

From Heroic Fights to the Politics of Care: the 2020 Protests in Belarus¹

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Abstract

This paper is focused on mass protests occurred in the summer and autumn 2020 in Belarus. The mass mobilisation is analysed against the backdrop of the Belarusian oppositional politics formed over the last two decades. Drawing on decolonial, gender and class sensibilities, the article strives to explain specificities of the 2020 mobilisation. The author shows that Tsikhanouskaya's campaign and the following mass protests initiated a discursive shift that emphasizes people's power and importance of small deeds. This shift was accompanied with the transformation of protest practices in a way that manifests horizontal and decentralized politics of care. Engaging with theorisation of social movements as communities, the study foregrounds relationality as a way to account for social and political changes. It also draws on the insights from resistance studies concerning continuity and forms of resistance.

Introduction

“You are incredible!”—with these words Maria Kalesnikava, one of three women who stood up to challenge the presidency of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in the 2020 election, has repeatedly greeted fellow Belarusians, including her supporters in the rallies and protests and in her letters from prison. This statement has not only been gladly accepted by the public, it has also evolved into a signature phrase for discussions and social media posts dedicated to Belarusians. So why is this detail important?

In this paper, I analyze the 2020 mass mobilization in Belarus through the lens of Belarusian oppositional politics formed over the last two decades. This perspective sheds lights on why Kalesnikava's phrase is symptomatic of a shift in the way the Belarusian people has been perceived and engaged as political subjects by the oppositional leaders. Contrary to the fight for power within oppositional communities observed in previous years, I argue that the horizontal and decentralized politics of care supporting and aiming at people's empowerment is at the core of the 2020 political contention.

From a theoretical perspective, my analysis is in a dialogue with scholars advocating for relationality in social movements. As Diani and Mische point out there is a certain void in thinking about struggles for change as “[c]hange has been mapped as variations in the properties of actors or events rather than in relational patterns” (2015: 307). Moreover, the very development of social movements and consequently their conceptualization in scholarship

¹ This is a work in progress for a journal publication. The analysis of the 2020 events is on an early stage. I have deleted some less developed part of the text but tried to present the logic of the whole article.

have been largely connected to the model of Western democracy (Ritter 2015, Schock 2015). It is evident in influential theoretical approaches, such as political opportunity structure and resource mobilization put forth to explain social movements (Edelman 2001). Resistance in other contexts might lack the infrastructure (legislation, resources, and organisation) and have another dynamics, for example, periods of abyss and non-existence or in terms of Bayat “non-movement” (2017). Drawing on this critique and aiming to grasp the complexity of actors involved in Belarusian protests, I use the concept of community instead of frequently used “opposition”. Hassan and Staggenborg (2015) point to openness and inclusivity of the concept “community”. It transcends the institutionalised forms and organizations (such as political parties and NGOs), tackles the informal alliances and groups, and is sensitive to the temporal and diffused forms of collectivity.

While arguing for a shift in a relational pattern within Belarusian protest communities, I, nevertheless, engage critically with a discursive frame of the “old” and “new” opposition that is actively used to reflect on the 2020 protests in Belarusian political circles and independent media². On the one hand, a demand for another—creative and inclusive—approach to protests and politics and attempts to enact it by some groups of activists have been observable in my study in 2015. On the other hand, from very beginning activists of the so-called “old opposition” have been a part of the 2020 political mobilisation. In other words, I foreground continuity, endurance, and coexisting temporalities as an analytical perspective on dynamics of protests and social movements (Lafrans and Sears 2016, Lazar 2014, Taylor 1989).

My analysis is based on two sets of ethnographic data: research of street politics and protest communities conducted in Minsk in 2015–2017 and a trip to Belarus in August–September 2020, which aimed at participating and witnessing societal shifts and protest transformations. In addition to participant observation of protests and other oppositional events during my first field study, I collected 57 in-depth interviews with former and current political activists, independent journalists, civil rights defenders, and other experts. The latest research consists exclusively of data gathered through participant observation of protests and informal talks with protesters.

Background: a Problematic Community?

At first, the 2020 presidential electoral cycle in Belarus did not promise a new scenario for political struggle. The oppositional parties announced primaries to choose the single candidate from the united opposition but at the end were not able to come to an agreement. At the same time, the state began to persecute possible alternative candidates while they were still collecting signatures in support of their candidacy. Political scientists conceptualize such patterns as an election trap (Ash 2013), preemptive authoritarianism (Silitski 2005), and adaptive authoritarianism (Frear 2019).

As late as in the middle of May, Zmitser Dashkevich, a famous activist and a former leader of *Malady Front*, commented the failed primaries in the interview to Radio Svaboda as follows:

The main reason it [the primaries] finished like this [the opposition has not united] is these were people there who have not liked (if to say diplomatically) and have not

² See, for example, <https://novychas.by/hramadstva/dosved-staroj-apazicyi-cjaper-velmi-zapatrabavan>, <https://newsvideo.su/video/14732171>

trusted one another for a long time. But someone told them, “Guys, you have to do it now.” It was a utopian idea from the beginning. For 26 years, we have witnessed dozens of such campaigns when the opposition sits down around one table, hugs, kisses, and their faces on the front pages of the independent media—“finally, they are united.” Then, everything ends in the same way.³

As this quote demonstrates, a problem of an oppositional strategy is articulated in terms of dysfunctional relationships between different actors. The same explanatory frame dominates in my interviews. An important linguistic marker that stands out in the data is the predominant usage of the third person “they” in relation to the Belarusian oppositional communities while instances of “we” are rare in the interviews. In such a way, the informants distance themselves from this collective subject and belonging is perceived as problematic, questionable or even unwanted. Kira’s⁴ quote might be instructive in this respect. Even when she expresses her solidarity to the opposition and closeness of their positions, she continues to discursively separate herself from the group, “I feel the connection with these people, in the sense that I have always been on their side” (interview with Kira, 09.10.2015).

In this context, preemptive measures of the Belarusian authority are to a big extent a factor that altered the social (first of all, gendered) structure of Belarusian protests. Enacting a patriarchal and hierarchical vision of political contention in registering Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a presidential candidate and physically assaulting predominantly male protesters in the first days, the state, in fact, has bolstered the development of alternative politics within protest communities. The collaboration between Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, and Tsipkala was presented as the long awaited change within the oppositional community for many Belarusians. At the same time, the structural change—the achieved unity—succeeded in mobilizing mass support because of a specific political subjectivity performed by the new leaders. Having no connection to the oppositional politics before, they have initiated transformation of the narratives and practices that constitute Belarusian protest communities.

“People” in Protesters’ Narratives: a Discursive Shift

Apart from the general demands of the protesters (resignation of Lukashenka, investigation of the cases of violence against Belarusians, release of the political prisoners), the ongoing protests are unique in a way they engage with the issue of people’s dignity. It is done predominantly with reference to the offenses said by Lukashenka about protesters, such as “sheep,” “rats,” “little people,” and “drug and alcohol addicts.” In return, the protesters shout “Who is the rat here?” some of them carry posters of a giant rat with Lukashenka’s moustaches, and from time to time, someone jokingly asks the crowd as if checking the attendance, “Are drug addicts here?”, “Are prostitutes here?”, “Are sheep here?”, “Are social parasites here?” (Field notes, August 23 and 30, 2020).

This observation returns me to my data from 2015 that pointed to a somewhat similar demeaning relation of political activists to ordinary Belarusians. Although it was never public in the same way as Lukashenka’s statements, my data still speaks of the division between active protesters and non-activist population. In interviews with me, political activists articulated

³ Vital’ Tsyhankou, “Zmitser Dashkevich: Ljuddzi, yakiya `vyluchajutstva u prezidenty navat ne havorats pra smenu ulady, pezhymu,” *Svaboda.org*, May, 13, 2020, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30608192.html>. Henceforth all translations in this text are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ I use pseudonyms instead of the real names of my informants

disappointment and almost a condescending view of “the people.” Consider the following quotes from the interviews with the activists Barys and Mikalai:

It is irritating that people do nothing. The life becomes worse, they all complain but do nothing to change it, even the simplest, the smallest thing. The most elementary. No need to go to take over buildings or do anything that is dangerous. But on the election day, if you are not satisfied, then maybe you should go out to the streets? This requires nothing from you, just your time (Interview with Barys, 01.04.2016).

[They] are used to be like cattle... But I told myself: I do not want to be one of the sheep from this herd who are told where to go and what to think (Interview with Mikalai, 13.04.2016).

Barys stresses the political apathy of “people” by the usage of generalizations (“do nothing,” “require nothing”) and the superlative adjectives (“the simplest,” “the smallest,” and “the most elementary”). The only things he sees the people do are complaining and feeling unhappy. Mikalai denies even this by comparing with the obedient “cattle” that is told “what to think”. As such, this is a dehumanising and insulting language. Being “sheep” and “cattle” in “the herd” as characteristics of the Belarusian society underlines absence of their will, acceptance of any kind of governance, and satisfaction with a simple life. This deprecating discourse produces a sharp division between the imagined Belarusian people and the activist circles.

Importantly, the research done by Elena Gapova (2010) investigating how national intellectuals perceive the 2006 protest in Minsk points to a similar tendency. Gapova examines the idea of the low national consciousness of Belarusians present in national intellectuals’ writings. Two ideas are important for this discussion. First, her material proves that othering of Belarusians by members of the oppositional circles is a process that has a history. Second, what is presented as a difference in cultural and moral values might conceal different class interests. Gapova perceives the disappointment of national intellectuals as a manifestation of an unrecognized class problem in Belarus. A somewhat similar line of thinking can be found in Rosen Dzagalov’s (2011) analysis of what he calls “the antipopulism of postsocialist intellectuals.” He connects it to the historically specific form of the human rights discourse present in the region. Since the 1970s, the human rights agenda has been focusing mostly on civil rights while disregarding socio-economic rights. In the same way, one of my informants, the journalist Nasta, speaks of the people as the experts in their lives who are aware of their needs. From her perspective, the problem is a lost connection between “the democratic opposition” and “the people.”

If politicians think that people are fooled by propaganda, they do not understand a thing. The people do well understand how they live and what they really need... . They have their ideas of how the country should develop, and they expect that the politicians would articulate their needs and visions in the best way (Interview with Nasta, 20.10.2015).

Although rather engrained, rendering “Belarusians” as passive and obedient within the protest communities has not been a monolithic narrative. Already in my first research trip, I encountered different stories about ordinary Belarusians told by activists. One of them tells of

the people's solidarity with the victims of the violent suppression of the 2010 protest⁵. David, an activist in one of the oppositional parties, recalls that just an hour after he published a post proposing to collect warm clothes, blankets, and other items for detained the flow of supportive people never stopped for so long as it was necessary. There were always people ready to help - to organize and pack things, and there were drivers in their cars waiting to pick packages and relatives up and to deliver them to the prisons. He concludes:

Belarusians are really good at showing solidarity. Maybe they are not asked often to be solidaric. If people really understand the whys and the whats of it what and why they do, they do it. Moreover, they do it with such a great desire and with an obvious delight (Interview with David, 26.11.2015).

David's narrative reminds other stories about "the incredible Belarusians" that are in abundance now. It also shows one of many forgotten small success stories from Belarusian protests that engender an alternative narrative about "the people." In the quoted passage, David talks of solidarity as a way of relating and engaging with the people—a way that transforms Belarusians from passive bystanders into active participants. As such, Tsikhanouskaya's campaign and the 2020 protests build on this discursive shift emphasizing people's power and a shared endeavour. It is not accidental that Belarusian sports(wo)men came to the Sunday march on September 27 with the big banner "The people is the champion". It was a re-enactment of the "You are incredible" formula—a narrative gesture introduced by the new leaders re-attributing pride and elevating not particular personalities but the people and the communal deeds.

The Politics of Care: Changes in Practices

The discourse of passive and frightened Belarusians strengthens the construction of political activism as a solitary and heroic position. The lonely heroes of the Belarusian protests before 2020 were born in fractures of solidarity within the oppositional communities and the perceived passivity of the Belarusian people. Consider construction of a heroic position in the following quote,

These people [activists] really suffer, for example, this is very difficult to be in prison, this simply destroys one's life and the life of one's family. It is a heroic deed without any doubts, but we have to admit that it is possible for a very small group of people. The big groups can not share this heroism and it means that a person can not pretend to be a political subject, especially in our system (interview with Nasta, 20.10.2015).

Several moments are instructive in this quote. Heroism presupposes readiness for radical actions and experiences that ordinary people are not ready to face. The experience that defines heroes is suffering that the heroes are ready and able to endure.

Furthermore, the logic of heroisation has supported the construction of political actions as an expression of normative masculinity. In the protests in 2015-2017, the most outstanding division along the gender line lied at the level of leadership and public visibility. All street protests were called upon a known oppositional leader (male) who articulated the idea behind a protest and decided upon a day, time, and location. The protests were centrally located and usually consisted of two parts—speeches and a march. The majority of protests that

⁵ The protest on December 19, 2010 against the election fraud.

I observed back then had no female spokesperson. Usually, at the end of rallies, women were given a megaphone to read the “Lord’s Prayer,” but that happened only in the absence of a priest who can only be the male in the Belarusian context, and then a group of elderly women led the singing of the alternative Belarusian anthem “Mahutny Bozha” (Mighty Lord).

In contrast, the 2020 protests, marches, and chains of solidarity had no organized speeches and a very flexible structure. The protests became leaderless not because Tsikhanouskaya and Tsepkala were forced to leave the country and Kalesnikava was arrested, but because they never claimed this position in the first place. None of these women attempted to frame and own the movement. The protests were the space for self-organisation and creativity where people communicate with their posters, their clothing, and their actions.

The continuous state violence has brought to the forefront practices of care and solidarity. To support mobilization, there were no demands for big heroic actions; the resistance was rather presented and performed in myriads of ways starting from cheering the march from the safety of one’s balcony and decorating one’s window with symbols or bringing water to the marching people. The announcement of the first women’s march in Telegram included the explicit instruction to care for your own and everyone’s safety, which entailed to avoid confrontation with the police and instead “to be like the water” (Fieldnotes, 27.08.2020). In practice, it meant that when meeting police cordons, women’s procession changed direction. Women simply passed the message from the head of the column to the rest, and exactly like the water, in the end, the march found and occupied the big road (Fieldnotes, 29.08.2020).

Furthermore, the protest strategies were fluid and adapt to the external conditions. After women’s marches began to be targeted by the police, the form of de-march⁶ was proposed and now coexists with the usual marches. In such a way, instead of being alienated as weak and scared, people are invited to choose the protest form in accordance to their abilities and life situation. Plasticity of the protests encouraged groups that was previously seen as vulnerable and in need of protection in the context of the heroic masculine contestation to join the movement. Since October, elderly people started to have their own regular marches on Mondays, then two weeks later, people with disability organized their own march that now happen every Thursday. The construction of the political subjectivity of these groups can be seen as the enactment of care. The people organize in response to state violence when one group takes the place of another as its appearance challenges police brutality. In this respect, it is telling that one of the elderly participants carried the posters saying, “I am marching for my granddaughter Nastya,” while another poster states “Hands off from our children.”

Numerous commentators in the media and social networks are divided as to whether the ongoing Belarusian protests are empowering or powerless. Many of them are sceptical of flowers, white clothing, songs, and creative posters as a means of bringing political changes. In this text, I attempted to show why these and other similar attributes are essential. I perceive them as an embodiment of the discursive explosion (re)claiming the dignity of the Belarusians and an appearance of a new political subjectivity of the Belarusian people. If “You are incredible!” announced by Kalesnikava, at first, might be seen as an encouragement, it is manifested now in people’s persistence in protest and many small acts of care, solidarity, and civil courage in front of the escalating state violence.

⁶ Women with flowers just walk in the city center. The idea is to be visible and numerous but avoid detention and for this, not to gather in a big procession and not to have explicit political symbols.

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