

SUICIDE IN POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES: EXAMPLES FROM HUNGARY AND BELARUS

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When I first went to Hungary, in 1993, I stayed with a Hungarian family in the small town of Karcag.¹ They lived in a one bedroom flat in a rundown apartment building on the edge of the center of town. The entire family was unemployed. As luck would have it, the parents had just become eligible for retirement before they lost their jobs at the former Soviet military factory in town and were receiving pensions. The first night I stayed there the neighbor upstairs committed suicide. He hung himself off the scaffolding erected along the backside of the building. His body beat against the window in the wind all night making it impossible for the father, László, to sleep that night. László got up in the morning, pulling back the curtains only to discover to his horror that his fellow worker and neighbor had chosen an easy way out. I never saw the body; László had called the police and they had removed the body before I, a deep sleeper and late riser, had bothered to wake up.

When I heard what had happened I was shocked and horrified. I had read that Budapest had the highest suicide rate of any city in Europe and that Hungary had the second highest suicide rate of any country in the world, but I had no idea I would ever come this close to seeing someone take his or her own life. I asked László, "Why did he do it? What reason did he have?" László with great humor and tongue in cheek kept insisting that he had always been a pain in the ass, always imposing on people, always needing help, always bothering people with his problems. He continued to joke, "Look even in his death he pesters our family. He kept me awake all night banging on the window. I had to take care of him and look after him...even in his death." I could not appreciate László's humor in this situation. I was seriously disturbed. I couldn't understand how one could joke about a man's death so easily. It occurred to me at the time that maybe I lacked the

same experiences most Hungarians shared, maybe they had gotten used to the idea that people, when faced with insurmountable problems, would resort to suicide. I insisted, "But why? What was wrong with his life that he felt he had to end it?" László explained that the man had lost his job and could not support his family anymore. He had lost all sense of purpose in life, all sense of honor, unable to fulfill his obligations to his family. What made things worse, explained László, was that the man had been having an affair with a young local girl and she had become pregnant. Without a job and no other available source of income, the man could not support one family, let alone two. László concluded at least now his wife and children would receive social security benefits from the state, because she was now a single mother. Similarly his mistress could also receive these same benefits, because the natural father could not be asked to support the child. László laughed, a rather ironic sad laugh, which seemed almost forced. Then he smiled weakly, and said, "See, it all worked out in the end."

In the text that follows, I evaluate suicide in Hungary based on informants' or consultants' comments, evaluation, and opinions. These people are largely middle-class, educated, young people—however some consultants were working class or farmers, their relatives etc. Here after I use the term Hungarians to refer to them, although this group is more complex and different than the text that follows might indicate. I simply reproduce what my consultants would call Hungarians, lumping a 10 million-person diverse group into a unified metaphor, which represents a unique form of humanity, an imagined community, a nation of Magyars, a product of imagination. When asked about suicide in Hungary they usually started sentences with the words "we Hungarians" or "the Hungarian people"—I reproduce this style here without considering Hungarians a

homogenized and uniform group of like individuals, but rather as a historic imagined community, a cultural construct. Since it is impossible to interview people who are successful at suicide, I have tried to understand why people might feel compelled to take their own lives. Is it a rational calculation of how to solve economic problems with honor? Is it a moral choice, which is a social psychological calculation of status, honor, respect, etc? Is it something cultural, easy to point out as a social norm, a code of honor, or a rite of passage? What can you say on the subject, which isn't speculation and guesses? In this respect I have only done what any ethnographer might do: I started asking people to explain what suicide means in Hungary. I naturally asked those around and noticed when suicide came up in novels, films, song lyrics and other forms of public representation. However, I have not researched the scientific literature on the causes of suicide or performed any statistical analysis. I simply have looked at the cultural and psychological reasons given by informants, friends, and consultants in the field. What could best be said is that this sample is limited; however, I hope my observations still go a long way in suggesting why Hungarians are one of the largest group of people in the world to commit suicide, and why post-socialist countries in general have had higher suicide rates in the 1990s.

The *Statistical Yearbook of Hungary: 1995* shows that the most likely category of people in Hungary to commit suicide are married men from 40-50 years old, living in villages in eastern Hungary. The most often used methods are hanging and poisoning by medicine. When asked why people might employ these methods consultants said that hanging was quick, easy, silent, and effective. When asked why married men from 40-50 years old, living in villages in eastern Hungary would be most likely to commit suicide consultants responded that these are people who are most likely to have lost jobs, be unemployed and responsible for their families incomes and economic security. One consultant said that Hungarians are more likely to commit suicide because Hungarians are more individualistic, isolated, silent, depressed, given to drinking, and always looking to the dark past or hopeless future, but never at the present. Almost everyone interviewed said that they knew someone personally who committed suicide.

In Hungary, suicide is attributed to various causes: genetic, racial, politics, economic hardship, psychological, social, geographical

location, etc. Some consultants when asked argued that whole families have an unusually high rate of suicide. They argued that it must be because they inherit certain genetic material, which predisposes them to suicide. Others argued that it was something in the genetic structure of the Hungarian people. While these interpretations are interesting at best, they seem difficult to prove and are not within my competence as a cultural anthropologist to confirm or deny. However, others argued that families might teach the younger generations that suicide is a way of solving problems, or that there is something cultural which is passed on that encourages Hungarians as a nation to solve personal problems by suicide. Although no one could point to something like hara-kiri or seppuku in Japan, several people simply said it was a tradition, citing as an example lovers killing themselves by jumping off the Veszprém bridge together. "It's a fad with young people" said one psychology student interviewed. Another said that it is a selfish act because the person who commits suicide doesn't care or think about his or her friends and family that he or she leaves behind.

Some argued that political changes brought economic hardship to many Hungarians in the 1990s; there was greater unemployment and mass lay-offs at government institutions and factories. People felt hopeless or depressed, insecure and worthless; in a country with a strong work ethic, being jobless meant being a person without dignity, purpose, or honor. However, statistics show a decrease in suicide through the 1990s in Hungary and an increase in suicide in the former Soviet Union (*Statistical Yearbook of Hungary* 1996; Brainerd 2001). A geography student argued that suicide might be caused by air pollution which gathers in the Carpathian mountain basin because people who live in the mountains or by the sea don't kill themselves as often as people who live in a country surrounded by mountains on the Puszta a flat stretch of land in the center of Hungary where the suicide rate is highest.

These explanations, although they may be interesting and they may contribute to suicide, are not conclusive. I suggest that suicide can be explained by political, economic, and psychological factors and I suggest that Bateson's double bind theory (Bateson 1972: 177-278) might help us to understand why some suicides might occur in socialist and post-socialist countries at a higher rate, which increased through the 1990s. Most of the Hungarians I interviewed, mostly

university students, teachers, and workers at Debrecen University argued that Hungarian history points to a series of defeats and problems where Hungary as a nation is always losing, it is a nation of “losers.” They refer to the occupation of Hungary by the Turks in the 16th and 17th centuries, the failure of the March 15th revolution of 1848, the division of the country after World War I, known collectively as “Trianon,” where Hungary was invaded by the Czech, Romanian, Serb, French, Slovenian, and Croatian armies in October 1918 and the country was dismembered and greatly reduced by the end of 1919. Hungary was then subjected to defeat and dictatorship in World War II, subjected to Soviet occupation, an imposed communist government, and Stalinism. The revolution of 1956, generally articulated as a fight for freedom and independence, or as a reform movement was crushed by the soviet army and led to Kadar’s “Goulash Communism,” which continued to institute economic and political reform until the peaceful revolution of 1989 when Communism came to an end. The period following 1989 was known as “the change,” which for most Hungarians meant mass privatization, foreign buy outs of Hungarian companies, Americanization, capitalism, consumerism and a perceived devaluing of all things Hungarian, an influx of wealthy foreigners and a revaluation of social relations based more on money. This history, as told to me over and over again in formal and informal interviews, shows a history of a nation, which repeatedly loses and thus my consultants’ evaluation of Hungary as a nation of losers (see also Konrád 1977).

Hungarians also describe their “mentality” or culture as pessimistic. They are in their own words a “pessimistic” or “fatalistic” people. They point to their history as a reason for pessimistic attitudes, and a mentality of expecting the worst from any given situation. Ironically they are a hard working people with a strong work ethic, and Hungary has enjoyed a higher standard of living compared with their neighbors. While Hungarian history may have produced a culture of pessimism or a fatalistic mentality, expecting failure and defeat based on past experiences, I think that this explanation is only part of the picture. I would argue that no single factor can explain any social action, and that culture, history, and economics are strong influences on social behavior. What people do is dependent on personal situations, on psychological factors, on the specificity of the politics of a given period as well as the specific circumstances of individual

people’s lives—there is something shared intersubjectively and something psychologically specific to people who take their own lives as a solution to “impossible” situations.

When I first came to Hungary, people I spoke with talked about impossibilities. In conversations people talked about their problems as “*lehetetlen*”—impossible. Five years later in 2001-2002 the discourse about social and personal problems changed from “*lehetetlen*” to “*bonyolult*” or “*borzasztó*”—complicated or horrible, but not impossible. An impossible situation is one in which a person, regardless of what he or she does, cannot win or succeed where as a complicated or horrible situation holds out hope of resolution, things can get better. As the old Hungarian socialist era joke goes, ‘the pessimist is talking to the optimist. The pessimist says, “Things can’t get any worse than this.” And the optimist replies, “Oh yes they can.”’ If the recurring use of the word “*lehetetlen*” signals the subjective or intersubjective evaluation of life’s circumstances as impossible, then it would seem to me that the more frequent use of the terms “*bonyolult*” or “*borzasztó*” in the 21st century signal a change in intersubjective and subjective evaluations of life’s circumstances as complicated and difficult, but not impossible. People who experience impossible situations might be, whether subjectively or objectively, be caught in a set of double bind relations. I will argue that double bind relations encourage, but do not determine a choice for one so trapped to commit suicide.

While life under socialism produced a number of problems for citizens of Hungary, economic, political, and psychological, not all Hungarians chose suicide as a solution to their problems. I suggest that socialism as a set of social relations was founded on patterns of binding and bonding following Michael Urban’s concept of political power in the USSR (Urban 1985).² I also think that Bateson’s theory of the double bind might go a long way toward explaining why some Hungarians chose suicide as a solution to their problems. Bateson argues that a situation constitutes a double bind when a person, no matter what s/he does, cannot win. “A person caught in the double-bind may develop schizophrenic symptoms” (Bateson 1972: 201). The person caught in the double bind is often referred to as the victim, and the victim experiences the double bind as a recurrent theme in life. This double bind is not a single traumatic situation but is an on-going problem of which there seems to be no solution or way out. “Such repeated experience” of the

double bind results in “habitual expectations” of losing, punishment, and absurdity. Bateson argues that double binds are primarily a “negative injunction”—if you do not do such and such I will punish you. But this first negative injunction is always immediately followed by a “secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishments or something which will ‘threaten’ one’s ‘survival’” (Bateson 1972: 207). In my estimation, a double bind is framed something like this; “If you do anything or if you do nothing, I will punish you. You are guilty and forever punishable, but I will hold off punishment for a price.” Bateson goes on to argue that for the victim there is no chance of escape. The final aspect of the double bind is the absence of feedback loops, trial and error—a lack of pragmatic communication. When any attempt at meta-communication about the double bind situation is punished the double bind is complete.

Bateson argues that children are caught in and learn the meaning of double binds first and foremost from their parents as caregivers and authority figures—this process of socialization is continued in institutional arrangements—primarily in schools. As a cartoon from the Soviet satirical periodical *Krokodil* shows, the double bind is an every-day situation. A father scolds and punishes his son for lying, hypocritically saying;

You naughty boy, telling lies like that. You're grounded! Don't you dare go out anywhere. And if I get a call from the ministry, tell them I'm not back from the business trip yet. And tell mummy I've gone to a meeting at the ministry. Have you got that? [(Krokodil 1952, 23: 12) reproduced in Ledeneva 1998: 80].

The child is simultaneously punished for lying and ordered to lie or else he will be further punished—he is punished for lying and threatened with punishment if he fails to lie. If the double binds persist long enough and if the victims of them learn that their universe is made up of double bind relations then, continual reinforcement of punishment may no longer be necessary to maintain the effects of double binds. Bateson argues that when a person is caught in a double bind relationship s/he will react defensively. “An individual will take a metaphorical statement literally when he is in a situation where he must respond, where he is faced with contradictory messages and when he is unable to comment on the contradictions”—the victim is in doubt about

how the information will be used and therefore responds literally (Bateson 1972: 209).

Since it is foolish to resist the powerful, the only way to resist double binds is through foolishness. The fool asks no questions, makes no waves; “his brain is like a broken record, repeating the same phrase over and over” (Konrad 1977: 37). As an answer to the double bind situation a person can shift to a metaphorical statement, which brings safety. “In an impossible situation it is better to ... become somebody else and insist that he is somebody else” (Bateson 1972: 210). Bateson argues that there are several alternative responses to double binds. One is to take all messages as literal. Another is to pretend to be someone or something one is not, usually a fool, idiot, simpleton, or a psychotic. Another would be to ignore all messages as unimportant or ridiculous. Another would be to withdrawal into one’s own fantasy world away from the public. Of course one might choose suicide ... Finally one might revolt and try to kill those who are maintaining the double bind for their own benefit at the expense of the victim. Many Hungarians I interviewed argued that suicide is a last and stubborn affirmation of one’s freedom, the freedom to choose and control one’s death, when someone can’t control his or her life.

I argue that socialism as a lived experience in Eastern Europe was founded upon double binds. Bateson argued that double binds are further characterized by the victim’s inability to distinguish between logical types. Socialism was founded on incompatible and mutually exclusive imperatives stemming from mutually exclusive logical types of authority. While the regimes of central and Eastern Europe have been characterized so often as totalitarian or authoritarian, their authority principles or sources of authority have been articulated in mutually exclusive logical types. While I derive my theory of double binds from Michael Urban and Gregory Bateson, I argue that double binds are generated on a larger scale from diarchies. Diarchies are regimes based on the idea that two persons or governmental bodies are jointly vested with supreme power—both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union produced diarchies. These persons or bodies gain their authority from culturally constituted ideas of sources of authority. Weber theorizes that all authority is traditional, charismatic, or legal rational (Weber 1946). These types, he argues, are mutually exclusive; yet I argue that socialism was founded on the unique combination of authority stemming from mutually

incompatible imperatives, which are simultaneously traditional, charismatic, and legal rational. The ruling communist party's authority was founded on the idea that only the party has exclusive access to truth, knowledge, and wisdom through Marxist-Leninist philosophy. The Party's exclusive access to truth, much like the church, gives the Party the right to rule in the general interest of the working class—the charismatic authority of the dictator supplements traditional authority. The dictator by virtue of being Lenin's follower receives traditional authority vested in the party—he is the leader of the party—but also he is a hero of the socialist state, he and the party are heroic. Charismatic authority comes from the leader's personal strength and his personal power proven through deed—protecting the state from invasion, enemies within, and the hostile capitalist world, which seeks to destroy communism. He must perform heroic deeds and miracles. In addition, the socialist state was founded on the idea that communism would be a completely rational, legal, and scientifically planned society that through technological development would create paradise on earth—heavenly salvation, utopia, and progress not in a mythological other world, but here in the very real future.

As Weber correctly postulates, these three forms of authority and any injunctions or imperatives coming from the party, the leader, or the bureaucracy are mutually incompatible. Any attempt at pointing out these contradictions was met with punishment. One must follow the dictates of the party without question even if the charismatic leader directs one to do the opposite. Simultaneously, one must follow the dictates of the charismatic leader even if his directives go against Marxist-Leninist principles, the dictates of the party, or the bureaucratically formulated plan. One must at all times follow legal rational regulations and plans as well as scientifically sound principles with verifiable feedback loops—trial and error—even if they contradict the charismatic leader's and the party's directives. Since the party and the charismatic leader are both the mutually exclusive sole source of science, truth, and knowledge, compliance with any one of the three is a violation of the other two. If anyone should fail to obey any of these authorities then one is subject to punishment—usually imprisonment or death. Everyone is forever guilty of disobeying authority and subject to punishment.

Using Weber's theories of authority—traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational—combined with Bateson's theory of the double-

bind, I suggest that socialism as a lived experience constituted a set of absurd propositions, impossible situations, and paradoxical political and economic relations. I suggest that most people in Hungary muddled through life adopting strategies of patron-client relations, dissimulation, disengagement, metaphorical speech, stealing, cheating, rituals of resistance, and outright revolution or violence directed at the state, the party, the leadership, and bureaucracy (Smith 2002). Although suicide is a "solution" to double binds this in itself does not explain why a higher rate of suicide is found in Hungary. Is there something culturally specific to Hungary, which might account for a higher suicide rate compared with other post-socialist countries? Besides interviews with native consultants, other sources of data on culture include interpretations of literature. Hungarian literature often includes accounts of suicides.

In Zsigmond Móricz's novel *Relations*, the protagonist commits suicide after becoming caught in a web of corruption in the city of Debrecen. Although the novel is set in 1932, the language of the author still can be heard in the discourses of Hungarians I met in Debrecen 70 years later. The world of the *pusztá* and towns of eastern Hungary, in this discourse, is divided into the state-people and the Hungarian nation where the state is the "full time scapegoat of public life" (Móricz 1997: 149). Most Hungarians argue that, "the state isn't organized for the benefit of the people," it is a set of patron-client "oligarchies," with "mystical power. An end in itself. Human life isn't important, what matters is for the state to flourish. The state devours its children. They say we live in a state. No: the state lives on us" (Móricz 1997: 149). Hungary is described by Móricz and Debreceni consultants in interviews as a nation of independent people who are like those condemned to death and locked up in a prison and the leadership of the state are "there for what they can get, but they never bring anything to the people. No roads, no protection, no enlightenment, no entertainment" (Móricz 1997: 149).

The problems Móricz describes are similar to the problems of post-socialism, where many consultants describe a new sense of freedom, yet a nostalgia for the security of the socialist era—an appreciation for dependence under which subsistence was guaranteed, where one could progress in accordance with one's abilities. But the unemployment of the 1990s was something that was intolerable and seemed impossible when coupled with extremely high income taxes,

business and work permits, value added taxes, rising price levels, and other new fees on every form of state business. As Móricz puts it “everything that the official mind can think up” is used to tax freedom; “he has to pay for his family’s clothes and food, and then he is free”(Móricz 1997: 150). But when he can’t live with the freedom of paying the rent, taxes due, the fees on everything needed in life, and can’t engage in moonlighting, and then there’s trouble.

The economic problem in Hungary for many people is not the GNP or other economic indicators but the fact that 30-50% of a person’s income is taken by the state in the form of taxes, social security, retirement, and national health care payments. The Social Democrats’ campaign 2002 promises that no one will pay more than 30% if they are elected. If one must forfeit on average of 40-50% of their income every month, but it is estimated that a person needs 100% of their total income to pay the bills, utilities, rent, telephone, food, clothing, and household repairs, then a high tax rate such as those currently paid by Hungarians is too much. The solution to the high tax rates is simple: people engage in moonlighting and tax evasion. Two jobs are typically needed, one official job with taxes paid out, social security, retirement, national health care payments, rent, utilities, etc. which can be recorded and submitted to the government on the books. Another job is needed, under the table, to pay for food, cloths, luxury items, etc. If a person hasn’t got a job, let alone two jobs, then that person is caught in the bind of not being able to meet his/her needs in a capitalist, consumerist society based on money as much as patron-client relations. Corruption is maintained because almost everyone is engaged in dissimulation over income and tax payments from the highest levels of the state to the lowest working-class citizen. In Móricz’s novel, the protagonist commits suicide because he is caught in a set of double bind relations over large-scale profits being embezzled by the wealthy and powerful state agents, but as the elected official he is ultimately responsible for the situation. Corruption is maintained and encouraged by a series of double bind relations, the most obvious being the tax laws that make it difficult if not impossible for anyone to actually pay what they owe the state and still pay for what they consume, use, or owe in rent. At the same time, those “in power” use their influence, “*protekció*,” to embezzle or cheat the tax laws and other regulations, policies, or bureaucratic procedures. It is impossible to be an honest man in politics and

economics; you either play the game of corruption or lose.

Whether suicide is caused by psychological, political, economic, or social factors, it is hard to say what pushes someone over the edge. However, it would seem that a combination of factors come together and a person sees these factors collectively as a set of double binds impossible to solve, impossible to deal with without *protekció*. *Protekció* means the exercise of personal influence on behalf of another in exchange for a favor done in return, which is immoral, illegal, or against the norm. Silence about unreported income is a kind of mutual protection employers and employees engage in, silence between service providers and customers. Those without protection are caught in what Elemér Hankiss calls *társadalmi csapdák*—social traps (Hankiss 1979). Hankiss writes that Hungarians have more words for corruption than eskimos have for snow, because corruption is such an everyday part of the Hungarian natural environment. If suicide can be explained at least in part by double binds—escaping an impossible situation in the freedom to take one’s own life—and if double binds are a characteristic form of persuasive power under socialism, getting people to do what they otherwise wouldn’t do, then it would seem that post-socialist power relations are a continuation of power under a new set of conditions, manipulated to form new sets of contradictory imperatives leading to new threats of punishment unless people continue to maintain patron-client relations collectively known as corruption.

In the past, a double bind might be relatively simple. A person is reported to the police for antisocial or probourgeois opinions and interned for a year. The guards or interrogators might torment him, offer him a chair and then slap him if he sat down, or slap him for disobeying an order if he remained standing. They might ask him a question and when he answered tell him to keep his mouth shut if he’s going to tell lies like that. They might tell him to be quiet and then ask if he understands. He can’t sit down or remain standing, he can’t speak or be silent without receiving verbal or physical punishment. George Konrád describes such a suicide case in his novel *The Case Worker*. A man is so tormented by such requests that his mind became unhinged. He commits suicide in the end. Orwell argues that double-think, similar to double binds, is a characteristic of classic totalitarian societies. But are double binds something particular only to

totalitarian, authoritarian, or socialist countries? Have double binds been maintained in post-socialist regimes albeit hidden in new laws, regulations, and policies?

Is there a difference between post-socialist states such as Hungary and Belarus? In the examples that follow I draw on material collected from consultants and friends in Belarus interviewed in 2001. In my interview material from Belarus, consultants articulated the psychological double bind of growing up under socialism and a post-socialist dictatorship where young people feel that they need a university diploma in order to get a good job and access to connections for unrecorded income through moonlighting. Where it simultaneously “doesn’t matter what you study or that you have learned anything, but rather that you have a piece of paper stating you have an education” yet in order to get a job you need to develop the skills of cheating, silence, dissimulation, engagement in patron-client relations etc. But often suicide is a social problem, perhaps encouraged by political and economic double binds people take out their frustrations by placing the less powerful into similar double binds—management to workers, teachers to students, parents to children.³ As one consultant, Alexandra from Belarus put it:

I know that my problems are not that huge in comparison with some people – I am not starving to death, no one is trying to kill me but myself, I wasn’t raped, and there is no war going on, but fuck, it all doesn’t help.... I am going insane and that’s it. It might be just as well that I am just imagining my problems, and I am sick, but so what? Even if it is true it doesn’t help me. They say that your parents should understand and support you no matter what happens, how sweet. Which fairy tale is this one? What about you’re parents hurting you and driving you insane? My friend said that her mum found her birth control pills and there was a huge scandal, and now she is almost locked at home. She is almost 20, isn’t it stupid? She’s been with guy for more than a year, and her parents don’t like him. It would be really funny and amusing if it weren’t so painful. Actually, I wish I could just die.

Why is it that a young person in a totalitarian society thinks so often of suicide and chooses instead to mutilate her body instead of taking her own life? Self-mutilation and suicide are said to be the voice of a desperate person

crying out for help, yet also this cry for help uses attacks on one’s own body as a way of drawing attention to one’s own plight—self mutilation as an attention getter. Yet it also seems to be an attempt to control the pain by inflicting pain on one’s self. It might also be a threat to get people to help one solve a problem, which seems almost impossible or difficult. Alexandra burnt herself in the arm with a cigarette after she told her parents she was having sex for the first time in her life—her mother called her a whore, “worse than a whore because a prostitute gets paid for sex and you were just used.” Her mother slapped her repeatedly and disowned her. Alexandra said that her mother always told her “You can trust me. You can tell me anything. I will understand” yet when she told her mother about her sex life her mother said, “You should have lied.” Alexandra said that her psychological pain was so intense that the only way she could stop the thoughts in her head to distract herself was by inflicting pain on herself by cutting her arm with a kitchen knife. She said it helped her to forget for a few minutes but that wasn’t enough perhaps she should just kill herself and end all the pain once and for all. In post-socialism’s morality and sexual liberation, young women are simultaneously encouraged to be studious, puritanical virgins and yet openly sexual in dress conforming to current fashions—mini skirts, high heels and make-up and yet not be promiscuous party girls. Alexandra’s mother asked her why she doesn’t dress up to attract boys, to look nice rather than looking like a boy. Yet later, when she did “dress up,” she was told that all that make-up and those fashionable cloths made her look like a “slut.”

As teenage girls, young women in Belarus are encouraged to be sexual and yet “asexual.” As mothers, women are required to regulate their daughter’s sexuality, make sure their daughters are going to catch the right man, sacrifice for their families, and do the double-burden of domestic and wage labor. As mothers they must be both sexually liberated women employing the sexual fetishes of make-up, high heeled shoes, mini skirts and yet also remain asexual mothers who have no sexuality of their own—both passive sexual objects and active calculating agents of their own destiny and that of their families. Women are said to be less creative

than men, based on their biology, yet must creatively balance work and family. Most of all, a mother is often defined as someone who more than anyone else in life has the innate and natural ability to love, a love for her children, which is stronger than any other social relation. A child who grows up and falls in love with another threatens the authority, the role, and the value of his or her mother. The mother begins to question the child's love for her and the child's romantic love for another. Since sex is a sign of love, a mother might try to "buy" her child's love with gifts, indulgences, or favors. If a child doesn't respond favorably, the mother might instigate a double bind relationship.

Alexandra was asked simultaneously to be a young sexual person and yet punished for her sexuality. She was asked repeatedly "Why don't you go out on dates, don't you like boys?" when she told her mother about her boy friend she was punished for her sexuality. If you don't have sexual desires then there is something wrong with you. If you have sexual desires then there is something wrong with you. If you have sex you are labeled a whore or prostitute. Yet, contradictorily, parents tell girls to use birth control pills and condoms for protection, but if these materials are discovered the young girl or young woman is punished for having safe sex or planning ahead for the possibility that they might want to engage in safe sex behaviors. If a woman wants to have sex, feels sexual desires or expresses her sexuality in any form she is punished either physically or through stigmatization. Sex is said to be an expression of love, yet the only proper place for sex is in marriage even if marriage is a loveless marriage. A mother might remind her child that love is the most important thing in the world and that no one can love you like your mother loves you. According to consultants in Belarus, it is unnatural for a woman to feel sexual, yet it is natural for men to be sexual. One Hungarian woman told me that men are naturally polygamous and women are naturally monogamous. A woman's sexuality should be the central organizing factor in her life, yet she should sacrifice herself for her husband and family—she is asked to define herself by her sexuality and yet is punished for expressing her sexuality. She is asked to define herself as a loving person, yet love is reserved for only family. How can a young woman love her family and love another—boyfriend, husband, lover, partner, etc.

Young women are caught in paradoxical social, cultural, and moral imperatives, which act as psychological double binds whether clearly linked to political and economic factors or not. Solutions to these double binds are difficult. Either a young woman can run away from home, take drugs or get drunk to forget, lead a double-life of friends versus family, public expectations and private thoughts, or contemplate suicide as Alexandra put it:

When I feel too bad I am trying to hurt myself to keep the tears away and let the pain take me to another world where I can't feel like shit and I am so tired from it. I am fed up with tears, with pain with all the bullshit in my life, I fed with all the crap that follows, with people trying to tell me what to do and giving shitty advise, you can't even imagine. My life is like hell here.

If suicide is a solution to the problems of double binds and these double binds persist in different forms under post-socialism then we would expect that suicide rates to decrease with economic improvement, as seen in Hungary. If double binds are political, economic, and cultural then we would expect to see suicide rates go up if we look at post-socialist dictatorships like Belarus, where the president Lukachenko is said by independent observers, members of the small opposition movement and the Western press, to be a dictator. Psychological double binds as found in families might be more common and cross-cultural, but not universal, but are based on cultural factors relating to such issues as gender, sexuality, and discipline of bodies. No matter what form double binds take, it seems clear to me that suicide is political; it involves taking power over one's life, by taking power over one's body, mind and soul—the power to destroy their own bodies rather than be disciplined and punished. When one is trying to control or influence one's body this seems to be a form of power, which engenders resistance, even if resistance is ineffective or self-defeating. However, suicide is an effective way to keep one less body from being used for others' benefit, one less person to be exploited, manipulated, punished, or abused. If attempted suicide is a cry for help, then help must come. One consultant argued that suicide is a solution to impossible situations, where someone feels isolated, alienated, stigmatized, but most importantly alone—a minority of one. She quotes Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, saying that, suicide is an option for someone who feels they are a minority of one.

Suicide can be prevented, perhaps if they feel that they are not in a minority of one—socially defined as crazy, but that they have someone to talk to, someone they trust, someone who will understand, and talk to them honestly and show that the situation is not hopeless. All they might need is a friend who shows real human affection and tries to understand. That person needs to be consistent in their thoughts and actions, and propose a way out, an alternative. So many suicide cases here in Belarus get referred to the mental asylum where the doctors give them drugs, lock them up, and perform experiments on them asking them to draw pictures and based on the color scheme used by the patient indicate in their records that the patient is better if they use more bright colors and worse if they use black. I told my friend in the hospital that she should just tell the doctors what they want to hear rather than being locked up in a mental hospital like a prisoner and taking drugs all the time which just make it difficult for her to think or stay awake.

In conclusion I would like to point out that suicide can be traced to multiple causes and that no single factor determines or influences a person's choice to take their own life. However, I would argue that Bateson's theory of the double bind might explain why some people might choose suicide, dissimulation, or duality in a situation of diarchical authority such as found in Hungary under socialism and Belarus under post-socialism. As Urban suggests, socialist countries such as the USSR were composed of weak structures (1985). Katherine Verdery calls the socialist state a weak state (1996). Double binds are used, then, when authority is weak and the person or persons employing double binds as a power relation use them because they are unable to persuade their subject to do what they would not normally do if not forced to do so. But a double bind often results in no action, which may serve the interests of the authorities. No action means no critique, no resistance, no revolution, no unorthodox behaviors, outward compliance with authority and thus the appearance of "normalcy." Suicide is often explained as a purely psychological phenomenon—a person who takes his or her own life is unbalanced, mentally disturbed, schizophrenic, or psychotic. Perhaps people who have serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia might be less likely to commit

suicide because they are detached from reality already and thus have escaped the problems posed by the real world, at least in their minds.

What I propose is that double binds are a political tool in weak states. Dictatorships display images of strength and power, but have little support from their citizens. In many dictatorships, diarchies are formed where there are two ministers of education, two ministers of culture, two supreme military commanders, etc. Similarly, parents in the family might also form diarchies where the mother and the father tell their children to do opposite things—the mother might try to prevent their daughter from getting pregnant before marriage by preaching abstinence, while the father might do the same by preaching safe sex practices. Control of one's body, thoughts, feelings, and desires is a form of power, thus, in the famous feminist dictum: the personal is political. As Katherine Verdery has shown (1998), dead bodies can take on political meaning. Following Foucault (1977), I argue that suicide can be as political as the control of docile bodies, discipline, and punishment. Control of one's sexuality is political and the state in a kind of totalitarian project tries to control the sexuality of the population through sex education classes, advice to parents, talk shows on television, abortion, making condoms and other forms of birth control available, warning of over breeding ethnic minorities—most often Roma in eastern Europe, and homophobic propaganda.

In the examples given above, I have tried to show that suicide is not simply a psychological problem, but one that is linked to politics, economic, culture, socialization, gender, and sexuality. The stronger post-socialist states become, using the example of Hungary, the more likely it seems that suicide rates will decrease. The weaker post-socialist states become, given the examples from Belarus, the more likely diarchies and double binds will be used as a mode of power and thus suicide rates will most likely increase. Strong states are built on each citizen's freedom to control their own bodies, their own minds, and creative abilities to find alternatives and thus engage in politics as a persuasive performance of respectful arguments and counter discourses leading to consensus building rather than oppression.

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² Michael Urban in "Conceptualizing Political Power in the USSR: Patterns of Binding and Bonding" (1985) states that the double bind represents a power dynamic between the communist party and its subjects. He says the object of power can neither fulfill injunctions from authority nor choose not to fulfill them. The classic double bind situation in socialist Eastern Europe lies in the Leninist formulation that the workers vanguard party acts to secure the interests of the workers, even when workers oppose the party's course of action. Since the double bind represents a dictate that one cannot follow, nor choose not to follow person or persons who receive the order cannot act, but

must act. No matter which they choose they are subject to punishment by the authorities. To avoid punishment they must fulfill some other task for the authorities, which defers sentencing indefinitely. Since everyone in a socialist country is asked to do the impossible, each and every member is subject to punishment in the form of purges, they therefore must live in fear of punishment—this motivates them to do nothing.

³ Bateson, in “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” argues that a double bind situation might exist in the family between a mother for example and her child. A parent might put a child in a double bind however the child might also put a parent in a double bind. There may be multiple overlapping and interlocking double bind relations between, parents, children, and others in society outside the family. Anna Yatskevich, in conversation, suggested to me that parents put children in double binds and visa versa perhaps unconsciously not as a feature of power struggle, which is not calculated to produce results, but as a psychological mechanism. It must also be pointed out that double bind relations might exist in any society in any context, however I argue that the weaker one’s authority the more likely they are to place their subjects in double binds. I also argue that not only love as Bateson suggests is a major theme of double binds in family situations, but also evidence points to sex, sexuality, and romantic love. A parent’s familial love is put in question as well as parental authority when a young person becomes active sexually, falls in love with an age mate, or expresses their sexuality, all of which throws into doubt the previous definitions, of family, familial bonding, love, social status or boy or girl, man or woman. The child will always remain the mother or father’s child yet the child has reached adulthood with menstruation, marriage, sexual intercourse, employment, acceptance at university, or other signs of coming of age—rites of passage. The child will always remain a child for the mother and father, yet is considered by society and peers to be an adult and considers himself or herself an adult. This again is a confusion of logical types, contradictory social imperatives, and a threat of punishment—a double bind common in many modern societies.