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CIVIC MOBILIZATION IN BELARUS
THE CASE OF THE 2020 ELECTION

Case Study Report

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HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

This case study is part of a larger project examining when and why citizens mobilize to challenge the state in hard authoritarian contexts. The project compares 21 recent episodes of mobilization in order to understand the factors that contributed to the mobilization's growth. Four mobilization episodes (Ethiopia in 2015-2018, Vietnam in 2016, Sudan in 2018-2019, and Belarus in 2020) were selected for in-depth case studies.

The project was made possible through the generous support of the United States Government. Our donors do not influence the organization's research priorities, report findings, or policy recommendations. The positions of this publication do not represent the positions of the United States Government.

On the cover: An aerial view of protesters during a demonstration on August 16, 2020 in Minsk, Belarus. Photo by Getty Images.

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Executive Summary

The 2020 presidential electoral campaign in Belarus resulted in a popular mobilization against Aliaksandar Lukashenka's regime at a scale the country had not seen for almost three decades. Three new presidential candidates, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, Viktar Babaryka, and Valer Tsapkala, none of whom represented the established political opposition, inspired great enthusiasm in society and attracted many volunteers for their campaigns. Lukashenka swiftly arrested Tsikhanousky and Babaryka, after which Tsapkala left the country, fearing for his freedom. Tsikhanousky's wife, Sviatlana, however, was allowed to register as a candidate because Lukashenka severely underestimated her potential to lead a campaign. She ended up uniting opposition to the regime around the demand for a fair election and ran a very successful campaign, despite obstruction by the regime. On election day, the voting results were grossly falsified, which triggered wide-scale protests across the country. Lukashenka responded with a brutal crackdown, which came as a moral shock to a society not used to large-scale violence. The shock triggered an even bigger wave of mobilization, which lasted for months but ultimately subsided in the face of continuing repression.

Several precursors made the unprecedented growth of the anti-regime mobilization possible. Two social processes that had been going on for years—the weakening of the social contract with the regime and the growth of the urban middle class—created demand for political change among different social groups. Under the old social contract, Lukashenka was the guarantor of security and stability, but this guarantee had been undermined by worsening conditions of state employment, shrinking social services, and especially by the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic right before the presidential election in 2020. As for the normally apolitical urban middle class, they disliked Lukashenka's neo-Soviet rhetoric but had not seen an attractive political alternative—until the 2020 election.

The new presidential candidates—Tsikhanousky, Babaryka, and Tsapkala – presented an attractive alternative in the eyes of many Belarusians. Unlike the established political opposition, which was often perceived by the population as pursuing their narrow materialistic interests or being all talk and no action, the new candidates were seen as doers who wished to use their talents to benefit society. The messages of their campaigns engaged with ideas of civic nationalism—solidarity, agency, dignity, and fairness—which Lukashenka had also engaged in the early days of his political career. The new candidates were able to challenge Lukashenka on his own terrain by speaking to the same societal values and concerns he spoke to, rather than challenging his rhetoric with different values. The broad character of their agenda appealed to a wide audience with diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

More immediate precursors that aided the growth of the mobilization were decentralized and non-hierarchical communities that had emerged over the previous few years, and the growth in social media and IT solutions these communities used for organizing collective action to solve social problems. These horizontal communities included different groups in the urban middle class: IT professionals, artists, NGO activists, creative class professionals, Siarhei Tsikhanousky's followers on social media, and networks of self-help organizations that formed during the COVID-19 pandemic. These activists and organizations swiftly repurposed their skills and earlier experiences of collective action to help the growth of popular mobilization around the election.

Finally, poorly targeted and excessive repression by the regime contributed to the upward shift in citizen mobilization. The arrest of the three main alternative candidates led to the unification of the opposition behind Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who built on the emerging demand for a fair election and used existing networks of supporters to take the mobilization to a new level. After the election, moral shock from the government's brutal crackdown on protesters led to another upward scale shift with new social groups joining the protests. The same moral shock led to defections by several high-profile state officials and rank-and-file members of the police force. Over the long run, however, systemic repression succeeded in keeping Lukashenka's regime in power.

Implications for Practitioners

As of this writing in June 2022, Lukashenka is still in power and tens of thousands of participants in the 2020 mobilizations are now in prison or exile. Yet the mobilization itself was a success in terms of radically shifting public perceptions of what is possible in Belarusian politics. Five years ago, Belarus seemed to be a hardened authoritarian regime with no possibility for mass dissent, yet a combination of historically contingent and social structural factors (the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of an entrepreneurial class, new ways of talking about Belarusian values), as well as the efforts of concrete actors, came together in unexpected ways. What can supporters of democratic movements learn from the Belarus case that can help them lay the groundwork for mobilization in other contexts of hard authoritarianism?

1. Authoritarian elections can be important windows of opportunity for reframing issues that the public cares about. In non-competitive regimes, this reframing is difficult to do from within established political parties and human rights groups both because the opposition may be stigmatized for receiving support from the West, and because the opposition may lack the ability to do the reframing in a way that resonates with public sentiment. Donors targeting democracy support around an election should think carefully about who that funding is going to and what activities it is supporting. In authoritarian contexts, traditional voter education and election monitoring will have a bigger impact on democratic outcomes when complemented by strategic communications, digital security, and grassroots network building by non-political actors. Nimble support for means of communication and organization that are beyond the regime's control (at least for now) may be an important way that philanthropists can influence civic mobilization in authoritarian contexts.

2. When an election is coming up in an authoritarian country where there is an implied social contract (in this case, a guarantee of security and a minimal standard of living in exchange for not challenging the state), pro-democracy advocates should ask whether there is a public perception that the government has not been living up to the social contract. If so, who is articulating that gap between expectations and reality? That articulation may be coming from unexpected places, such as the business community, or nationalists. Pro-democracy activists and organizations may not want to be directly associated with these groups but can amplify those frames in their own messages. The leaders of the Belarus mobilization had very different backgrounds from the established pro-democracy leaders, ones that were connected to the messages and identities that inspired the protest. Rather than taking a leadership role, pro-democracy groups can play a significant role if they really listen to the interests and needs being articulated by emerging grassroots movements, and respond with support in their area of technical expertise (e.g. journalism, law, civic education, nonviolent resistance tactics).

> "In authoritarian contexts, traditional voter education and election monitoring will have a bigger impact on democratic outcomes when complemented by strategic communications, digital security, and grassroots network building by non-political actors."

3. There is evidence that rights-based movements need to vernacularize claims to universal human rights in order to be successful.[1] In the Belarus case, the framings that mobilized the population were ones that resonated with Western liberal democratic discourse (fairness, following the electoral rules, not arresting people for speaking out or protesting), but they were not couched in a rights-based discourse. Rather, these claims against the regime emerged from the state's own discourse and Belarusian cultural norms. One implication may be that civic education programs need to combine the ideas of universal and constitutional rights with a strong component of vernacularization by program participants. The result may be a civic identity that does not focus on challenging the regime but rather on arguing that the regime should be accountable for upholding the social contract. The Belarus case suggests that in a situation when an authoritarian regime repeatedly violates the social contract, this civic identity can be a precursor that supports a pro-democracy movement that uses the democratic means such as elections and engaging legal mechanisms to achieve its goals.

4. Self-help networks that emerged during the last several years and coordinated over relatively secure, quasi-public communications channels were key to spreading the mobilization. These networks were not formed for a political purpose but formed an infrastructure that allowed political mobilization to take place once the new leaders had a message and a call to action that resonated with the broad public. Donors and others who want to support the potential for mobilization in authoritarian contexts can look outside the context of pro-democracy activists to find networks with mobilization potential: business and professional associations, Facebook groups, social media influencers, community development organizations, ethnic or religious associations, and so on. These apolitical forms of autonomous citizen organization and decentralized communications infrastructure are an important precursor to pro-democracy mobilizations in authoritarian contexts.

Introduction

The 2020 electoral mobilization and protests in Belarus have rocked the country and the world. At the scheduled presidential election, Aliaksandar Lukashenka[2] the country's leader of 26 years, faced three surprise competitors. In just a few weeks, these new candidates mobilized popular support so large that it threatened Lukashenka's power. The subsequent events—the arrest of the candidates, consolidation of resistance behind the wife of one of them, falsification of electoral results, and massive post-electoral protests—shook the existing understandings of Belarus politics and society. They created a new political reality in the country and made autocrats in other countries realign their strategies in light of new threats from popular protest.

Upward scale shift

An increase "in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions to a different focal point, involving a new range of actors, different objects, and broadened claims."[3] For the purposes of studying authoritarian cases, we use the minimal criterion of an increase in the number of mobilization participants relative to previous mobilizations in that country.

This report is focused on one of the crucial questions for understanding of the 2020 events in Belarus as well as the broader phenomenon of resistance to authoritarian regimes. **What enabled the 2020 mobilization to grow much larger than any mobilization against Lukashenka's power that Belarus had seen before? What factors and mechanisms helped the mobilization to scale up?** Here, we are not analyzing whether or why the Belarus movement succeeded or failed according to its objectives. Instead, we are focusing only on the mechanisms of popular mobilization and why there was an "upward scale shift" in 2020, a tipping point with much broader and larger participation in anti-regime activities than the country had previously experienced. Of all countries with authoritarian regimes, Belarus seemed to be among those where large-scale protests were unlikely, and yet, it defied this expectation. Understanding how a mobilization could scale up in a country like Belarus may provide insights into the mobilization dynamics in other countries and help activists and democracy supporters be more effective in their pursuits.

The analysis in this report is based on primary and secondary sources. It synthesizes the information from both traditional and new media, such as YouTube or Telegram, as well as the insights from academic research published to date. In addition, we interviewed 13 activists involved in the 2020 Belarus mobilization in different capacities, including leadership ones, asking about their background and the experience of activism. Using these sources, we sought to understand how the 2020 mobilization against Lukashenka's regime differed from the previous attempts to mobilize Belarusians. Tracing how these differences helped the mobilization to grow allowed us to identify the precursors of the upward scale shift in 2020.

The report consists of three parts. The first provides a brief description of the political situation in post-Soviet Belarus and analyzes the factors behind Lukashenka's political longevity. The second describes the events of the 2020 electoral mobilization and post-electoral protests. The third examines the precursors and mechanisms of mobilization growth to a scale unprecedented in the history of post-Soviet Belarus.

The Political Situation in Post-Soviet Belarus

Belarus is a post-Soviet country whose economy and politics inherited many features of the Soviet system with relatively minimal change. Unlike other post-Soviet states, Belarus did not privatize major industrial enterprises and kept a high share of the workforce in the state-controlled sectors of the economy. Aliaksandar Lukashenka, the country's president since 1994, used the promise of economic security—a "social contract" with the population—to gain country-wide support in the 1990s. Simultaneously, however, he gradually hollowed out democratic institutions and created an authoritarian regime that maintained his grip on power for decades.

Lukashenka's early popularity was the result of his image as a progressive, entrepreneurial leader who, at the same time, was a vocal critic of the institutional chaos and corruption of the early post-Soviet days in Belarus. In the late 1980s, he was a director of a collective farm who eagerly took advantage of the first entrepreneurial opportunities in the late Soviet Union. He significantly increased the production volumes and profits of his collective farm as well as invested in production facilities and infrastructure.[4] By 1994, however, he actively criticized the market reforms and the country's government implementing them. As a parliamentary deputy, he voted against privatization of large industrial enterprises and chaired the anti-corruption committee that accused many senior government officials of misappropriating state resources. That year, he won his first presidential election based on an anti-elite platform supported most strongly by the voters in provinces. He was the "candidate of the people," not associated with the established political groups and promising the security and stability desperately needed by the majority of the population at the time.[5]

After being elected president, Lukashenka quickly converted his popular support into the institutional changes that strengthened the power of the presidency and effectively destroyed the nascent democratic institutions in the country. A 1995 referendum provided the president with the right to disband the parliament; a 1996 referendum gave him the right to appoint the Constitutional Court judges and ministers as well as removed the possibility of presidential dismissal for violating the constitution. Both referendums took place with gross violations of established procedures, but the security apparatus, which Lukashenka reformed first thing after being elected, helped him deal with his political opponents and defectors who refused to follow unlawful orders. In the next few years, some of his most active critics either died under suspicious circumstances or were disappeared. A referendum in 2004 removed the last obstacle to Lukashenka's power—constitutional term limits—opening the door to a life-long presidency.[7]

Authoritarian social contract

An institutional arrangement in which an authoritarian political regime guarantees a wide provision of public goods and services in exchange for the people not challenging the regime politically. [6]

Between 1994 and 2020, Lukashenka won presidential elections in 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2015. All of them witnessed multiple procedural violations as well as intimidation of the opposition and cutting it off the resources and information space.[8] This is not to imply that Lukashenka did not have the support of a significant part of the Belarus population, which even his opponents recognized.[9] This support was influenced by at least three factors: (1) the relative stability of the Belarus economy, (2) the tight control of the information space, and (3) the weak appeal of the opposition.

Lukashenka at least partially fulfilled his promise of economic stability and security, which was the foundation of his social contract with the population. In the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Belarus economy was growing at approximately the same rate as the neighboring Latvia. Its recovery started three years earlier than in Russia, which made the transitional period go a lot smoother in Belarus compared to Russia or Ukraine. Salaries in the public sector as well as pensions significantly increased in the 2000s. Until the economy entered a stagnation period around the global economic crisis of 2008, Lukashenka's economic record in the eyes of the population was rather positive even though the Belarus GDP per person was only a half or less than the one in Russia, Poland, Lithuania, or Latvia. [10]

As he consolidated his power, Lukashenka also tightened his control over the information space in the country. He introduced censorship in the media immediately after being elected in 1994; in the following years, larger media outlets were shut down, while the smaller ones were cut off from dissemination channels. At least one independent journalist, Dzmitry Zavadsky, disappeared in 2000, while others were often threatened and harassed.[11] Independent public opinion polls were banned in the early 2000s.[12] The information space was dominated by the state-controlled media, which exclusively transmitted the pro-Lukashenka agenda, including messages about his wide support among the population. A few relatively independent online media outlets had a limited audience, and there was no platform for a broad discussion of popular grievances or the regime's performance. In the absence of independent polls, it is difficult to estimate how widespread different political attitudes in Belarus society were. However, existing evidence suggests that some groups, especially those of the older generation and living in the provinces, largely believed the state-supported narrative about Belarus being the fortress of economic stability and order.[13] Another part of the public was more skeptical about Lukashenka, but exhibited the signs of learned helplessness: these people remained mostly disengaged from politics as they were convinced that the majority supported Lukashenka anyway and political change in the country was not on the horizon.[14]

The third reason why Lukashenka managed to stay in power for so long was the weak appeal of the opposition. Although there is no doubt that the opposition has been severely repressed by the regime, it also failed to develop the qualities that would attract any significant number of followers. Existing evidence suggests that in the 2000s, up to 50% of voters might potentially vote for a candidate other than Lukashenka provided that that candidate was seen as a real challenger, but none of the opposition leaders at the time was able to fulfil that role.[15]

For an average Belarusian voter, the opposition parties in the country looked like they were more interested in internal political games than in connecting to voters. Historically, there were two kinds of opposition parties in Belarus: nationalist and social-democratic.[16] Over the course of their development in the post-Soviet period, both kinds of parties experienced multiple splits and coalition realignments, which left an average Belarus voter rather confused about their identities and platforms.[17] However committed to democratic values these parties might have been internally, the messages that got through to the voters despite the political noise did not resonate with the public. The opposition communicated with the public about higher-order national values mostly in Belarusian, which was not the language of everyday communication for most Belarusians. Meanwhile, Lukashenka talked in Russian about simple, everyday issues. All oppositional parties, some more extreme than others, suggested making the Belarusian language the only official language in the country, although the actual usage of the Belarusian language lagged far behind the usage of Russian. Some opposition parties also suggested weakening ties with Russia and seeking integration into the European Union, which was not very appealing either.[18] The Belarus ethnic identity, even if not very salient, was never built around an opposition to Russia and Russianness.[19]

The leadership of the opposition parties was no more appealing to the voters than their messages.[20] In addition to the frequent splits and realignments, the opposition leadership also concentrated in rather narrow intelligentsia circles in Minsk and lacked representation of other social groups and geographic areas. The personal ambitions of the opposition leaders often increased the opposition fragmentation and overshadowed the substance of their political agendas. Many opposition forces relied on foreign donors for financial support since Lukashenka's regime made sure that the potential domestic funding sources were out of reach for them.[21] All of this contributed to the negative image of the opposition beyond their core supporters: at best, they were seen as useless windbags out of touch with real life issues; at worst, they were opportunists and profiteers who only appeared around the election time to imitate political activity and attract more money from foreign donors.[22] State propaganda actively created and maintained this image of the opposition while contrasting it with the image of Lukashenka. Unlike the opposition, Lukashenka was portrayed as having a strong work ethic and being closer to the people than any political groups.[23] And even though a large share of the population was likely skeptical about this propaganda message, they did not see the opposition leaders as viable alternatives to Lukashenka.

The negative image of the opposition together with the increased repression were among the reasons why protests in Belarus have not scaled up since the early 1990s. Small-scale protests were relatively common, especially in the 2000s when there were on average 10 active protest campaigns a year. During the next decade, the crackdown of political protests after the 2010 election and adoption of restrictive legislation led to a decline in protest.[24] Popular discontent still sometimes spilled over into street protests, such as the 2017 protests against the "parasite law." However, the political opposition was unable to connect to the masses and convert this discontent into a challenge to Lukashenka's regime.[25]

The Key Events of the 2020 Mobilization

The situation changed dramatically in 2020. During the first COVID-19 pandemic year, Belarus had a scheduled presidential election, and three unexpected new candidates, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, Viktar Babaryka, and Valer Tsapkala completely changed the electoral dynamic in the country. Their campaigns mobilized hundreds of thousands of volunteers and active supporters among less than 7 million Belarus voters.[26] None of them was ultimately allowed to run, and all of them ended up in jail or exile, but the falling flag was picked up by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Siarhei Tsikhanousky's wife. Consolidating the resources of all three opposition campaigns, Tskihanouskaia created a momentum that had not happened in post-Soviet Belarus before. On election day, Lukashenka's regime falsified the election result, which triggered a large nationwide protest. The moral shock Belarus society encountered when this protest was brutally cracked down on triggered further growth of mobilization and the emergence of a series of grassroots civic initiatives. After the mobilization wave was broken by the regime, these civic initiatives continued to operate from abroad.

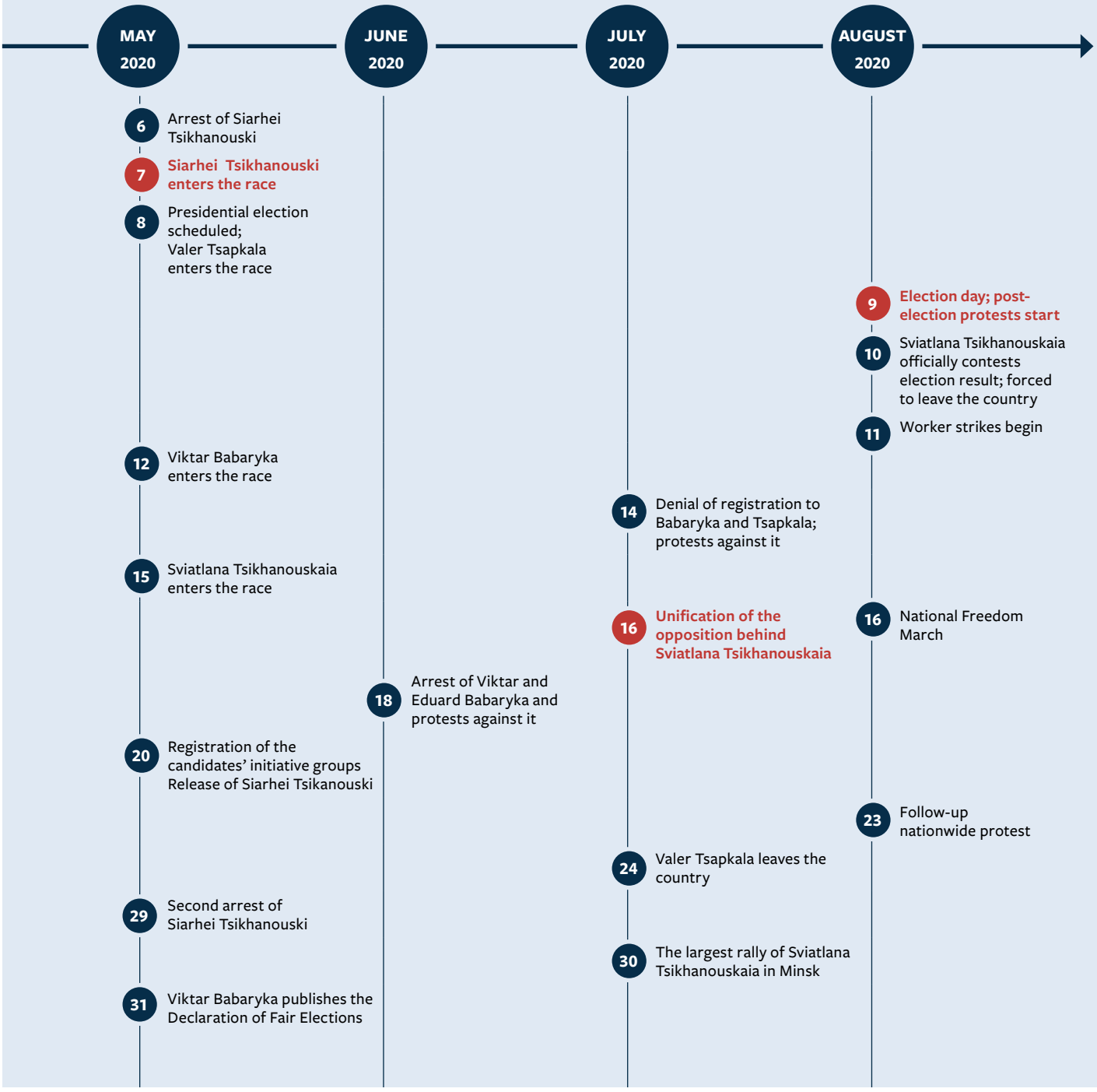
The 2020 Belarus mobilization can be divided into three stages. The first began on May 7 when the first new candidate, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, announced that he would be running for president. The second began on July 16 when the opposition forces united behind Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya after the two other opposition candidates, Babaryka and Tsapkala, were denied registration. The third began on August 9, election day, after the announcement of the preliminary election results and lasted for a few months until street protests wound down under the regime pressure.

The March of Peace and Independence, Minsk, Belarus, August 30, 2020. © Andrew Keymaster/Unsplash

THE FIRST UPWARD SCALE SHIFT: MAY 7 – JULY 16

During the first stage of the mobilization, the nomination and popularity of the new candidates, especially Viktar Babaryka, caught Lukashenka's regime by surprise. Before the authorities arrested the dangerous challengers, these new players were able to set the electoral campaign on a route it never took before.

Timeline of the 2020 mobilization in Belarus



The new candidates enter the race

On May 7, 2020, a YouTube channel, "A Country for Living," run by Siarhei Tsikhanousky published a video where he announced that he would run for president of Belarus in the upcoming election. Tsikhanousky was a small entrepreneur who created his YouTube channel in March 2019, initially planning to talk about the tensions between the Belarus state bureaucracy and entrepreneurs. The name of the channel, "A Country for Living," referred to a slogan used by the Belarus state propaganda in materials promoting a positive image of the country, and the mission of Tsikhanousky's channel was to question that image.[27] Very quickly, his channel began to cover a wider range of everyday problems people in Belarus experienced and to blame Lukashenka's regime for them. At the time of his arrest, his channel had about 140,000 subscribers.[28] As of May 7, 2020, the most popular video on the channel had 719,000 views.[29]

On May 8, the Belarus parliament officially scheduled the election and the second opposition candidate, Valer Tsapkala, announced his intent to run. Tsapkala was a former diplomat and Lukashenka's ally who served as the Belarus ambassador to the United States and Mexico from 1997-2002. After returning from the US, he created and led High Tech Park, a Belarus incubator of IT businesses. Taking advantage of a favorable tax regime and state regulations, the Belarus IT industry had grown to contribute 6.5% to Belarus GDP. In 2020, salaries of IT professionals were the highest among all industries, about double of the salaries of the next top earners such as pilots and financial managers.[30]

Viktar Babaryka announced his intent to run for president on May 12. Babaryka was a banker and philanthropist; he chaired the board of Belgazprombank, one of the largest banks in Belarus and over the years funded a number of charities and cultural projects. These projects included Foundation "Chance" that helped pay for high-cost medical treatment for children, the Art Collection of Belgazprombank, which sought out and returned to Belarus the paintings of famous artists of Belarus origin, and the art center "Ok16," which hosted experimental art exhibitions and performances. Babaryka's candidacy was publicly supported by some well-known Belarusian cultural figures, among which were Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich and film director Andrei Kureichik.[31]

According to Belarus law, presidential candidates can only be nominated by the citizens of Belarus. A prospective candidate must submit at least 100,000 valid voter signatures to the Central Election Commission no later than 25 days before the election. The signatures can only be collected after the candidate registers an initiative group of at least 100 voters. During the signature collection period, the candidates cannot reveal the details of their political programs; they can only talk about their own biography. The political programs are revealed after the prospective candidates are registered by the Central Election Commission, which can deny registration if more than 15 percent of the total number of signatures are invalid or if the documents the candidate submitted contain false information.[32]

Of the three new candidates, Viktar Babaryka and Valer Tsapkala registered their initiative groups on May 20. Siarhei Tsikhanousky, however, was not able to do that: he was arrested the day before the video announcing his presidential bid was released, and the authorities would not accept his request to register his initiative group from prison.[33] His arrest was allegedly for participating in a protest that happened a few months earlier and is believed to have been meant to stop him from running for president.[34] While he was under arrest, Tsikhanousky's wife, Sviatlana announced that she would run instead of him, took over the initiative group he gathered, and registered it under her name.[35]

Signature collection

The signature collection period that followed the registration of the initiative groups demonstrated that the three new candidates had generated significant enthusiasm in society, which, as was mentioned earlier, had previously avoided most involvement with politics. In only a few days, Viktar Babaryka's call for volunteers attracted about 10,000 people, more than any other candidate.[36] Most of these people were educated urbanites—small businessmen, managers, IT specialists, artists, etc.—who had never been involved with politics before. Valer Tsapkala's campaign volunteers had a similar socio-economic profile. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya relied primarily on the followers of Siarhei Tsikhanousky's YouTube channel, especially those who had already been helping him in his political activities.

The number of signatures these volunteer groups managed to collect was also much higher than any observers expected. The candidates' teams combined online and offline activities to spread the information about signature collection and maximize efficiency. They used social media to publicize signature collection locations as well as collect information about the voters willing to leave their signatures

but unable to come in person (a volunteer would then visit these voters to get their signatures). The signature collection locations were often set up in public places with high traffic, and many people came to sign up for more than one candidate.[37] Often there were long lines at these locations, which also had a cascade effect: people who either did not know about the signature collection or had not thought of signing would see these lines and decide to join too.[38] By the time the signatures had to be submitted to the Central Election Commission, Babaryka's team had collected over 367 thousand of them, Tsapkala's team—over 158 thousand, and Tsikhanouskaya's team—over 109 thousand.[39]

The demand for a fair election

While the opposition candidates mobilized volunteers and worked to collect the signatures, Lukashenka, who formally had to go through the same process, used government employees, public sector organizations, and state-owned enterprises to collect the signatures. The heads of these organizations often ordered their workers to bring in their IDs and sign in support of Lukashenka. Sometimes, these organizations would even share people's personal information so that signatures could be produced without people's consent.[40]

In response to reports about these practices, on May 31 Viktar Babaryka shared "Declaration For A Fair Election" on his campaign website and personal Facebook page, calling for all people to stick to the principles of fair elections, resist dishonest practices, and help those who expose them. He called for all candidates to pledge their support for the Declaration. He also promised to help anyone who was prosecuted for their attempt to enforce fair elections. Simultaneously, he filed a complaint to the Central Electoral Commission about the illegal practices used by the Lukashenka campaign.[41]

Babaryka's "Declaration For A Fair Election" inspired grassroots action to ensure electoral transparency. Several activists created an initiative called Honest People that united citizens committed to protect electoral fairness. The initiative attracted many people who were previously apolitical but decided to respond to Babaryka's call. Out of four founding members, only one was previously involved in Babaryka's campaign. By the end of July, Honest People grew to include 300 members and managed ten projects. One of these projects recruited electoral observers and boasted 10,000 applications. Another one called "Emergency Mutual Help" (*"Skoraya Vzaimopomosh'"*) connected potential donors to those persecuted during the campaign through a digital platform. The platform "Voice" ("Golos") also developed by Honest People was meant to conduct an alternative vote count based on the ballot photos submitted by citizens through Viber or Telegram.[42]

Besides Honest People, there were other grassroots initiatives inspired by the fair election cause. One of them was called "Catholics don't falsify." Its founder, Artem Tkachuk, viewed the goal of this initiative as encouraging Catholics who were members of electoral commissions to obey the law and prevent falsifications. To do that, Catholic activists developed and disseminated information materials containing quotes of Catholic priests and other famous Catholics that explained the importance of ensuring a fair election from the point of view of the Catholic faith.[43] Another initiative came from lawyers; several of them assembled into a team that provided legal consultations for citizens who had applied to become members of electoral commissions and, if they were rejected, helped them appeal the decision. The creator of this team told us in an interview that he had not been following the political situation in the country before the 2020 election season, but Babaryka's Declaration inspired him to get involved. He also emphasized that he provided legal advice and expertise as a professional while remaining politically impartial.[44]

This demand for a fair election started by Babaryka would become the main focus of the second stage of the mobilization. It was a simple unifying message that brought together different social groups and inspired previously apolitical citizens to join the movement.

Arrests and denial of registration

The level of support and enthusiasm that the three new candidates generated was clearly not expected by Lukashenka's regime. If Siarhei Tsikhanousky's activities had already been on the authorities' radar, Babaryka and Tsapkala were regime insiders who unexpectedly defected to oppose the regime. During the previous electoral cycles, Lukashenka's confidence meant that he always allowed opposition candidates to run and only arrested them when they protested against the election's results. This time, the popular support the new candidates had mobilized provoked the regime to arrest them well in advance of election day.[45]

As mentioned earlier, Siarhei Tsikhanousky was under arrest

at the time when he had to register the initiative group, and his wife Sviatlana had to step in. Siarhei was released on May 20, the day the initiative groups were registered, probably because the authorities believed the threat from him was mostly neutralized.[46] He, however, immediately began working for Sviatlana's electoral campaign, and on May 29, he was arrested again.[47]

Viktar Babaryka and his son and campaign manager, Eduard, were arrested on June 18 on their way to submit the signatures to the Central Electoral Commission, allegedly because of their unlawful activities while working at Belgazprombank.[48] The arrest, however, was clearly understood by society as an attempt to prevent the strongest opposition candidate from running for president, and protests against this arrest took place in multiple cities. In Minsk, Gomel, Mogilev, Bobruisk, Baranovichi, Grodna, and Vitebsk, people lined up in "chains of solidarity"—a form of protest that originated during the Baltic Way of 1989 and has been used on many other occasions since then; most recently, it also became associated with long signature collection lines.[49] The protest in Minsk was attended by more than two thousand people.[50]

Despite Babaryka's arrest, his campaign was able to submit the collected signatures to the Central Electoral Commission, as did Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Valer Tsapkala. On July 14, the Commission registered Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and denied registration to Babaryka and Tsapkala. The Commission found 55% of the 367 thousand signatures submitted by the Babaryka campaign and 51% of the 159 thousand submitted by the Tsapkala campaign invalid. Valer Tsapkala was denied registration because the number of valid signatures he submitted did not reach 100 thousand, while Babaryka was denied registration for allegedly failing to declare the financial assets he controlled.[51]

The denial of registration to Babaryka and Tsapkala on July 14 triggered same-day protests in multiple cities, including Brest, Gomel, Mogilev, and Grodna, to which the authorities responded with arrests.[52] In Minsk alone, over 220 people were arrested.[53] Valer Tsapkala, fearing for his freedom, left the country on July 24.[54]

THE SECOND UPWARD SCALE SHIFT: JULY 16 – AUGUST 9

The second stage of the mobilization was driven by the women's trio—Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kolesnikova (Babaryka's campaign manager), and Veranika Tsapkala (Valer Tsapkala's wife), who gave their support to Sviatlana's candidacy and put forward one simple demand: a new, free and fair election. Rather than promising to govern, Tsikhanouskaya promised to use her post as president to run a new, free and fair election, in which all candidates can participate. This simple and uncontroversial platform had a broad appeal in society, which reenergized the campaign and the civic initiatives geared to ensure an honest vote count.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's campaign

On July 16, the representatives of Kolesnikova and Tsapkala announced that they would support the candidacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and help run the campaign. Jointly, they called for a wide societal effort to ensure an honest vote count on the election day and went on a tour across the country to promote Sviatlana as a candidate.[55]

Once again, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was greatly underestimated by Lukashenka's regime as a potential challenger. A former schoolteacher and a stay-home mom with zero political experience at the time of the election, she looked like a candidate that the Belarus population would never choose to be president. Sviatlana and her team, though, managed to turn her background into an advantage when they made holding a new, free and fair election her main electoral promise. Sviatlana's background only made this promise more credible as it clearly signaled that she was not the kind of person who would be willing to seize power and become president herself.[56] Her candidacy and campaign, thus, reinforced the demand for fair election started earlier by Viktar Babaryka and neutralized the potential points of political disagreements among her supporters.

Left to right: Veronika Tsapkala, the wife of opposition figure Valer Tsapkala, who was barred from running for presidency, presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia and Maria Kalesnikava, Viktar Babaryka›s campaign chief, pose during a press conference in Minsk on July 17, 2020. (Photo by Sergei GAPON / AFP)

The other two women were no less important for the campaign. Kalesnikava, a talented musician and teacher who worked as director of the art center "OK16," became the most charismatic leader of the campaign. Tsapkala, who represented her husband in this alliance, completed the trio that symbolized the unity of the opposition. The three of them appeared together on pictures and posters with their three campaign symbols, heart, fist, and the letter "V", which stood for love, power, and victory.

Between July 19 and August 9, Tsikhanouskaya's campaign organized more than 20 rallies in different Belarusian cities, including two in Minsk. The rallies were organized by professional volunteers who joined Tsikhanouskaya's team through their professional network channels. One of our interviewees was invited to help plan the events, as they had professional experience writing speeches and scripts, planning events, and attracting an audience's attention.[57] The team organizing rallies included people from one of the biggest Belarus event agencies who were responsible for finding hosts and singers to perform during the rallies.[58] The second Minsk rally was the largest in the whole campaign attracting 63,000 participants.

Obstruction of Tsikhanouskaya's campaign by Lukashenka's regime

As Tsikhanouskaya's campaign was unfolding and her support growing, Lukashenka's regime tried to obstruct public rallies. According to Belarus law, all rallies must be approved by the local authorities who presumably coordinate different public events in the area. In multiple cities, Tsikhanouskaya's campaign applications for rallies were denied because allegedly the public spaces were occupied for other events. For example, in Stolin, Brest region, the only square in the city was booked by Lukashenka's operative for campaign events every day from July 27 through August 8 from 8 am to 10 pm.[59] On August 6, Tsikhanouskaya's campaign was forced to cancel the previously scheduled rally in Minsk because somehow all available sites were fully booked by other events. Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala still invited their supporters to Kyiv Square, where an event for children's extracurricular education was held. None of the three leaders were allowed to enter the square by the police; their supporters later organized a spontaneous street march.[60]

On August 6-8, a few days before the election, several members of Tsikhanouskaya campaign, including Kalesnikava and Tsikhanouskaya's campaign manager Maria Moroz, were detained by the police. Kalesnikava was quickly released on the same day.[61]

List of largest rallies for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the places where authorities obstructed them

Date	Place	Population[62]	Number of participants
19-Jul	Minsk	2,020,000	7,500[63]
23-Jul	Barysaw	140,000	5,000[64]
24-Jul	Vitebsk	365,000	7,000[65]
25-Jul	Mogilev	357,000	3,000[66]
25-Jul	Orsha	108,000	3,000[67]
26-Jul	Gomel	510,000	10,000[68]
25-Jul	Babruysk	212,000	6,000[69]
26-Jul	Pinsk	126,000	2,000[70]
30-Jul	Minsk	2,020,000	63,000[71]
1-Aug	Grodno	357,000	10,000[72]
2-Aug	Brest	340,000	18,000[73]
2-Aug	Baranovichi	175,000	8,000[74]
2-Aug	Pinsk	126,000	obstructed
4-Aug	Slutsk	62,000	obstructed
4-Aug	Salihorsk	101,000	obstructed
6-Aug	Minsk	2,020,000	obstructed
	Stolin	13,000	obstructed

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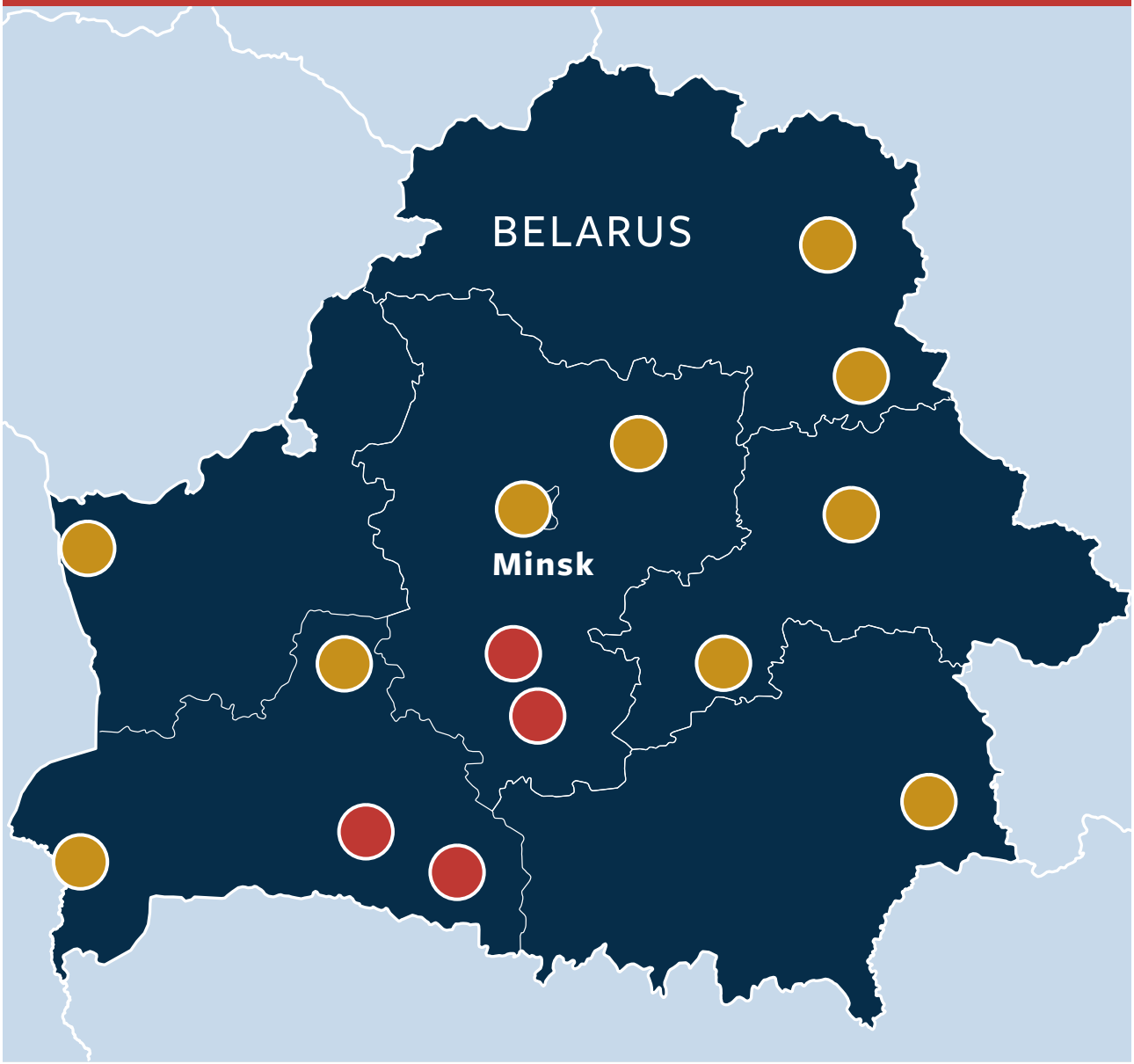
Map of largest rallies for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the places where authorities obstructed them



THE THIRD UPWARD SCALE SHIFT: AUGUST 9 AND LATER

The third stage of the mobilization began after the Belarus authorities announced the election results, which were widely seen by Belarus society as falsified. After officially contesting these results, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave the country and large street protests broke out in multiple cities. A brutal crackdown of the protests triggered further mobilization growth, which now included a wider variety of social groups, including industrial workers and representatives of Christian organizations.

Contestation of the election results

According to the preliminary election results announced on the evening of August 9, Aliaksandar Lukashenka won the election with 80% of the vote, while Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya only received 10%. Given the scale of Tsikhanouskaya's campaign and her visible popular support, these results were widely seen as implausible. In addition, Honest People, the civic initiative that monitored the election, reported thousands of procedural violations.[75]

Tsikhanouskaya immediately filed a complaint with the Central Electoral Commission. When she was inside the building submitting the complaint, she was detained by Belarus security apparatus who threatened her and immediately deported her to Lithuania. From Lithuania, she released a video on August 14, in which she claimed to have won the election.[76]

Protests and crackdowns August 9-11

As soon as the preliminary election results were announced, protests broke out in major Belarus cities such as Brest, Minsk, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Mazyr, Homel, and Babruisk.[77] In Minsk, peaceful protests quickly escalated into violent clashes between protesters and the police.[78] The scale of this brutality was unprecedented for Belarus and came as a shock to the whole country. During the next few days, tens of thousands of protesters were beaten and arrested; many of those who were jailed were tortured.[79] One jail facility situated on Akrestina Lane in Minsk became particularly famous for the brutal treatment of detainees by law enforcement officers.[80] Human rights monitors received several hundred reports of torture and ill-treatment by security forces over the first 10 days of the protests.[81]

Another important development that happened in the first few days after the election was the rapid increase of popularity of Telegram channels, especially the one called "Nexta," which became a platform for coordination of protesters' actions. The Belarus authorities restricted Internet access in many locations right after the election, and Telegram proved to be the most reliable communication channel because it allowed users to get around the blockage. Nexta's audience grew from about 300 thousand to over two million people during the week following the election.[82]

Mobilization growth after the moral shock

The brutal crackdown of post-election protests triggered the third upward scale shift in this mobilization episode. If during the first two stages, the mobilization grew when people joined the campaigns primarily as individual citizens, after the election and the spike of repression, we see social and professional groups—women, doctors, industrial workers, etc.—announcing their solidarity with the protesters using their professional or cultural identity. The repression also led to an expansion in the demands of protesters, which now called not only for a fair vote count, but also that law enforcement officials who were responsible for violence and torture be held accountable. State violence triggered further expansion of grassroots initiatives, especially among the diaspora, as well as several defections from the regime among the higher-ranking officials and many more among the rank-and-file.

The expansion of the protest took different forms: street protests, open letters, strikes, and resignations. On August 12, a solidarity chain by Kamarovsky market in Minsk gathered about 250 women in white clothes holding flowers in protest against the violence. The solidarity chain was organized by several female activists who coordinated via a Telegram chat. Later, women in white participated in other demonstrations hoping that it would be safer for women to protest than for men.[83] On August 13, several dozen Christians of different denominations—Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants—gathered for a collective prayer for the end of violence.[84]

Open letters with calls to stop violence, release detainees, investigate police crimes, and hold a new presidential election were also published by different professional groups. One of the first was a letter from the Belarusian

IT industry, which by August 12 had been signed by over 2500 professionals, including CEOs of Belarusian IT companies.[85] Another came from athletes and sports journalists.[86] About 250 employees of state-owned and independent media also signed an open letter to the Minister of Information demanding that the government stop repressing journalists and other citizens, and ensure a reliable Internet connection.[87] On August 13, the actors of Yanka Kupala National Academic Theater (Kupalovsky) suspended performances and signed an open letter calling for a vote recount and an end to the violence.[88] By 14 August, the workers of 25 industrial enterprises joined the strikes. Among those participating were Belarusian Metallurgical Plant, Minsk Tractor Plant, Minsk plant "Integral", "Belmedpreparaty", "Keramin", "Grodno Azot", "Naftan" and others.[89] On August 18, several dozen teachers organized a march, after which they passed their demands to the Ministry of Education.[90]

The repression also triggered defections from the regime of some former state officials, such as the former Belarus Ambassador in Slovakia Igor Leshchenia, and a number of rank-and-file members of the police and the military.[91] Some journalists of state television and radio resigned; other employees joined the strikes.[92]

Along with expansion of the protest, repression also led to a further consolidation of civic structures that supported the resistance. Among the first responders were medical professionals who coordinated through Telegram to provide first aid to injured protesters.[93] In mid-August, Andrei Strizhak, one of the leaders of a self-help and crowd-funded group launched during Covid, the By_Covid19 campaign, launched BYSOL—a solidarity fund that helped the victims of repressions. Within a few days after the election, it collected thousands of donations that amounted to $5 million, which were used, among other needs, to pay the fines the authorities imposed on the protesters and to support those who lost their jobs. Other initiatives and organizations worked to help persecuted citizens, as well. Some examples include special funds for doctors, scholars, artists, the police, students, athletes; Valer Tsapkala's "Belarus of the Future Foundation;" the human rights information portal Probono. by; and expansion of support offered by organizations such as "IMENA", By_help initiative, and the Human Rights Center Viasna.[94]

On Sunday, August 16, Minsk witnessed the largest protest in the history of Belarus. Hundreds of thousands of people—the estimates vary from 150,000 to 400,000—marched to the Independence Square in the city center, which became known as the National Freedom March. By this time, the white-red-white flag—the national flag of Belarus in the early 1990s—became the symbol of the protest and could be seen everywhere. Maria Kalesnikava, the only representative of the united opposition campaign who was still in the country spoke at the rally calling for Lukashenka's resignation.[95] Another large protest named the March for New Belarus, happened a week later, on August 23 and attracted an estimated 100,000 people. The protesters marched again in the center of Minsk as well as in other cities such as Brest, Grodno, Babruysk, and demanded Lukashenka's resignation, the release of political prisoners, and trials for those involved in killings and torture.[96] In both cases, the police did not intervene in the protests during the day but began detaining people by the evening. The authorities also continued disrupting Internet connectivity, a practice they started right after announcing election results.[97]

After the two largest weekend protests in August, the resistance continued for a few months but did not experience another upward scale shift. On September 8, Belarusian authorities attempted to forcibly deport the most vocal protest leader, Maria Kalesnikava to Ukraine. She tore up her passport at the border, so they arrested her instead of deporting her.[98] Repressions against other activists also continued and intensified. Many activists left the country and joined Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the rest of the Belarus diaspora in their campaign against Lukashenka's regime from abroad. The 2020 mobilization did not succeed in toppling the regime, but it gave birth to resistance networks and infrastructure that has never existed in Belarus before. Inside the country this infrastructure was forced underground, but it continues developing from avbroad and will likely serve as the basis of future mobilizations against Lukashenka's regime.

Mobilization Precursors in Depth

This next section is for those who want to go into greater depth with evidence for the arguments about what enabled large scale mobilization around the 2020 election and what was different from previous mobilizations that did not scale up. The 2020 mobilization in Belarus was the result of the historical confluence of several contextual and structural factors that developed in the preceding years. The weakening social contract between Lukashenka's regime and Belarus society was significantly undermined by the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. These grievances, however, would not have led to a mobilization this large had it not been for the new presidential candidates: their image and messaging created a viable alternative to Lukashenka, which Belarus citizens had not seen before. Non-hierarchical and decentralized communities that had grown in the preceding years, sometimes with the help of the new presidential candidates, fueled the mobilization with skills and experience of collective action. Finally, the moral shock caused by the government's blatant repression of these candidates and their supporters led to mobilization growth in the short term before it ultimately dwindled over the next several months.

THE WEAKENING SOCIAL CONTRACT

In some authoritarian countries, state and society manage their relationship through a tacit or explicit social contract. The social contract with Belarus' population—a political arrangement in which the state provides a basic level of stability and security while the population does not challenge the state politically—was one of the pillars of Lukashenka's regime in its first decade. Starting in the mid-2000s, however, the state provision of services and guarantees of economic security have been slowly eroding, and different social groups became increasingly dissatisfied with how the state fulfilled this social contract.[99] In 2003-2004, most public and private sector workers in Belarus were transferred to short-term contracts, which reduced their job security. The public was concerned with the low level of state support for education and health care as well as excessive regulations for businesses. Even non-working pensioners, who were the most satisfied group in general, did not believe the state would help them if they found themselves in dire circumstances. Starting in the mid-2010s, this erosion of the social contract was happening against the backdrop of rising inequality among different social groups as well as between the capital and the provinces.[100]

The demand for a renewed social contract and for the state to fulfil its obligations was noticeable in the public sphere before the 2020 mobilization. In 2017, Belarusians in multiple cities protested the so-called "parasite law," which required non-working citizens to pay a tax that would cover state-provided services. This law was a continuation of a more general trend of reducing state-provided benefits while declaring rising levels of prosperity and was yet another manifestation of the inability of the state to fulfil the social contract.[101] The protesters demanded dignity and economic inclusion, which implied social rights by the virtue of citizenship. At that time in 2017, opposition parties failed to build on this protest, but the new political leaders in 2020, especially Siarhei Tsikhanousky, successfully developed the theme of the broken social contract.[102] Tsikhanousky's YouTube channel covered economic problems and state corruption that Belarusian people encountered in their daily lives, and the name of the channel—drawing on a Lukashenka regime slogan, "A Country for Living"—underscored the hypocrisy of regime's declared social contract. This report will address Tsikhanousky's activities in more detail in subsequent sections.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in Belarus about two months before the presidential campaign, as well as the reaction of the Belarus government and Lukashenka personally to it, demonstrated the failure of the state to provide even basic security for the population. Lukashenka dismissed the danger of the virus and, even worse, spoke

with contempt about the first victims blaming them for their poor health. The overcentralized governance system was unable to adjust to the pandemic's challenges and implement the necessary public health and economic measures. Many public sector employees, especially doctors and teachers, were left with very little support from the government in the situation when this support might have been the difference between life and death. During the pandemic, the usual features of the regime—the government inefficiencies, distortions of reality on the state media, or Lukashenka's eccentric behavior—now threatened not just economic well-being but the very lives of many Belarusians.[103] According to one of the leaders of civil society's response to COVID-19, people were desperate; doctors had no personal protective equipment, which exposed them to a high risk of contracting a disease. She noted "When a disaster happens, it has an impact on everyone, and one can not live a normal life, work or study. Because these are questions of basic security, which are the most important for every human." When everything calmed down, everyone stated talking about the state abandoning its citizens.[104]

THE NEW LEADERS

The weakening of the social contract had been going on for years, but it was not until 2020 that we saw a large-scale mobilization. The crucial change that happened in 2020 was the emergence of new political leaders who differed in important respects from the old opposition. Their backgrounds of entrepreneurs-turned-politicians resonated with the principles of solidarity, fairness, and merit, which were important in the moral world of the previously apolitical public. Such a connection between the image of the new leaders and the identity of the Belarus public made them a viable alternative to Lukashenka—a role that the old opposition could not fulfil.

Dignity and morality of the apolitical Belarusians

One of the reasons why many Belarusians stayed apolitical for years is the disconnect of Lukashenka's opponents' rhetoric from what made the lives of Belarusians meaningful. For example, for rural residents, dignity and morality were disconnected from political freedoms or ethnic revival of the country.[105] The moral and dignified person, in their view, was the one who engaged in productive labor, cared about the good of the community rather than only about their private material interests, and who was not an outsider trying to speak from the position of moral superiority. The old political opposition as well as human rights activists, in these people's view, failed on all accounts. They surfaced around the election time, criticized the way things were done in the country assuming they knew better and disrupted the existing order. They were not engaged in any productive labor and only cared about their material interests as they used the opportunity to criticize the regime in Belarus to attract more aid from foreign countries. This negative image of the opposition was largely constructed by the state-controlled media, but it resonated well with the already existing moral code.[106]

The life worlds of urban dwellers who made the 2020 mobilization possible likely had less connection with local communities and more with the outside world than those of the rural population. But the political apathy of the urbanites was likely rooted in a similar disconnect between politics and their own lives along with the doubts in the motives and effectiveness of the existing political opposition. As the opposition parties went through multiple splits and reorganizations over the years, it made their leaders look as they cared more about their own ambitions than about the common cause. In some of his speeches, Siarhei Tsikhanousky mentioned this disconnect as a problem: he said that the opposition only appeared around the election time and did nothing to improve people's lives.[107] A representative of the old opposition, whom we interviewed, admitted that the few people who were interested in politics before 2020 often asked the old opposition: "When would you do something?" No opposition leader was ready to take responsibility, and the public commented, observed, criticized but did not participate.[108] Another interviewee had been following the political situation in the country for a long time but did not have any preferences before 2020, as there were only old politicians on the political arena who did not manage to accomplish much despite their effort.[109] A representative of Belarusian diaspora also noted that strong opposition leaders in Belarus did not exist because the old opposition was forced to function underground.[110]

The new candidates: doers who care about the country

In contrast to the established opposition, the background of Tsikhanousky, Babaryka, and Tsapkala created an image of "doers" who cared about the country. All of them have an entrepreneurial background, thus, it would be difficult to say they were not engaged in productive labor. At the same time, all of them have a record of caring about public interest rather than only about their own profits. Tsikhanousky had been developing a YouTube channel where he talked about people's everyday problems that stemmed from the poor performance of the state. Tsapkala created High Tech Park, which created unprecedented opportunities for IT professionals in the country and made this profession one of the most desirable for Belarus youth.

The most impressive record, however, was Babaryka's. Having made his fortune in the banking sector, Babaryka had been a philanthropist for over a decade. The projects he supported revealed his vision for the nation—a vision built on the rich cultural tradition that Belarusians could be proud of and on creating developmental opportunities for future generations. In 2008, he created an International Children's Charity Foundation "Chance," which provided support for seriously ill children. He inspired and financially supported a whole range of cultural projects aimed at both preserving Belarus cultural heritage and creating opportunities for continued cultural development. Babaryka was a successful professional and philanthropist. He had a vision for the country and a sincere desire to make the country a better place. He bravely challenged an authoritarian regime while staying strictly within the law. According to our interviewees, these characteristics resonated with people and inspired them to join his campaign.[111]

All three new candidates were also seen as "insiders." Babaryka and Tsapkala were regime insiders as they had occupied high-level public offices. Tsikhanousky was a small entrepreneur who worked in Belarus and Russia. Even though the state-controlled mass media continued to use the narrative of foreign forces driving the opposition to the regime, it was much less believable about these new candidates compared to the established opposition. None of these three candidates looked like condescending outsiders who came to impose their own worldview on the Belarus people. Rather, they looked like authentic leaders caring about the country—a role that was monopolized by Lukashenka until 2020.

The women's trio—Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala—that replaced the male candidates after they were denied registration also resonated with the values already existing in society. Lukashenka allowed Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to register and run because he believed (probably correctly) that Belarus voters would not elect a woman as president. His big miscalculation was that after the arrest of the male candidates and the unification of the three campaigns, Tsikhanouskaya was not seen as a regular female leader but rather a symbol of fairness, solidarity, and selflessness. All the capacities represented in the women's trio were associated with care and self-sacrifice: as women, mothers, teachers, musicians. Stepping up to support the line of male leaders complied with traditional gender roles rather than challenged them. And the quick move to unite the campaigns and make fair elections the main campaign promise demonstrated once again that these women were in politics not because of personal ambitions but rather because they cared about the fate of the country. Many of our interviewees noted that they voted for Tsikhanouskaya because other opposition candidates were arrested: "My vote for Tsikhanouskaya was probably a protest one, as there were no other candidates. I liked that she was a woman and that she was not a professional politician. I was satisfied with her willingness to hold a fair election."[112]

Although the established opposition did not have the necessary qualities to build a large movement, these opposition leaders along with human rights NGOs helped the new candidates and the 2020 mobilization in general. Some representatives of the established opposition directly participated in the campaigns of the new candidates as team members.[113] One of our interviewees, an experienced politician from the 1990s, as well as some of his counterparts, joined Babaryka's team. They brought to the table their expertise dealing with electoral procedures. They also organized the chain of solidarity against Babaryka's arrest, which many citizens joined. The rest of Babaryka's team was skeptical about the old opposition activists organizing these actions, but ultimately they appreciated it.[114] Existing human rights organizations contributed by organizing election observation, documenting repressions, and assisting repressed citizens with legal advice. That is, they used the skills they had been developing since 2008.[115]

CIVIC NATIONALISM AS THE FRAMING

The explicit demand that was at the center of the 2020 Belarus mobilization was that of fair elections. This demand, however, emerged as a unifying agenda only in the process of mobilization rather than being what drove it from the very beginning.[116] Understanding the more comprehensive set of ideas and motivations that made the upward scale shift possible requires that we look at the main political framings present in post-Soviet Belarus and at how the earlier activities of Lukashenka's challengers positioned them vis-à-vis those framings.

Framing

An interpretation of a social or political issue that connects it to a set of values and group identities.

The emergence of the new idea of Belarus

Since the early 1990s, there were two main national identity projects that competed in the public discourse: neo-Soviet and national revivalist.[117] The first one, appropriated and maintained by Lukashenka's regime, viewed Belarus as a nation ruled by a strong, benevolent, and wise leader who understood the livelihoods of ordinary people, guaranteed a social safety net for all its members, and ensured a fair distribution of economic resources in society. It was based on "egalitarian nationalism" and resonated well with the moral code of the Belarus countryside described above, which focused on the values of productive labor, community support, and autonomy (independence from external influences).[118] The second, a national revivalist project, was rooted in anti-Soviet dissident activities and emphasized the importance of breaking with the Soviet past and relying on Belarus' ethnic heritage, including Belarusian language. This project had support among the intelligentsia but never had a significant following in larger society.

In the 2000s-2010s, a new vision for Belarus as a nation had been gradually developing through various economic, cultural, and social processes. This new vision built on the existing societal values of communal solidarity, fairness, egalitarianism, and autonomy—the same values that Lukashenka's neo-Soviet identity project engaged. But rather than defining Belarus through its relation to the Soviet legacy, this new national idea presented Belarus as a part of and contributor to the world economy, society, and culture. It made Belarusians proud of their rich history and culture, which organically incorporated different traditions of the people living in Belarus rather than limiting it only to Belarus' ethnic heritage. This new Belarus was a nation trying to build a society based on the principles of solidarity and fairness that at the same time provides excellent opportunities for development—a country where everyone can live a dignified life and pursue happiness. In an interview about the Belarus national idea that Viktar Babaryka gave in February 2020, he said that he envisioned the future Belarus as a country in which it is good to be born, good to live, and good to die.[119] Similar ideas were promoted by Tsikhanousky and Tsapkala.

The new presidential candidates who inspired the 2020 mobilization significantly contributed to the development of this new vision for the nation. Tsikhanowski, for example, being an entrepreneur, emphasized that small businesses can be the driver of the country's development long before he decided to run for president. His message "Let's build a country for living together" not only spoke to the problems ordinary Belarusians, but also invoked the idea of people's agency and power to shape their own future. Another example of such agency were crowdfunding platforms, including Ulej ("Beehive"), which was created and run by Viktar Babaryka's son, Eduard; they showed that people could come together and make things happen without the state involvement.[120] The art collection, Art Belarus, that Viktar Babaryka gathered and put on permanent display demonstrated the contributions of Belarusians to world culture. So did the publication of Sviatlana Aleksievich's works that Babaryka helped finance. He also supported the festival of independent theaters and the cultural center OK16, where artists explored Belarus national identity and its connection to the outside world. It was from this environment that Maria Kalesnikava, one of the future leaders of the 2020 mobilization, emerged. Her own ideas about music resonated with these themes of pluralism, harmony of different voices, and the power of collective action.[121] Finally, the development of the IT sector, in which Valer Tsapkala played a key role, demonstrated that Belarus could be a land where successful high-tech startups grow and become world-renowned companies.

This new vision of Belarus turned out to be appealing to so many people and consequential for political mobilization because of a combination of two qualities, which neither the neo-Soviet nor the nationalist revivalist identity projects had. First, it focused

on solidarity rather than division. Unlike the national revivalist project, it was based on cultural pluralism and created space for everyone, whether they were supporters of Belarus ethnic culture, general communal values, or cultural openness. Second, it connected the idea of national unity with future-oriented political agency rather than with maintaining social order and the need to defend the country from external influences. Solidarity was reframed as the power to solve problems, improve people's lives, and determine the nation's future rather than avoid political turmoil. This way, the new national idea turned the Soviet-style "egalitarian nationalism" into a more civic nationalism that inspired the 2020 mobilization.

The clash of the old and new national identities during the 2020 mobilization

The new national idea clashed with the old one maintained by Lukashenka's regime in the months before and during the 2020 presidential election campaign. Before 2020, Lukashenka's regime had a near monopoly on speaking on behalf of the nation and on leading its collective action. His new challengers, however, showed that they could speak to many of the same societal concerns better than Lukashenka who failed to deliver what he promised. Once they challenged him on his own terrain, they were able to build a movement of an unprecedented scale.[122]

Siarhey Tsikhanousky's YouTube channel played a big part in undermining the legitimacy of Lukashenka's regime beyond the already skeptical urban middle class. His audience included many people living in the provinces and smaller towns, small entrepreneurs, workers, etc. These people might have been less involved with the new national idea than the urbanites, but they had been accumulating grievances that did not match the rosy picture painted by the regime-controlled media. Tsikhanousky was the first media entrepreneur to speak directly to the grievances of these people.[123] As already mentioned above, he directly challenged the regime's narrative by naming his channel "A Country for Living," which was the slogan of a government-sponsored ad picturing Belarus as a comfortable place to live. In March 2020, Tsikanousky went on a regional tour in a motorhome and he met with subscribers to his channel in different provinces and talked to them about economic problems and government corruption. His subscribers acted as co-creators of the alternative political narrative that was much closer to the lived experiences of many people than the narrative advanced by Lukashenka's regime.

Together with challenging and suggesting attractive alternatives to the regime's framing, all the new presidential candidates called for concrete actions that every citizen could engage in. All candidates began collecting signatures supporting their candidacy and called for volunteers to contribute to the campaigns and electoral monitoring. Siarhei Tsikanousky initially shared the disbelief of the old opposition that an honest election was possible in Belarus, but he saw the process of signature collection as an opportunity to demonstrate the extent of opposition to the current regime among the people. Viktar Babaryka and Valer Tsapkala, in contrast to the old opposition, believed that an honest election was possible if there were a collective effort to monitor the vote count.

Two aspects of how this political agency was framed were important for breaking the passivity of Belarus citizens. First, the idea of a fair election and all the actions suggested by Lukashenka's challengers fell strictly within the actions allowed by the electoral law.[124] In contrast to the old opposition, which claimed that the whole system was rigged and called for electoral boycotts and protests, sticking to the established electoral procedures made it difficult for the regime to use its usual trick of discrediting the opposition as the agents of the West aiming to undermine stability in the country. Rather than disturbing the social order Babaryka, Tsapkala, and later Tsikhanouskaya's team challenged the regime to stick to its own declared rules. The platform of the united opposition campaign was summarized in a post to Babaryka's Telegram channel which addressed several movement demands (a fair election, political prisoners) and asked people to vote on the election day and not earlier in order to give the government fewer opportunities to falsify votes:

The five main principles of our electoral campaign:
1. We will call for voters to turn out for the election on August 9, 2020, and vote.
2. We will free political and economic prisoners and give them the possibility to hear their cases again in independent and honest courts.
3. We will hold a new, honest election after August 9, 2020.
4. We will inform voters about the need to defend their votes through various means.
5. We will call on [citizens] to participate in honest election initiatives: "Honest people," "Right for choice," "Movement for Truth," and others; to become observers. [We will] call [on them] to use the mechanisms available to record one's vote and turnout at the moment of voting.[125]

Second, in the political context of 2020 Belarus, the new candidates' demand for a fair election was seen as the demand for *collective* agency and dignity of the nation, social fairness, and equality—in contract to the demand for *individual* political freedom and group representation, which are usually associated with the cause of fair elections but were never in popular in Belarus. The failure of the social contract and the desire to replace the outdated neo-Soviet national identity with a new one created a demand for collective agency, which the new presidential candidates were well fit to lead. The agenda of a fair election was simple and attractive to everyone who shared the demand for agency regardless of specific political views or even the absence of well-formed political opinions.

One way in which the clash of the new and the old national identities manifested during the 2020 mobilization was the reinterpretation of narratives about World War II, which have been very important for Belarus national identity and statehood. After the brutal repression of the post-electoral protests, which is discussed later in this report, the new protest wave used WWII symbols extensively. During the National Freedom March on August 16, the statue of the Motherland—a symbol of victory in WWII—was wrapped in the white-red-white flag that became the main symbol of post-electoral protests.[126] With this gesture, the protesters established the connection between the collective agency of Belarusians who fought Fascism and those who were now fighting Lukashenka's regime. The same connection happened when a 65-year-old pianist from Brest played patriotic WWII songs for the protesters marching by his windows to encourage them, and when the protesters called themselves "partisans" and the riot police "karateli," the word that was used for Nazis during WWII.[127] Artists produced powerful work that connected the 2020 mobilization to patriotism and the memory of collective action during WWII, such as the poster picturing Maria ("Mash") Kolesnikova with a torn Belarusian passport that resembled a very famous WWII poster "The Motherland is Calling."[128] In this way, longstanding symbols and discourses that had been appropriated by Lukashenka's regime were re-appropriated in opposition to the 2020 version of his regime.

NEW HORIZONTAL COMMUNITIES AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

The new vision of Belarus and the demand for political agency led to an upward scale shift of mobilization not least because they originated from and appealed to a number of new social groups and communities which had recently developed and strengthened their horizontal, person-to-person ties. The emergence of some of these communities was a direct consequence of the previous activities of the new presidential candidates. Other communities grew as Belarusian society made use of new communications technologies. Many of these communities had never engaged in political action before, but they had experience of collective action in support various social causes. During the 2020 electoral campaign, existing social ties, experiences, and skills were quickly repurposed to support the anti-regime mobilization once the candidates with innovative ideas declared their presidential bids. The new media and technology were a big help in both developing these horizontal communities in the years before 2020 and in creating innovative solutions for facilitating collective action and information dissemination during the 2020 mobilization.

The urban middle class

The previous section of the report already mentioned that the growing urban middle class—teachers, university faculty, journalists and media specialists, NGO workers, artists, IT specialists—played an important role in developing the new vision for Belarus. The growth of this part of society had taken place over the last two decades, and two of the new presidential candidates, Viktar Babaryka and Valer Tsapkala, significantly contributed to it. Tsapkala's High Tech Park created a large community of IT specialists who not only worked side-by-side with each other but also volunteered their time to help various social projects. These projects were sometimes done in collaboration with governmental organizations and were not viewed as politically threatening by the regime. For example, The Belarusian Ministry for Emergency Situations adopted an app developed by IT volunteers; they also created QR-codes for schoolbooks and IT-solutions for children with autism, child care centers, and hospices.[129] Viktar Babaryka and his son Eduard also developed a relationship with this community—

the crowdfunding platform Ulej is an example of such collaboration. During the 2020 mobilization, IT professionals were crucial for developing the key crowdsourced and crowdfunded platform for electoral monitoring (Golos).

Other communities that significantly contributed to the 2020 events were the creative classes: arts and culture workers as well as the people and organizations who worked on specific social causes (e.g. feminists). Viktar Babaryka's philanthropy was one of the sources of support for the development of these communities, and some volunteers for his campaign were people already involved in these networks.[130] Later, some artists, writers, and event organizers helped Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's campaign organize rallies using their professional skills.[131] Others created an internet project *#kultprotest*, which united many creative class professionals who supported the cause of a fair election.[132] Musicians and theaters organized street performances during the post-electoral phase of mobilization. Some bands marched with the protesters. Feminists organized women's solidarity chains in response to post-election protest crackdown.[133] All these actions supported the dynamic of the protest, demonstrated solidarity, and encouraged people who might not have been part of these specific communities to join.

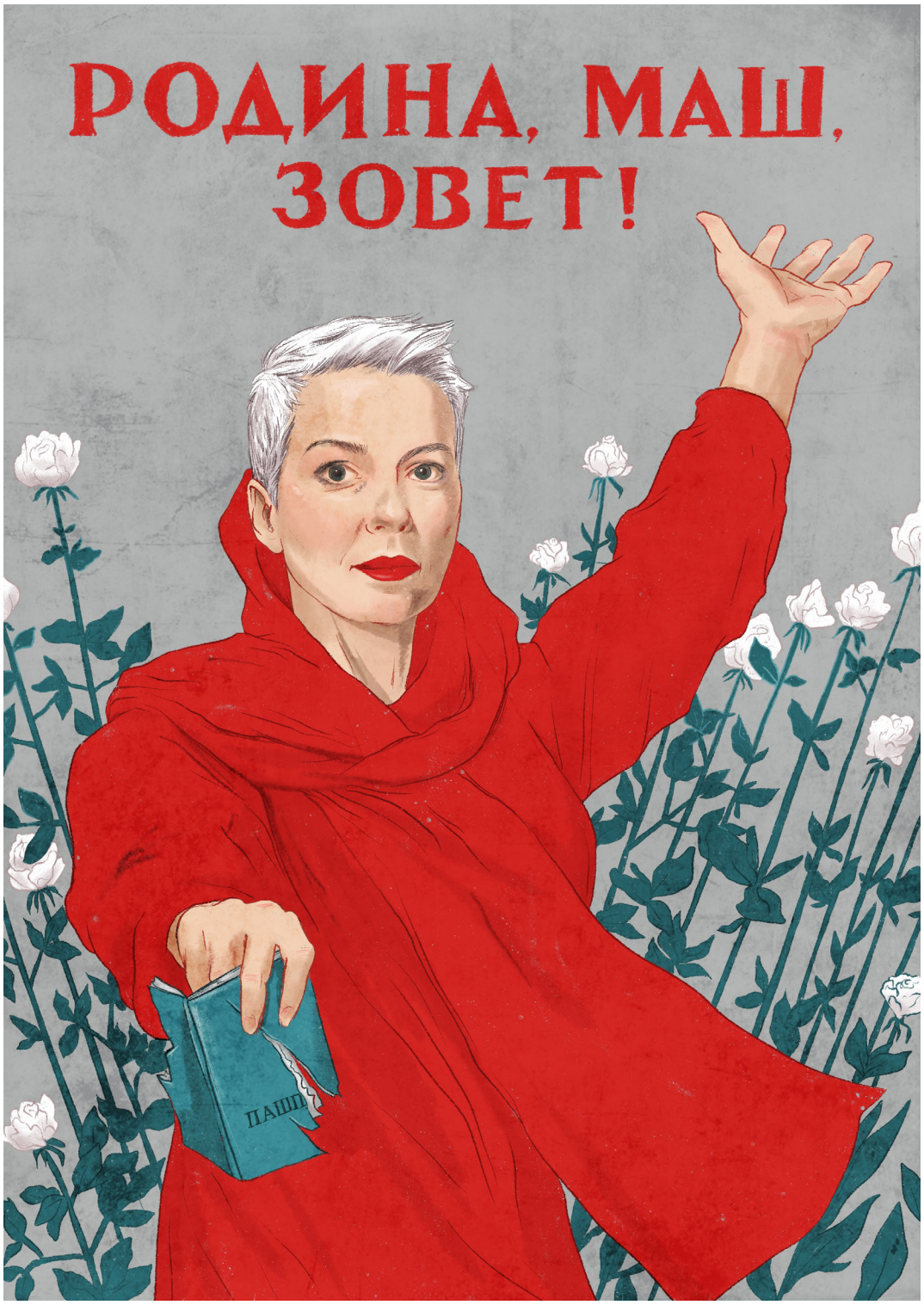
The followers of Siarhei Tsikhanousky

Another important community consisted of the followers of Siarhei Tsikhanousky's YouTube channel. This community extended beyond the middle class of the major urban centers and, unlike urban middle class communities, came together based on a political cause—the opposition to Lukashenka's regime. Since the launch of his channel in March 2019, Tsikhanousky had been building this community both online and offline, and subsequently the members of this community took an active part in the 2020 electoral campaign and post-election protests.

Initially, Tsikhanousky built a following by covering the issues of local government failures, corruption, and obstacles to doing business. Over time, he began to extend the online format offline by engaging his followers in being co-creators of his videos and by encouraging them to express their discontent publicly. The November 2019 parliamentary election was an important event that catalyzed Tsikhanousky's efforts to mobilize supporters against the regime offline. He volunteered as an observer at that election and reported on multiple violations, which led him to conclude that the election was falsified. He called on his supporters to protest electoral unfairness by participating in a *#Belarus12Stop* flashmob in which people wearing white clothes and ribbons paused what they were doing at 12pm, and posted what they were doing to social media. Later, he also tried to scale up a tactic that had already been used by activists in Brest protesting the operation of a lead-acid battery plant for over a year: he suggested people gather every Sunday at 12 pm in a public square to feed the pigeons—a public action that was increasingly associated with the anti-plant protest but did not give the local authorities a formal ground to detain its participants. Tsikhanousky believed that a political change in Belarus could only be achieved through mass protests, not through elections, and his logic behind organizing such flashmobs and gatherings was to trigger a cascade effect: "1,000 people will start and tell others, 100,000 will watch the recording—and it will unfold."[134]

Along with flashmobs, Tsikhanousky also went on a tour across Belarus and gathered his supporters in public places to meet him and each other. In January-May 2020, Tsikhanousky organized 40 meetings with subscribers—described as walks, discussions, or pigeon feedings—in 31 regional cities and towns. These meetings served as public forums, during which citizens shared their grievances. Videos of these meetings became increasingly popular with Tsikhanousky's audience. For example, in a video shot at a meeting in Hlybokaye, a woman described the country's ruler as a cockroach from a fairy tale. The video got 719,000 views and the image of Lukashenka as a cockroach later became a widespread meme during the presidential campaign.[135] The videos made it obvious to others that there was a lack of support for the regime among the people, which counteracted the narrative of the state-controlled media and helped further undermine the legitimacy of Lukashenka's regime.

Besides spreading information about the lack of support for the regime, these meetings further encouraged Tsikhanousky's supporters to take collective action. His YouTube channel "A Country for Living" created regional and local Telegram channels and chats to encourage members to self-organize and share their ideas on how to build the movement. In March 2020, Tsikhanousky announced a fundraiser on Ulej.by to fund a motor home rental for his regional tour, and a single live-stream generated $1,600—a record sum for bloggers.[136] Tsikhanousky also called for solidarity with activists persecuted by the authorities. On May 3, dozens of people in Mahilyow and Lida joined rallies in solidarity with Brest, providing the first glimpses of the future cross-regional protest diffusion. At one of the last meetings with Tsikhanousky in May, a young man remarked:



Poster "Motherland, Masha Calls," by Anna Redko, 2020.

"Here, a new society is being born."[137]

As a result of these prior mobilizations of his followers, Tsikhanousky could capitalize on core networks of activists and a substantial online following during the presidential electoral campaign. People who formed these communities were often the ones who got involved in politics after watching Tsikhanousky's streams, which they found emotionally engaging and relevant to their lives.[138] These communities helped with signature collection as well as with organizing regional rallies for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's campaign. They also drove the post-electoral protests in the regions.

COVID-19 pandemic activism

Another important factor that contributed to the scale of the 2020 mobilization in Belarus was mobilization around the COVID-19 pandemic. Lukashenka's refusal to recognize the danger of the disease and the contempt he expressed to its victims not only further weakened the existing social contract but also led to the formation of self-help networks of activists. They organized to help hospitals handle the challenges of the pandemic, and in this process, built horizontal connections and organizational solutions that were later used for the anti-regime electoral mobilization.

The self-help networks began coming together when a chief physician of one of Minsk hospitals changed his social media avatar to one that said "Stay home while I stay at work," similar to avatars used by doctors all over the world at the time. This was a sign that this doctor was brave enough to publicly recognize the existence of the problem while the authorities denied it. An activist we interviewed reached out to this doctor and inquired about the needs that medical workers faced. It appeared that hospitals lacked personal protective equipment (PPE) such as high-grade protective masks. As a reaction to this dire situation, activists launched the "By_Covid19" campaign—an initiative that raised funds and attracted hundreds of volunteers who supplied PPE to hospitals. The activists who ran By_Covid19 drew on their prior experience creating By_help—an informal initiative started in 2017 to support protesters who were being prosecuted.[139] IMENA, a media and crowdfunding platform for social projects that had existed since 2016, collaborated with By_Covid19 by helping to connect doctors to volunteers and organizations who could help them. The platforms received thousands of desperate messages from medical workers along with 800 requests for help from hospitals across Belarus.[140]

By_Covid19, IMENA, and other civic activities such as restaurants providing food for medics created an infrastructure that worked in parallel to the state. At its peak, this informally organized Covid response team included up to one thousand volunteers across the country who represented diverse professional groups including NGO workers, entrepreneurs, journalists, and IT professionals. Some of them joined because of a personal experience with coronavirus and others realized that their knowledge and skills could be useful. This network created coordination mechanisms for volunteers, such as a system of chats focused on specific tasks and mobilized the Belarusian diaspora to help financially and organizationally.

Volunteer activism during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic directly translated into political activism. Witnessing both the failure of the state to deal with the pandemic and civil society coming together to solve common problems led activists to join opposition electoral campaigns and new civic associations in support of fair elections, such as Honest People and Golos. Existing horizontal collaborations, digital platforms, and professional expertise were quickly repurposed to support campaigns and election monitoring. Many volunteers from smaller towns joined Tsikhanouski's campaign, while activists from Minsk and more affluent regional cities supported Babaryka's campaign.[141]

The scale of pandemic activism, even though unprecedented for Belarus when it started, was much smaller than the electoral mobilization that took place in Belarus just a few weeks after the start of the pandemic. Viktar Babaryka's call for volunteers attracted about 10,000 people, which is ten times more than the number of activists in COVID-19 self-help organizations. However, the network connections and organizational solutions of the pandemic volunteer community prepared the ground for a movement that could incorporate thousands of new volunteers over a very short period of time and served as one of the precursors of the movement's upward scale shift.

New media and communication technology

An important social and technological transformation that had been under development for years and that helped the 2020 mobilization to grow was the spread of the internet as a source of information and the ways digital technology changed social communication. By 2020, 85% of Belarus' population was using the Internet; its significance as the primary information source quickly grew over the few

years before 2020 to constitute a serious alternative to television.[142]

This development was a prerequisite for independent media to break the information monopoly of Lukashenka's regime. The consumption of independent media was a clear predictor of political opinion and the only apparent factor that separated the opposition and regime loyalists in 2020.[143] The Internet, unlike traditional media, also provided a lot more opportunities for citizens to discuss information, express their political views, and observe the opinions of others. Analysis of social media shows the formation of an oppositional public on Belarusian YouTube in the years leading up to the 2020 mobilization.[144] The opportunity to freely discuss the political situation transformed some existing communities too: for example, the Catholic Church in Belarus supported the opposition in part because new media had intensified the discussion of political matters in the Catholic community and amplified voices that took a more radical stance.[145]

Spreading alternative narratives and forming opinions, however, was not the only effect of technological development that turned out to be consequential for the 2020 mobilization. The spread of messaging applications, especially Viber, transformed the ways people communicated at the grassroots level. Specifically, it led to the proliferation of group chats for people who wanted to cooperate in dealing with common issues. These could be people who lived in a particular building or neighborhood or the parents of children attending the same school. Group chats in messaging apps provided Belarus citizens with the experience of direct and fast communication within small groups, which could be created instantaneously for any kind of task requiring cooperation.[146]

These new communication habits contributed to the growth and coordination of the opposition movement as the 2020 mobilization developed. The local Viber chats were rarely directly repurposed to serve political mobilization, both because Viber was not considered a safe communication channel and because not everyone on these chats was willing to engage with political causes. However, people who were willing to contribute to the opposition campaigns, quickly reassembled into chats in Telegram as this was another familiar but seemingly more secure form of communication.[147] After the election these group chats coordinated local protests and other forms of resistance: one study showed that the locales with already existing Telegram chat groups were more likely to organize post-election protests quickly.[148] By the end of September 2020, there were over 1,000 local chat groups in Minsk, some of which united thousands of people. A special website with a map helped residents to find their local chat groups and join the resistance.[149]

Another new media form that combined the information and coordination function during the post-election protests was a Telegram channel *Nexta* (pronounced *nekhta*, "someone" in Belarusian). It was run from Poland by several Belarus bloggers in their early 20s. It provided live reporting of the protests based on the information its subscribers sent to the channel. It also helped to coordinate the many small groups and individuals who protested on the ground. In the first ten days of post-election protests, the audience of the channel grew from 300,000 to over 2 million subscribers.[150] These technologies facilitated the continuing growth of protest activity in the country, as well as informing the world of what was really happening as the government cracked down.

REPRESSION

Another factor that was important for the upward scale shift of the 2020 mobilization in Belarus was the changed character of political repression by the regime. Although this factor was not behind the initial mobilization wave, it significantly contributed to the second and the third upward scale shifts—the ones that followed the unification of campaigns behind Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and following election day. The arrest of presidential candidates who had already attracted an unprecedented level of popular support and the brutal crackdown on post-electoral protests amplified popular feelings of injustice, which led to an even larger mobilization.

Arresting potential candidates before the election had never happened in Belarus before 2020. During the previous elections, Lukashenka allowed all his opponents to run and arrested them either weeks after the election (in 2006) or on election day (in 2010).[151] Although those elections were falsified as well, the opposition candidates were at least formally on the ballot, which allowed the regime to claim that all the procedures were properly followed. In 2020, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, Viktar Babaryka, and Mikola Statkevich (a representative of the established opposition) were arrested weeks before the election, and Valer Tsapkaka was denied registration. This time it was much harder for the regime to claim that the competition was fair, especially because Tsikhanousky and Babaryka had already attracted thousands of followers who actively collected signatures for them, and Babaryka released his well-received "Declaration For A Fair Election." Their arrests were viewed by their followers as the denial of their right to choose their leaders, which prepared a fertile ground for the support of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's demand for a fair election. As one of the coordinators of signature collection for Tsikhanouskaya in Lida said: "Because of the government actions, there are more people here now. The more they repress us, the more people join."[152]

The crackdown of post-election protests came as a shock for many Belarusians, after which inaction felt morally wrong.[153] It further exacerbated their feelings of injustice and demonstrated that far from guaranteeing security, the regime now posed a direct threat to its citizens. Resistance to this repression drew on the collective memory of defending the nation during WWII, evoking vocabulary and symbols that drew parallels between resistance to Nazis then and resistance to Lukashenka's regime now.[154] It also drew on the vocabulary of the new civic nationalism. Striking workers who joined the protests after witnessing the crackdown emphasized a political and civic agenda, not an economic one: the resignation of Lukashenka, a fair election, and an investigation of police crimes, using the same framings around fairness, agency, and dignity as the other protesters.[155] Defections among civil servants, the police and the military, even though they were rare, demonstrated that the regime's monopoly on legitimate violence had been questioned. And the further development of civic initiatives to help the victims of state repression and to support the resistance highlights that citizens had learned to act collectively without the leadership of the state. Repression, thus, activated a civic agency that the regime successfully suppressed for decades.

The effect of repression on mobilization in 2020 was different from the one it had on earlier protests. Before 2020, repression resulted in a sharp decline in protest, especially socio-economic ones.[156] In 2020, repression triggered two upward scale shifts of the mobilization. This time, the regime's brutality was so shocking that Lukashenka came to be seen as a collective threat rather than a guarantor of security for the nation; at the same time, alternative political figures able to take the leadership over from Lukashenka were present, which led to another escalation rather than a decline in protest. The escalation, though, was relatively short-lived, and over a longer period, repression succeeded in counteracting the mobilization and keeping the regime in power. Many activists involved in the resistance were either imprisoned or forced to emigrate. The Belarus diaspora and political refugees, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, continued their activism from abroad and successfully maintained the idea of a democratic Belarus in the public discourse of Western countries. Their opportunities to engage Belarus citizens inside the country, however, were severely limited by the systemic repression that Lukashenka's regime exercised after 2020.

Notes

1 Chenoweth et al., "Struggles from Below: Literature Review on Human Rights Struggles by Domestic Actors."

2 The spelling of names used in this report transliterate from the Belarusian rather than Russian versions of the names except for the cases when the predominant spelling in the English-language sources is different (e.g. Svetlana Alexievich).

3 Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism,* 121.

4 Грозовский, "Совхоз высоких технологий. Как изменилась экономика Беларуси за 26 лет правления Лукашенко и что будет после него."

5 Frear, Belarus under Lukashenka, chap. 5; Грозовский, "Совхоз высоких технологий Как изменилась экономика Беларуси за 26 лет правления Лукашенко и что будет после него"; Marples, "Changing Belarus."

6 Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed;* Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East"; Haiduk, Rakova, and Silitski, *Social contracts in contemporary Belarus.*

7 "Референдумы, репрессии, цензура."

8 "Elections in Belarus"; "Олег Гулак о том, как фальсифицируют выборы в Беларуси."

9 Азар, "«Я каждое утро беру лопату и копаю» Интервью главной звезды белорусских протестов Марии Колесниковой."

10 Грозовский, "Совхоз высоких технологий Как изменилась экономика Беларуси за 26 лет правления Лукашенко и что будет после него"; Marples, "Changing Belarus," 283.

11 "Референдумы, репрессии, цензура."

12 Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka,* 64; "«Голос улиц»"; Дракахруст, "Што паказвае «маштабнае сацапытаньне» ад Лукашэнкі?"

13 Hervouet, "The Moral Economy of the Kolkhoz Worker, Or Why the Protest Movement in Belarus Does Not Seem to Concern the Collectivized Countryside."

14 See, for example, Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka*; Astapova et al., "Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society."

15 Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka,* 115.

16 Дракохруст, Дракохруст, and Фурман, "Трансформация Партийной Системы Беларуси"; Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka,* 112; Озимко, "Оппозиция в Белоруссии."

17 Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka,* 115.

18 Озимко, "Оппозиция в Белоруссии."

19 Wilson, *Belarus*, chap. 7.

20 For more on how the opposition has been maintained in a 'ghetto' by the authorities, see Bedford and Vinatier, "Resisting the Irresistible."

21 Charnysh, "Political Opposition in Belarus"; Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka*, 115.

22 Hervouet, "The Moral Economy of the Kolkhoz Worker, Or Why the Protest Movement in Belarus Does Not Seem to Concern the Collectivized Countryside," 66. In one of his streams, Siarhei Tsikhanousky echoed some of these ideas about the established opposition: "When they are conducting primaries, they need votes. When there are real problems, where are they? That is why people are saying that something is not right with the opposition. First, it is weak, and second—they do not do anything at all, they don't show up at activists' events" – see Тихановский, *Поддержим патриотов и активистов. Стрим Из Бреста.*; see also Bedford, "'The Election Game:' Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus."

23 Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka,* chap. 5.

24 de Vogel, "Anti-Opposition Crackdowns and Protest."

25 Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka,* 141.

26 The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), "IFES Election Guide | Elections: Belarus Parliament 2019."

27 For the original video that used this slogan, see *Belarus the Place to Live.*

28 Александровская, "Блогер Тихановский."

29 "Блогер Ціханоўскі сабраўся ў прэзыдэнты. Хто ён."

30 Кожемякин, "Зарплата айтишников в долларах в сентябре — минимальная за три месяца."

31 Алексиевич, "Представляю себе власть будущего — президент Виктор Бабарико и премьер Кирилл Рудый"; Андрей Курейчик, *Обращение к Виктору Бабарико.*

32 Ст. 61 ИК РБ Порядок выдвижения кандидатов в Президенты Республики Беларусь; Ст. 68 ИК РБ Регистрация кандидатов в Президенты Республики Беларусь, в депутаты; Ст. 68/1 ИК РБ Отказ в регистрации кандидата в Президенты Республики Беларусь, в депутаты.

33 Тихановский, *Враг государства №1 - стрим Сергея Тихановского.*

34 Мельничук, "Аресты в Беларуси."

35 There were other candidates besides Lukashenka, Tsikhanousky, Babaryka, and Tsapkala; they were connected to the established opposition and never enjoyed a wide popular support, thus we will not discuss their campaigns in this report.

36 Дынько and АШ, "«Улада мяне менш баіцца, чым апазыцыя», — вялікае інтэрвію зь Віктарам Бабарыкам."

37 Дынько and АШ.

38 Interview 7.

39 "Цапкала ня зможа стаць кандыдатам у прэзыдэнты — ЦВК прызнаў толькі 75 тысяч подпісаў."

40 "Бабарико просит снять Лукашенко с выборов."

41 Бабарико, "Декларация о честных выборах президента Беларуси 2020"; Бабарико, "Добрый Вечер, Дорогие Друзья!"

42 Колос, "«Честные Люди»: «Если Увидим, Что Лукашенко Набрал 51%, Мы Должны Будем Признать Эти Цифры»."

43 Дз, "«Фальсыфікацыя — цяжкі грэх». Католікі абвясьцілі кампанію за сумленныя выбары."

44 Interview 5.

45 "How Did the Main Belarusian Protest Happen."

46 Мищенко, "Белорусский блогер Тихановский отпущен на свободу."

47 Барановская, "В Гродно задержали блогера Сергея Тихановского."

48 "Belarus," June 18, 2020.

49 The Baltic Way was a political demonstration organized by Baltic pro-independence movements on August 23, 1989. About two million people joined their hands to form a human chain spanning over 675 kilometers across the Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in support of independence of these republics from the Soviet Union.

50 "В Белоруссии возобновились акции против задержаний политиков и активистов"; Богуславская, "В Минске задержали участников акций солидарности с претендентами на пост президента"; Демидова, "МВД Беларуси сообщило о 270 задержанных после пикетов."

51 Гункель and Богуславская, "В Беларуси проходят стихийные акции в поддержку Бабарико и Цепкало."

52 Гункель and Богуславская.

53 Горковская, "Стихийные протесты и аресты в Беларуси."

54 Кропман, "Экс-претендент в президенты Цепкало уехал из Беларуси и увез детей."

55 "'Теперь наша власть боится Светлану'. Штабы Тихановской, Бабарико и Цепкало представили план действий."

56 Interview 11.

57 Interview 2.

58 Interview 6.

59 "Песни, танцы и грамоты. Как прошел в Пинске пикет за Лукашенко, из-за которого в город не приехала Тихановская."

60 Гункель, "Тихановская и ее сторонники пойдут не на митинг, а на городской праздник"; "Тихановская отказалась от предвыборных митингов. Все площадки заняты или там ремонт."

61 "В Минске задержали, а потом отпустили Марию Колесникову. Ей сказали, что 'ее перепутали.'"

62 "Численность населения на 1 января 2020 г. по Республике Беларусь в разрезе областей, районов, городов, поселков городского типа."

63 "Выборы в Беларуси."

64 "Массовый митинг в поддержку Светланы Тихановской в Борисове."

65 Серабро, "На митинге Тихановской в Витебске люди залезали на деревья, чтобы увидеть кандидатку — в парке собралось несколько тысяч горожан"; Кропман, "Митинг оппозиции в Витебске собрал несколько тысяч человек."

66 "Митинг в Могилеве собрал тысячи человек."

67 "В разных городах Беларуси прошли многотысячные митинги в поддержку Тихановской."

68 "Массовый митинг в Гомеле в поддержку Светланы Тихановской."

69 "В разных городах Беларуси прошли многотысячные митинги в поддержку Тихановской."

70 "Более 2 тысяч пинчан дружно скандировали."

71 "В Минске прошел многотысячный митинг кандидата в президенты Светланы Тихановской."

72 "'Этот драндулет власти разваливается по частям': в Гродно на митинг Светланы Тихановской пришло около 10 тысяч человек."

73 "18 тысяч митингующих в Бресте поддержали Тихановскую."

74 "Светлана Тихановская собрала в Барановичах около 8 тысяч."

75 "ЦИК Беларуси"; Гункель, "В Беларуси наблюдатели говорят о завышении явки в 1,5 раза"; Быковский, "Выборы президента Беларуси"; Бобрицкий, "«В разы меньше официальных данных». Сколько на самом деле набрал Лукашенко на выборах."

76 "'Дети - это самое важное'. Тихановская покинула Беларусь и уехала в Литву."

77 "Вторая ночь протестов в Беларуси."

78 "Протесты в Беларуси," August 10, 2020.

79 "Belarus," August 11, 2020.

80 Неведомская, "Что творится в белорусских СИЗО?"

81 "10 Points on Torture and Ill-Treatment Reports."

82 Юзбекова, "Как четыре человека создали главный Telegram-канал белорусского протеста с аудиторией 2 млн подписчиков"; Курышко, "Окно в Беларусь. Что такое Телеграм-канал NEXTA и как он появился."

83 Потарська and Соломатіна, "У протеста не женское лицо. Интервью с Ириной Соломатиной о белорусских протестах"; Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 69–71; "Протесты в Беларуси," August 12, 2020.

84 "Христиане Минска вышли на крестный ход против насилия."

85 "2500+ CEO, инвесторов, разработчиков призывают остановить насилие. Открытое письмо."

86 "Уже более 400 спортсменов подписались под письмом с требованиями к власти."

87 Вачедин, "Белорусские журналисты призывают остановить насилие."

88 Неведомская, "Театр и протест в Беларуси."

89 "Нам Пішуць"; "В том числе протестует Белорусская АЭС. Сотрудники более 25 предприятий и заводов объявили забастовку по всей Беларуси."

90 "«1 сентября я не буду врать детям». Учителя вышли на протест и пригрозили объявить забастовку."

91 Бушуев, "Экс-посол Беларуси"; "«Белорусского спецназа больше нет». В соцсетях появились видео, на которых бывшие военные в знак протеста выбрасывают форму."

92 "Протесты в Беларуси," August 12, 2020; Соломка, "В Беларуси бастуют сотрудники госТВ и радио."

93 "Волонтеры и Медики - о Том, Как Оказывают Медпомощь На Протестах и Как с Ними Ведет Себя ОМОН"; "Нападения на врачей."

94 Неведомская, "Как в Беларуси помогают пострадавшим от властей в ходе протестов"; Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 197–99. By_help initiative emerged in 2017 to help the participants of the "Social Parasites" March repressed by Belarus authorities.

95 Демидова, "В Минске прошла самая массовая акция протеста в истории Беларуси"; "«А хто там ідзе?"

96 "'Марш новой Беларуси' и Лукашенко с автоматом"; "Massive Rally In Belarus Calls For End Of Lukashenka's Rule."

97 "Massive Rally In Belarus Calls For End Of Lukashenka's Rule."

98 "Марию Колесникову задержали на границе с Украиной через сутки после того, как она пропала в Минске."

99 Krawatzek and Langbein, "Attitudes towards Democracy and the Market in Belarus."

100 Haiduk, Rakova, and Silitski, *Social contracts in contemporary Belarus;* Шпарага, У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси, 146–47.

101 Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 150–51.

102 Artiukh, "More Contagious than Coronavirus."

103 Егоров and Шелест, "Беларусь в ситуации эпидемии COVID-19."

104 Interview 13.

105 Hervouet, "The Moral Economy of the Kolkhoz Worker, Or Why the Protest Movement in Belarus Does Not Seem to Concern the Collectivized Countryside."

106 Hervouet, 66.

107 Тихановский, *Поддержим патриотов и активистов. Стрим Из Бреста.*

108 Interview 11.

109 Interview 5.

110 Interview 4.

111 Interviews 2, 5, 6, 7, 8.

112 Interview 4; similar statements in Interviews 5 and 7.

113 For example, Volha Kavalkova, one of the leaders of Belarus Christian Democrats, became a spokesperson for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia. Mikola Statkevich, one of the leaders of Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Assembly), cooperated with Siarhei Tsikhanousky on organizing signature collection drives.

114 Interview 11.

115 One of our interviewees told us that in preparation to being an election observer, she watched educational videos about the electoral process created by the Human Rights Center "Viasna," and they helped her understand the legal procedures in place (Interview 4).

116 An important detail here is that the prospective presidential candidates were not allowed to publicize their programs until they were officially registered—an opportunity that the three new opposition candidates were denied.

117 Kazharski, "Belarus' New Political Nation?," 72; Bekus, *Struggle over Identity.*

118 Leshchenko, "The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus"; Hervouet, "The Moral Economy of the Kolkhoz Worker, Or Why the Protest Movement in Belarus Does Not Seem to Concern the Collectivized Countryside."

119 Бабарико, Стать электронной Швейцарией.

120 Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 149–50.

121 Колесникова, Мария. *Оркестр – Это Мы?*

122 Artiukh, "More Contagious than Coronavirus."

123 Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 161–63.

124 Шпарага, 46–48.

125 Бабарико, "Сегодня Прошла Встреча Штабов Трех Альтернативных Кандидатов: Светланы Тихановской, Валерия Цепкало и Виктора Бабарико."

126 Bekus, "Echo of 1989?"

127 *Музыкант Александр Ивачев Играет Из Своей Квартиры Во Время Марша Единства в Бресте 6 Сентября;* Коршунов, "История брестского пианиста, который во время протестов играл людям «Священную войну» — и пока дома не появляется"; Неруш, "'Киберпартизаны' взломали базу данных МВД. Что они рассказали DW."

128 Maria Kolesnikava tore her passport when the authorities kidnapped her and attempted to take her out of the country on September 7, 2020.

129 Interview 3.

130 Interview 4.

131 Interview 2.

132 Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 63.

133 Шпарага, 69.

134 Тихановский, *Чэсные Выборы. Финал. Стрим 13 часов. Акция 12.*

135 Тихановский, *A Woman from Glybokoye Says All the Truth about Lukashenko;* "Блогер Ціханоўскі сабраўся ў прэзыдэнты. Хто ён."

136 Дз, "Беларускі блогер паставіў рэкорд у зьбіраньні грошай для сацыяльнага праекту."

137 Тихановский, *Поддержим патриотов и активистов. Стрим Из Бреста.*

138 Interview 9.

139 Interview 12.

140 Interview 13.

141 Interview 12.

142 World Bank, "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) - Belarus"; Bodrunova and Blekanov, "A Self-Critical Public," 4.

143 Greene, "You Are What You Read."

144 Bodrunova and Blekanov, "A Self-Critical Public."

145 Ластовский, "От Молитвы к Протесту: Католическая Церковь в Беларуси," 249.

146 Gabowitsch, "Belarusian Protest," 5–6.

147 Gabowitsch, 6–7.

148 Mateo, "'All of Belarus Has Come out onto the Streets.'"

149 Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси,* 179.

150 Юзбекова, "Как четыре человека создали главный Telegram-канал белорусского протеста с аудиторией 2 млн подписчиков."

151 "How Did the Main Belarusian Protest Happen."

152 "У Лідзе зьбіраюць подпісы за Сьвятлану Ціханоўскую."

153 See Pearlman, "Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria." for the mechanism of how moral arguments stimulate people to join resistance campaigns.

154 Bekus, "Echo of 1989?"

155 *Речь Рабочего На Забастовке в Беларуси;* Artiukh, "The Anatomy of Impatience," 57.

156 de Vogel, "Anti-Opposition Crackdowns and Protest."

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List of interviewees

The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2021.

1. A human rights activist
2. A member of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team
3. An IT professional involved in developing By_COVID19 and Golos platforms
4. Election observer; a diaspora representative
5. A lawyer who consulted for the electoral campaign of the opposition
6. A member of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team
7. A student activist
8. An artist involved in the opposition campaign and protests
9. A member of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team
10. An activist involved with Honest People
11. A member of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team
12. One of the leaders of By_COVID19
13. One of the leaders of "IMENA"

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