 1999). Much later, in the Soviet Union, *potemkinskie derevni* (“Potemkin villages”) became an especially fitting idiom, a common term to refer to certain ostentatious socialist rituals concealing the real unflattering state of things. As Sheila Fitzpatrick characterized it later, “Potemkinism was a Stalinist discourse in which

the defects and contradictions of the present were overlooked and the world was described not as it was but as it was becoming, as Soviet Marxists believed it necessarily *would be* [Fitzpatrick's italics] in future” (Fitzpatrick 1994: 16). Michael David-Fox also mentions Soviet *kultpokaz* (“cultural show”) and *pokazuha* (“window-dressing”) as a practice of showing certain ideal places – model institutions – to Western visitors: from collective farms to scientific organizations (David-Fox 2012: 98–141). Among other socialist and post-socialist countries, the Baltic states under Soviet rule (Purs 2012: 49–75) and Romania (David-Fox 2012: 100) also faced Potemkinism. Labeling contemporary Uzbekistan – another post-Soviet country – “a spectacular state”, Laura Adams suggests that its government seems less concerned with Uzbek material prosperity than with its international cachet, resulting in a Potemkin-village

effect for a visitor (Adams 2010: 28). These authors suggest different views on Potemkinism, while its complexity and ambiguity is, perhaps, best defined by Sheila Fitzpatrick who understands Potemkinism not just as deceitful practices for international display, but also as an envisioning of the future keeping people focused on a project.

The History and Cases of Potemkin Villages

Perhaps the most powerful Potemkinist stories circulate in the states in which socialism, as it often happens, is the foundation of the dictatorial and oppressive regime. For instance, travelers discussing North Korea often mention that the tourists are allowed to see and take pictures only of certain things there. The North Korea narrative is a good example of the very important feature of Potemkin villages: their existence is often hard to prove and stories about them remain rumors, speculations, and myths (in the same way as the narrative which initially coined window-dressing as *Potemkinism*). For example, it is often said that in order to show off their wares to the South, the North Koreans fabricated an entire village, Kijong-dong, which lies in the heavily-patrolled demilitarized zone between North and South Korea (The latest 2008). It is indeed hard to validate these rumors, which insist that the village was designed purely for show, with actors and actresses cutting the grass, turning the lights on in most buildings at the time when most people would wake up, and pretending to live happy, poverty-free lives.

Authors mention Potemkin villages with regard to various things. For instance, the journalist John Laughland criticized the trial of Slobodan Milošević, understanding it as an example of Potemkin justice and democracy, “a travesty at the heart of international justice” (Laughland 2007: 88–109). Laughland considered the trial sham, serving the aims of the major world politics actors rather than doing justice. Brian McVeigh declared window-dressing a peculiarity of Japanese higher education, with “opinions suppressed, voices lost, self-expressions discouraged, and individuality restrained” (McVeigh 2002: 3). The 2014 Sochi Olympics were often criticized for

Potemkinism (Pikabu 2014). All these dimensions show how versatile the meaning of the term and its applications may be. Languages (including English) grasp this variety, producing multiple terms applicable for such cases: *window-dressing*, *massaging the data*, *building façades*, *beautification*, *mock-up*, *cosmetic reforms*, *smokescreen*, etc. Folklore, in turn, responds with humor – for instance, jokes based on the frame story “the disguised leader comes down to his people to see how they live” (Thompson 1955–1958, K1812 “King in disguise”). Below two examples from Soviet and contemporary Belarusian jokes, respectively:

Once Stalin decided to check how his people live, walked around the city, went shopping. Molotov [Bolshevik politician and diplomat] asks him, “What for? We report everything to you: people live well; they are happy... And it is not safe...” – “I will put on makeup in order to remain unrecognized.” Molotov arranged goods to be brought to one of the shops and sent checkists [members of *Cheka*, the Soviet security organization] and their wives to be customers. He drove Stalin to this shop. The leader entered. He discovered that few customers bought anything. He decided to buy a hundred grams of butter, and handed in a receipt to the shop assistant. “Take more”, the assistant said. “Why? I can take more tomorrow if I need.” – “Fool! Tomorrow the shelves will be empty. Today this bastard is shopping, observing how his people live. That is why there are goods in the shops!” (Translated from Arkhipova & Melnichenko 2010: 278)

Lukashenko [the president of Belarus] decided to learn the truth of what his people thought about him. He disguised himself in rags and in the evening he went to the market. He went up to a butcher and asked, “How much is a kilo of meat?” – “200 roubles.” – “Why is it so expensive?” – “Because our president is a jerk.” The president was insulted and decided to teach this scum a lesson to scare him. Next day he came by limousine in his suit. He went to the same butcher and asked the same

question. The butcher answered, “200 roubles.” – “Why is it so expensive?” – “I told you yesterday, jerk!” (Male, 35, translated from the interview in Russian, recorded in 2013, Minsk)

From the point of view of classification of political jokes, suggested by Victor Raskin, such texts belong to the topic of compromising or undesirable situations coupled with the denigration of a public figure who reflects unflatteringly on the government as a whole (Raskin 1985: 235).

Maintaining faces and façades through erecting Potemkin villages is at least as old and widespread around the world as another famous piece of folklore – the fairy tale *Puss in Boots* (Uther 2004, ATU 545B). Through the course of the narrative, the cat successfully presents his master (a dowerless son of a miller) to the king. The cat hurries ahead of the king’s couch and orders the country folk along the road to tell the king that the land belongs to the cat’s master (saying that if they do not tell the king what he instructed them to say, he will cut them into mincemeat). As a result of these and many other manipulations, the king is impressed with the bogus son of a miller (now marquis) and his fortune, and gives him the princess in marriage. The story of window-dressing by Puss in Boots is international, as its Potemkinist elements are widespread in many cultures. Encountered everywhere, they are, however, differentially evaluated depending on the prevailing social order. Presenting and discussing this paper, I have often heard examples of Potemkinism from various countries: El Salvador, India, China, and South Africa – too many cases to retell them in this article. As Brian McVeigh argues, “all societies possess – indeed, rest upon (to some degree at least) – simulated institutions” (McVeigh 2002: 15). The difference is probably in the relevance and choice of certain institutions and objects put forward for display as they are not equally important for different branding purposes. Perhaps one of the best films to reflect on the choices of such objects is *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall* (Spain, 1953), in which the officials try to show off Franco’s Spain to U.S. emissaries in order to get financial aid from them. They

consider and discuss different objects to put forward for the display, trying to demonstrate the stereotypes of Spanish culture with which the visiting American officials will be most accustomed (Noyes 2006).

The Belarusian Case: Areas of Research and Methodology

Unlike the famous Spanish movie, my study is based on reports of such performances rather than discussions of how to perform – reception rather than production. The question I focus on in this research is not about the branding process only, but about vernacular attitudes and anxieties rising around it. The focus of this article is on the attitudes toward the institutions and objects put forward for display in Belarus, a former Soviet country that elected its first president, Alexander Lukashenko, in 1994, after gaining independence in 1991. Lukashenko has ruled the country since then; for this reason, it is notorious as the last dictatorship of Europe. In addition, the country inherited a state system that was still socialist, and, unlike some other former USSR republics striving for novelties, enthusiastically preserved many of its elements in economics, politics, and everyday life. This environment appeared to be fruitful for Potemkinist practices, and, consequently, narratives, which I documented from almost every interlocutor in a series of ethnographic interviews about Belarusian political and ethnic identity as well as from constant observation and mass media research. To illustrate the Belarusian situation, I will mostly concentrate on two localities: the Vitebsk region and the so-called presidential zone – the Alexandria village and its surroundings (where Lukashenko was born and raised). The research methods used in these two localities were different. In the Vitebsk case, I held about thirty anonymous interviews. Initially, I did not aim to ask about Potemkinism, but these stories started to pop up naturally within the flow of the interview. Thus, I realized that it is an important issue in the country and I should ask and let the interlocutors talk about it as much as they find it significant.

Regarding Alexandria, the birthplace of Alexander Lukashenko, due to the special status of this presi-

dential zone and corresponding lifestyle (perpetual Potemkinism, special attention from the ideology and security state departments, fears of those who live there), I could not reveal the true aims – researching narratives of *potemkinism* – of my visit to its citizens and record my interviews. I approached people working at various places there to have a free conversation about the places (e.g. a school), and in all our conversations, the problem of Potemkinism emerged. Being well-aware of the ethical issues of not getting consent from the interlocutors, yet, not seeing possibilities for open research, I conceal the identities of the interviewees as much as possible, to avoid harming them in any way, at the same time trying to reflect the situation without damaging its meaning.

The stories about the cases I present do not have stable emic names; most often they are referred to as *Potemkinskie derevni* and *pokazuha* (deriving from the Russian “to show”); both terms reveal pejorative connotations and were known long before Belarus became independent. Most often, the interlocutors used none of the terms though, telling no-name stories that featured the same topic of a show for the president, the bosses, or other visitors, and the first story told evoked many others. I will further refer to such cases as *Potemkin villages* (or *potemkinskie derevni*) as a vernacular term, sometimes alternating it with *Potemkinism* and *window-dressing* to avoid repetition and emphasize routinization and the omnipresence of the phenomena. Other emic keywords used in relation to these stories were *marazm* (“asininity”), characterizing the absurdness of the situation and the behavior of the higher ranks, and *nepriyatnosti* (“troubles”) as a threat encountered if one defies erecting the *Potemkin villages*.

It is almost impossible to say whether the stories I recorded are true or not: they remain unverified information, and the official discourse is never interested in confirming them. However, the crucial question is why and how these narrations gain meaning and enter in circulation. These rumors, of course, reflect the practice, although it is not clear how often it happens as opposed to being narrated. As Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi once suggested, “not only can facts be turned into narratives but

narratives can also be turned into facts,” and both types of performance become part of the oral tradition. Dégh and Vázsonyi borrow the term *ostension* from semiotics to define the cases in which the fact and the narrative get into a continuous process of retroaction, strengthening each other’s viability in the paradoxical situation of coexistence (Dégh & Vázsonyi 1983: 29). The Potemkin village cases and narratives are also in an ongoing interaction, and the narratives become “maps for action”, reflecting “both what has ‘really’ happened, but also what a person or persons can make happen” (Ellis 1989: 218). They become a form of knowledge, striving to organize a confusing world, uncovering vernacular concerns, and permitting the concealed sentiments to enter the public debate (Fine & Ellis 2010: 5, 9). After all, there is always a kernel of truth in them, although I will rather concentrate on why they become so significant that almost every interlocutor in Belarus has had his or her example for this research.

Potemkinism in Vitebsk and the Vitebsk Region

In 2010, before the presidential election, Alexander Lukashenko raised the salaries to encourage Belarusians to vote for him. For this and other economic reasons, in 2011, a serious financial crisis followed. In search of a way out, among other measures, the government tried to revive ineffective industries. As a result, in 2012, Alexander Lukashenko visited the Vitebsk woodworking enterprise, one of the financially challenged industrial units scattered around the country that became a forlorn hope during the financial crisis. Many stories accompanied and followed his visit, and, knowing some of them, I asked my interlocutors how the city had been prepared for the visit. According to the interviews, the road Lukashenko was to drive on as well as its surroundings were completely changed.

To prepare it for Lukashenko’s visit, all of the DSK [name of the district] was cleaned, moreover ... they paved the road with asphalt at the very last minute, in fact, they paved the road over the snow, it was snowing for the first time... All

the workers were sent away for a day off, one line was launched, engineers and masters wearing new clothes were placed there instead of the workers, those who would not have said anything wrong. (Male, 18, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013)

And on Lukashenko's way, of course, everything was put in order. In the places where the street-lights had not worked for decades, they lit everything; they put numbers on the houses. (Female, 50, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013)

They started to pave the road with asphalt over the snow, they started to paint everything, all the roads, all the glades, even clear them of stumps; to light up the windows in every possible way; this was horrible. The head of the enterprise, which he was supposed to visit, had been fired and hired again three times. (Male, 19, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013)

The non-state, oppositionist press added to these narratives: several articles appeared claiming that during the preparations for Lukashenko's visit, trams – the main means of transportation in this district – did not work, as the road was being paved with asphalt:

Many people expressed their indignation at Vitebsk officials preparing *pokazuha* for Lukashenko. And then often added that they had not voted for him at the election; and the more things like that happened, it was more difficult to tolerate such humiliation ... The façades of the houses were being painted, the trees cut, the bushes cleared, even the flowerbeds planted – no matter that it was in December. (Svaboda 2012)

Such narratives go far beyond Vitebsk. As one of the interviewees said, "Many things in our country become relevant immediately before a certain date or event." Indeed, every special event held in the country brings about new stories on the elaborate preparations for particularly important visitors. Another example comes from Polotsk, the most ancient city in the country situated in the Vitebsk region. When

the city celebrated its recent anniversary and Lukashenko was supposed to come, the manhole lids were paved over with asphalt (making future access to the manholes impossible), as the workers did not have enough time to pave the road properly (as my interviewees explain). Another locally famous window-dressed building, standing on the road leading to the center of the city, is a bright pink house. As a Polotsk dweller (Male, 29) explained, the house was supposed to be demolished before the anniversary celebration, but there was not enough time for that. Since this ugly building was standing on the road Lukashenko was assumed to drive (to visit the event), it was painted pink with the sign "For sale" put on it. "Painting façades is the common practice in our country," the Polotsk interviewee concluded.

However, the façades are not painted only for the president. The former governor of Vitebsk, Alexander Kosinets (now the Head of the Presidential Administration), was infamous for multiple, often illogical changes that he launched in the city and unnecessary decorations people made in a hurry on his demands or knowing that he was coming. For instance, he forced different state institutions to adorn windows with garlands at the employees' own expense "to create a festive mood" (Female, 50, recorded in Vitebsk) before New Year:

[Did Kosinets make you decorate your building with garlands?] Yes, he issued a decree, probably unpublished, I guess on Saturday. On Sunday, people of course did not work, and did not know anything, and on their coming to work on Monday, they learned that garlands were to be there by 4 p.m., as someone would come and check that, and if the windows were not decorated, the managers would have troubles (*nepriiatnosti*). On Monday, people had to pay heaps of money for the garlands, ask their friends for them, well, as usual. (Male, 30, recorded in Minsk in 2013)

Many interviewees underlined the uselessness of such practices, which reflected the *marazm* ("asininity") of higher ranks, coming from the top and diffusing around:

They were painting the rotten old windows before the president's visit. [For *pokazuha* as well?] Of course, for *pokazuha*. I also consider that every boss has a certain *marazm* of his own level, and the higher the level is, the more *marazm* he has. (Female, 50, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013)

[Why do such cases happen?] Some idiot makes a decision, and everyone should behave the way this idiot wants. This is the style of managing coming from the very top; that is why I am not surprised at such cases flourishing at the level of the Ministry of Health or kindergartens: these are the chains of one vertical line. We just see the effect on the lower levels. (Male, 32, recorded in Minsk in 2013)

Interlocutors also notice that window-dressing is often so asinine because the qualification and profession of the officials do not correspond to the positions they occupy. One of the interviewees was retelling the story of his uncle participating in the building of an important architectural ensemble dedicated to another significant event, *Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk*. This music festival is held every year to promote the unity of Slavic nationalities. It always attracts many Russian visitors, including the officials of higher ranks. The city is unfortunately and hastily renovated every year to impress the visitors. When Alexander Kosinets visited the ensemble that was supposed to be finished before *Slavianski Bazaar* to amaze the guests, he was almost fully satisfied. Only one thing disturbed him, apparently: to his mind, the transformer substation supplying the ensemble with electricity was spoiling the whole composition, and he asked the employees to remove it. The employees were shocked: this caprice would cost several days of work and cause an electricity shutdown in the central district. I asked the interviewee if they objected. "Of course, not. Kosinets is a medical doctor, how will you explain it to him?" After some thinking, he added: "Well, taking into account that my uncle was demoted, maybe he objected. It may have caused *nepriiatnosti* ('troubles')" (Male, 25, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013). According to many interviews, potential troubles are the main

reason of Potemkin villages being built without any objection. Thus, the craving for ideal order in Belarus often results in the contrary: fear of troubles, accusing officials of asininity, and time spent on useless decorations are hardly advantageous for actual order. Judging from the fact that the zealous advocate of decorative order, Alexander Kosinets, was promoted to the position of the Head of Presidential Administration, his politics fit the ideology of the state well.

Certain events and places in Belarus seem to have great potential for current ideology promotion and be especially apt for window-dressing. For instance, showcasing industrial enterprise becomes important during economic crisis. The anniversary celebration of the country's most ancient city, Polotsk, is significant for national identity. *Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk* promotes the unity of East Slavic nationalities and friendship with Russia, from which Belarus gets loans and resources. Representing the country's president – Alexander Lukashenko – in the best possible way is another important mission imposed on his birthplace.

Alexandria, the Presidential Zone

Perhaps the ultimate example of Potemkinism in Belarus is Alexandria village, the settlement where Alexander Lukashenko grew up. Extreme Potemkinism also stretches further to the so-called "presidential zone" – the surrounding villages, which Lukashenko occasionally visits (e.g. he was born in nearby Kopys' and sometimes comes to visit the hospital there). The duties of the dwellers of this cluster of villages include grooming perfect façades and undertaking elaborate preparations for each of Lukashenko's visits. Rumors about these exemplary villages and their façades circulate around the country. As one of the interlocutors joked before the trip I undertook to Alexandria and nearby villages in 2013, "even cows there do not defecate in the places not designated for defecation there" (Female, 51, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013). Moreover, alternative press keeps writing about KGB agents crowding the area and surveilling both residents and newcomers (Compromat 2006).

One of the most significant objects of the presidential zone is a museum of Lukashenko set up in the school where he studied. Calling there in advance regarding their opening hours, I learned that I would require permission to visit it. The local ideology department (a subdivision of local government subordinate to the main ideology department) grants permissions. It was possible to get permission through a phone call, but it was time consuming (the officials kept forwarding my calls and asking many questions on the aims of my visit). The museum is in fact just a room at the school, and the school's principal was the guide. The exposition is presented on four walls: the first one is dedicated to the history of the location, the one across from it is on the ethnography of the region, the third and the fourth ones, facing each other, are about Lukashenko – pictures of him and his family and some documents. Taking photos was not allowed; as the principal explained at the time, the museum was not quite ready after recent renovations, which could cause criticism and speculations in case pictures were uploaded to the Internet. Maybe the museum image was not ideal enough to become public yet. But the simplicity of the four-wall construction is already obvious. This exemplary and central touristic object-to-be must correspond to the populist appeal of Lukashenko's personal and political biography: he is from the countryside, one of the simple people (Astapova 2016). Unlike the majority of window-dressing cases described above and below, the Lukashenko museum performs humility and ordinariness. This is quite a contrast from more habitual cult of personality monuments (statues, luxurious museums, or mausoleums).

The inhabitants I met in different villages of the cluster mentioned, from the very beginning of our acquaintance, that they represent an unusual school, hospital, museum, factory or shop, as they are based in the “presidential zone”. Every time Lukashenko comes to the region, they have to prepare – what if he visits them? Several people also told the same story: the principal of another school in the presidential zone was once painting its façade in a hurry and fell off the ladder breaking his leg. But, they noted, breaking the leg was for the good. Among other

preparations before Lukashenko's visit (including painting the façade), the officials set up a computer class, so the principal did not suffer in vain.

However, not so many dwellers of the cluster were positive. In another institution in the presidential zone, I heard complaints that Lukashenko comes to Alexandria too often: he had been there two weeks ago and was coming again. The employees expressed their discontent: when he last came to their institution, they had to “crawl and clean everything with their bellies”. On his latest arrival, they were sent to the forest, and had to stay there while he was visiting, even though it was early spring, and still frosty. A visitor from the nearby plant interjected with a comment: when Lukashenko came to his enterprise, the employees of his plant were sent to sit and wait in the warehouse in order to keep the unsightly and unreliable from the eyes of the president – to prevent a mere chance they might talk or behave inappropriately. They could say something wrong or spoil the perfect picture otherwise. Another visitor agreed: when he worked in power grids and Lukashenko was visiting a nearby factory, electricians were to stay inside the transformer substation. It happened not only because they were unsightly (as in the previous case), but to eliminate any distortion in the performance: in case the electricity was cut, they were supposed to fix it immediately. One more story he told was about the period before one of Lukashenko's re-elections when the electrician and his colleagues had received an order to hang lights in every village (and to remove them after the election). This is an example of window-dressing done by people for other people of the same social class and similar rank, ordered to make each other happier before the election, consciously and routinely completing this order.

In Alexandria and its surroundings, I never even had to ask about Potemkinism, in spite of the fears of surveillance in the presidential zone; it was the natural flow of conversation that brought the speaker to his or her complaints at the very beginning of the talk. Other visitors immediately added their examples. It was the main topic of storytelling in this locality, as all major events are dedicated to Lu-

kashenko's arrival. The presidential zone produced a concentration of Potemkinism and a multiplicity of narratives about it.

Building a special spectacle zone around the figure of a ruler resembles a larger-scale case described by Jill Steward. The touristic image of early twentieth-century Vienna was constructed around the figure of the emperor, with the city space designed to glorify him in all possible ways. On a wider front, political events invariably reminded foreigners of the backward and troubled nature of the empire (Steward 2003: 91). Although on a smaller scale, the Alexandria village cluster, an ideal microcosm that is supposed to be the face of the country representing its president, is similarly contrasted with the narratives on how this image is really created. The ideal-to-be, artificial picture falls apart if one asks how it was painted.

Window-dressing surpasses the literal architectural enhancement and mere constructions, and is embedded into the lives of Belarusians far beyond Alexandria and Vitebsk. People even learn to benefit from it. On my recent encounter with a Belarusian scholar, telling about her doctoral dissertation on linguistics, I expressed my surprise about its easy defense: it contradicted my knowledge about the difficulties of defending a dissertation on the humanities in Belarus. "*Potemkinskie derevni*, that was what helped me," she replied. She had many English sources in her bibliography, which made her elderly professors think her dissertation was good enough. According to her, they could not read English, so they could not check these sources, but, having to maintain their academic faces, they did not confess it.

Façade performances become a priority in young families' houses. In spite of lack of money, they take bank loans for decoration and beautification of their apartments and cars; no matter that afterwards they do not have enough money for food. In a special journal issue of *Southern Folklore*, dedicated to façade performances, Dorothy Noyes suggests that in such a way "householders perform respectability through the façade, displaying both identification with and distinction within a community. The façade is a

public face claimed by the family" (Noyes 1995: 91). Judging from the multiple examples, Potemkinism in Belarus becomes more than maintaining the face: it grows into the routine of everyday life.

Socialist Past and Present

A variety of reasons for Potemkinism can be found in different spheres of Belarusian life. Yet, as I will argue, the most crucial is the paternalist socialism Belarus inherited from the Soviet Union and enthusiastically promoted. The importance of the socialist past (and sometimes present) for the resurgence of Potemkinism cases and rumors is also vivid in neighboring post-Soviet countries: Russia and the Ukraine. The Belarusian narrative about paving over manholes has its variants there. Multiple pieces of news discuss paving the manholes before Vladimir Putin's arrival in Smolensk (Rosbalt 2011), Dmitry Medvedev's trip to Kirov (Lenta.ru 2009), and Victor Yanukovich's visit to Chernovtsy (TSN 2010). Looking for their origin and answering the eternal folklorist's question of whether they are the products of mono- or polygenesis fall outside of the scope of this article, but these cases seem symptomatic of the general close interrelations between socialism (or post-socialism) and Potemkinism.

In the Belarusian case, it is especially significant that being a part of the Soviet Union till 1991, the region was the window display of the Soviet system and an exemplary republic within the USSR, officially most supportive of its regime (Eke & Kuzio 2000: 537). Having gained independence, Belarus found itself at the crossroads, without clear aims, rules, or directions of development. Partially because of that, Alexander Lukashenko won the first presidential election in 1994: his appeals to the audience were similar to those made by the Soviet power and hence comprehensible. Still in need of a set of regulations, Belarusians easily adopted Lukashenko's rules of the game, including performances for the officials or foreigners. Thus, the resurgence of the rumors about Potemkin villages is not occasional. *Kultpokaz*, or *cultural show*, both for foreigners and local authorities has a revival. The foreigners are often treated in a special way also due to the long iso-

lation of Belarusians, lasting at least since the Cold War up to now. Western travelers usually need a visa to get to Belarus (while the rest of Europe is visa-free for them); low salaries and the need to apply for visa to most countries (including the Schengen zone) do not allow Belarusians to travel and meet the foreigners outside.

One more socialist reason for Potemkinism lies in what Per Rudling calls the foundation of the modern Belarusian identity, the most influential historical event for today's Belarus – the Second World War (Rudling 2010: 9). Belarus became one of the first Soviet republics to receive the blow of the war: the country was purposefully and dramatically destroyed and almost every family lost a member. Andrej Kotljarchuk suggests that this national trauma has deeply penetrated the public discourse and self-awareness of Belarusians (Kotljarchuk 2013). Belarus was branded by ideology as a republic of partisans who fought against the Nazis, and this façade legend encouraged people to struggle during the war and enhanced the post-war development. As a country officially most supportive of the Soviet regime, after the end of the Second World War, Belarus hurriedly started to rebuild what had been destroyed. The Second World War trauma is now used to support and promote Lukashenko's ideology: current political stability is often achieved by emphasizing issues of security and giving more guarantees to the traumatized people. In the discussions of politics, many Belarusians say, "Whatever, but not a war" (*Lish by ne bylo voiny*), appealing to the national tragedy and expressing the need of certain guarantees for the sake of which they can sacrifice many other things and build Potemkin villages if necessary.

The fact that everyone participates in the creation of the façade unites people, moreover – and this is another rule of socialist politics – everyone is to some extent employed. This is an important part of the Belarusian economic system – the creation of workplaces that do not exist in the capitalist world: conductors in public transport, toilet keepers and luggage guards at the railway stations, working for low salaries. Preserving these professions performs the same function as Potemkin villages: maintain-

ing the ideals of the socialist state and creating a feeling that every single citizen of the country has an important mission – from selling tickets in the public transport system to participating in the window-dressing process. The system becomes self-sufficient through everyone participating and being involved.

The result is what Gramsci called "excellence" – the massive production of subaltern identities of consent in highly developed hegemonies (Gramsci 1985: 61–63). Building Potemkin villages, Belarusians maintain the leader's authority and become a part – albeit subordinate – of the power bloc (Jones 2006: 58). Satisfying the hegemony's aspirations to ideal by participating in window-dressing, they achieve social guarantees – employment, free healthcare, mothers' salaries, etc. – in return. Among other consequences, Potemkinism entails the dualism of perceptions – the dichotomy of ideal and non-ideal or black and white, being very significant in the Belarusian case. It is reflected in the removal of unsightly employees and passers-by that may spoil the perfect-to-be ordered picture. Building such ideal landscapes is closely related to maintaining a standardized lifestyle, decreasing the meaning of initiative, individuality, diversity, creativity and choice – qualities that are dangerous for non-democratic societies. As a result, Potemkinism becomes a blend of both comfortable and politically correct behavior: one does not have to be creative, but just follow generally accepted scripts.

Full of contradictions, the hegemonic excellence is often subject to parody and ridicule in the narratives complaining about Potemkin villages, which are similar in their mechanisms to euphemisms, disguise, and other rituals of transcript hidden from the superior (Scott 1990). They allow a vent of emotions and prevent an open conflict. Erecting Potemkin villages and showing them off in front of the superior, one can mock the superior for believing the front afterwards. The parts in Potemkin narratives that mock the believing authorities, however, do not aim to overthrow them. As Foucault observed, power is not solely a negative restrictive force, it "also traverses and produces things. It induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be con-

sidered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression” (Foucault 2000: 120).

The contradictions of the window-dressing can also be seen through the prism of Michael Herzfeld’s notion of *cultural intimacy*:

those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation. (Herzfeld 2005: 3)

Potemkin villages is a social practice embedded in the country’s history and recognized as shameful; yet, paradoxically it gives both the feeling of commonality and the reason to disrespect the state. It results in *disemia* – the tension “between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection” (2005: 6), causing the incongruity of the façades and multiple rumors about them flooding the alternative discourse. Some tension is nevertheless worth the socialist stability provided in return.

Order of Potemkinism: Ideal Performance of the Power Falling Apart

As James Scott suggests, “the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful and the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery” (Scott 1990: XI), adding that “the need to deceive comes from rigor power relations” (1990: 2). In a similar vein, Dorothy Noyes claims that

the deployment of bodies in space through the collective performance offers the occasion for the convincing realization of metaphors of order ... Normative or official performances use spectacle to school us in the social order, assembling bodies to display the meaningful contrasts

between them and to position them in their appropriate conceptual locations. (Noyes 1995: 98)

The Belarusian order is produced and preserved through display, reenacting rigorous power relations in “the last dictatorship of Europe”. The state and its representatives occupy all spheres of life, with the ideology and politics penetrating culture and economics. The functions of these spheres are distorted, and they start to play the ideological role not characteristic of them. One of the many results, described by Alexander Sarna, is turning certain architectural objects into shock works (*udarnye stroiki*), attaching their completion to the certain dates (Sarna 2008: 246), which, in turn, harms the quality of the buildings as well as their reputation. They are immediately surrounded by rumors and doubts, which are hardly positive for the regime that initially used this way of erecting buildings as propaganda (2008: 247). Another example of ideology penetrating various landscapes is the Alexandrian case. The perfection of the otherwise ordinary Belarusian village aims to metonymically transfer the ideal qualities of this subject territory to their leader by proxy. Reinforcing his power through Potemkinism, Lukashenko performs what Jean Baudrillard calls “seduction” – the willful neglect of truth in favor of the play of power and creation (Baudrillard 1991).

Another idea of Baudrillard – that of *simulacrum* masking, perverting, or even replacing the profound reality – also seems suitable in the Belarusian case. Particular for postmodernity, simulacrum precedes the original, with the distinction between reality and representation erased as a result (Baudrillard 1994: 6, 16–17). Baudrillard refers to the words credited to Ecclesiastes: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (1994: 1). In Belarus, the simulacrum of order becomes a viable political model, arousing as many contradictions in the vernacular attitudes as any other – democratic or dictatorial regime.

Potemkin Villages and Narratives about them: Conformism or Passive Resistance?

One of the major questions regarding the study of socialism and Soviet countries in particular, emerging in almost every scholarly piece of writing on the subject, is whether people resist or enjoy the practices documented. It is not only the socialist cases that demand the answer though. For instance, in his book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and State*, Albert Hirschman suggests that in case customers of economic enterprises or citizens of political systems are dissatisfied with these enterprises or systems, they act in three possible ways. They exit (or immigrate), voice their dissatisfaction, or remain loyal to what they do not like due to different reasons (Hirschman 1970). The latter idea is, perhaps, the most well-developed in socialist studies, and the notion of *Ketman*, formulated by a Polish poet of Lithuanian origin, Czesław Miłosz, is one of the most characteristic for this approach. Miłosz offers the term *Ketman* for the acts of paying lip service to authority and sacrificing the possibility of objecting and protesting for the sake of professional development or personal survival (Miłosz 1953: 54–81). Developing this idea later, Erving Goffman adds that “the cynic, with all his performance dis-involvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously” (Goffman 1956: 10). To give an example similar to *Ketman* and advantages the inferiors may achieve from *Ketman*, James Scott mentions Laotians, who responded to the requirement made by French officials to have a village headman by creating a set of bogus notables who had no local influence and who were presented to colonial functionaries as the local officials. Scott calls such cases *ersatz façades*, erected in order to shield another reality from detection (Scott 1990: 132). Such performances in the front give licenses in the back; meanwhile fooling the superior is an incomparable pleasure. This empirical example shows how much more multidimensional the cases of Potemkin vil-

lages are than their potential theoretical descriptions based on the monosemantic approaches.

Another example comes from the formerly socialist Albanian capital Tirana. When it got a new mayor, Edi Rama, in 2000, he initiated steady changes in the capital, seeking to transform its face of “an orderly but dull capital city” (Makgetla 2010: 3) by, first of all, painting grey Soviet-style apartments and government buildings in bright colors and artistic designs. This is the way he chose to deal with the legacy of the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship and the further transitional period of Albania: hundreds of illegally constructed buildings, shady neighborhoods, and generally poor infrastructure. Not everyone agreed with Rama’s strategies (some accused him of cosmetic reforms), but the public debate about it signaled a growing civic involvement, a critical shift in citizens’ perceptions of government and their role in it (Makgetla 2010).

Negative views, of course, form a large part in window-dressing discourse, and the oppositional press often employ them to launch its critique of the government. For example, according to one of the Belarusian articles by the non-governmental press, a road hurriedly paved with asphalt before the harvesting celebration, in Gorki, Mogilev region (again, Lukashenko was supposed to come there), collapsed, and a family of three fell through the ground and were injured (Novoteka 2013). However, usually the cases of window-dressing have more than one dimension, even in the perception of one person.

For instance, when it comes to Kosinets’ aforementioned changes in Vitebsk, attitudes toward them are ambiguous. While his order to stub the trees that veterans planted on the Victory Square long ago is often criticized, on the other hand, it is appreciated that the Square nowadays has facilities for entertaining children. This view is visible in the following excerpt of one interview:

About the changes in the city, my attitude is ambivalent: on the one hand, the city became attractive, places for rest appeared, on the other hand, spaces that were too important, like the Victory square, were rebuilt. But the young people are

happy, children are happy... Also, just before Lukashenko's visit, the car hit the fence [the fence became unsightly for Lukashenko coming by], so the fence was expanded, and it was positive. (Male, 42, recorded in Vitebsk in 2013)

And this is the conclusion about Potemkinism from another interviewee:

[Are there many cases of *pokazuha*?] Of course, there is a lot of *marazm*. But I think it happens not only in Belarus, in all the countries, it was and will be like that. (Male, 20, recorded in Minsk in 2013)

Similarly, the aforementioned Alexandrian case with the principal who was painting the school in a hurry and broke his leg is symptomatic: many concluded that the leg of the school principal was broken not in vain, since the school got computers. Moreover, people learn not only to survive, but to benefit from such a system, as was shown in the case of the dissertation easily defended because professors did not know English, but could not confess it, having to maintain their academic faces.

These and other cases I encountered during my fieldwork confirm the necessity of viewing socialist realities more broadly than in terms of dichotomies. Statistical research, with its answer options of "I support the Potemkinism" and "I reject it", is hardly applicable here. It is the folkloristic methods of open interview and analysis that show how polyvocal the whole picture is, how many pros and cons coexist in the view of one person. It resembles the idea of vernacular religion proposed by Leonard Primiano to put an end to the two-tiered understanding of religion (Primiano 1995). To paraphrase it, vernacular attitudes toward the political are more than mere conformism or resistance. In the same way as the worldview of one person may accommodate beliefs institutionalized as pagan and Orthodox, political acceptance and resistance may peacefully coexist mixed together due to different reasons – security, benefits, approval, etc. Conformism and resistance paradoxically coexist in building Potemkin villages and stories about them.

In his argument against dichotomies in socialist studies, Alexei Yurchak touches upon a similar paradox. Writing about the late Soviet Union, he notices that "reproducing the system and participating in its continuous internal displacement were mutually constitutive processes" (2006: 283). Similarly, in Belarus, the constant reproduction of the performance of window-dressing finds its displacement in rumors and dissatisfaction with the system being reproduced. The more ordered the life is by the state, the more it decays, cracks and mismatches. In its turn, the outlet of negative emotions and dissatisfaction allows reproduction of window-dressing.

Potemkinism has many dimensions: positive evaluations of window-dressing peacefully coexist with the negative ones even in the same interview. As Erving Goffman suggests, "an individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it. These extremes are something a little more than just the ends of the continuum. Each provides the individual with a position which has its own particular securities and defenses" (Goffman 1956: 11). Placing oneself in a particular position on the continuum, one takes multiple criteria into account: safety, comfort, professional development and political views. It is important to keep in mind that Potemkin villages do not always have a pejorative connotation: they are controversial.

Potemkin Villages and the Problem of (Mis-)Representation

The ideal Potemkinist order does not hold the same kind of value for the insiders and the others: a more abstract form of social guarantees for the former, it is more of a visual display for the latter. Potemkinism is a good tool for foreign propaganda, targeting mainly the values of a nostalgic post-Soviet audience. The self-representation in front of most post-Soviet countries becomes extremely important since these are also the main partners in economic and political cooperation. Most of the Belarusian trade or military unions, agreements on cooperation in education, healthcare, law and other spheres of life were signed with them. And Belarus seems to succeed in its play in front of its target audience. Dur-

ing my trips around former Soviet countries (e.g. in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia), people always address me to express their positive attitude toward Lukashenko's politics, and especially the order he established. But the main spectator is certainly Russia – the neighbor, political and economic partner, resource-supplier, and investor of Belarus. In 2007–2010, when I lived in St. Petersburg, almost everyone asked me why I was not living in Belarus, the country of my citizenship. Their surprise was based on their own visits to Belarus and seeing clean broad streets, green parks and “order” all around. This order conflicted with chaotic St. Petersburg or other Russian cities, and caused the general opinion on Belarus as a well-regulated country among Russians who were nostalgic about visual stability and the Soviet Union. As a result, both in Russia and some other post-Soviet countries, phrases like “*Bat’ka* [father] keeps the country in order” or “We need *Bat’ka* [father] to establish order [*navesti poriadok*] in Russia” became almost idioms. Lukashenko's nickname *Bat’ka* and his *poriadok* are now the keywords to define Belarus. The sterile green streets taken at face value have become synonymous with order.

Belarus is successful at building façades for the particular audience most important for Belarusian well-being: plenty of Russians come to the well-ordered Belarus for tourism and shopping. The general friendship of Russia with Belarus as a “stable country” is beneficial for the latter, as Potemkin order brings Russian visitors, investments, and gas. Belarusian solid façades are especially highly appreciated in contrast with the current Ukrainian situation: unlike the Ukraine (another country regarded as East Slavic), Belarus is sturdy not only in its order, but also in its friendlier position toward Russia. The performance hits the audience relevant for the current political regime and economic situation. Moreover, it maintains the image of Lukashenko as a serious and consistent president.

Conclusion

Among other definitions of ‘order’, the Merriam-Webster dictionary suggests two contradicting ones: order is “the state of peace, freedom from confused

or unruly behavior, and respect for law or proper authority” and “a specific rule, regulation, or authoritative direction” (Merriam-Webster). The second, rather Potemkinist understanding of order is antonymous to the first, rather Western definition. Order as a command in Belarus becomes an alternative to the order as peace. This state of things seems to constitute a viable social model in Belarus, contrasting Western-style democracies often imposed as a norm. It is not freedom or democracy that counts in the Belarusian case, but power: the ability of the leader to provide peace, prosperity, and stability. From the country's early history, Potemkinist order in Belarus was planted into the fertile ground of contemporary socialism, supported by Soviet templates, national trauma, and the paternalist state with its set of reliable rules.

It is not surprising that the ideal artificial order sometimes cracks: people tell cheerful jokes about Lukashenko's visits, the humorous rumors about presidential visits circulate all over the country, etc. At the same time people learn to adapt and benefit from the situation they find themselves in, to compromise for the sake of socialist advantages they are given and familiar with. Building Potemkin villages is an insignificant sacrifice if one receives free medical aid, education, and other benefits of the socialist state in return, especially for a person who is used to it and has never lived in another political system. Erecting the Potemkin villages becomes everyday life and regular routine, going far beyond the architectural enhancements for the state.

What is more, Potemkin order easily finds its thankful target audience, that is, former Soviet states, which on their tough post-socialist way to democracy are often nostalgic of past visual stability of the Soviet Union. The visually ordered country is pleasant to deal with when it comes to investments or other deals. Both people and the state learned Potemkin pragmatics and the ways to benefit from it. No wonder that appearance of peace and stability become more important than actual peace and stability in this part of the world: the Belarusian brand of an ordered and reliable country works when it is promoted to both domestic and foreign spectators.

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