



Issue 22:

Belarus in the Focus of Academic Research: A Conceptual Reset

EDITORIAL

Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of Belarus on the world map as an independent state. While most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were actively engaged in political and economic reforms and civic society building, Belarus was somewhat in stasis. Its ‘farewell to socialism’ was not over. For 27 years in power, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko managed to establish a regime of one-man rule based on the bureaucratic ‘vertical’ and repressive state apparatuses. Belarusian political and economic system – combining the totalitarian features of the Soviet model of governance and the economic mechanisms of state-monopoly capitalism – appeared to be quite stress-resistant (which is evident even now, despite the accelerated disintegration of the entire system).

The specificity of this hybrid political model is reflected in the concepts of ‘adaptive’ (Frear 2019) and ‘preemptive’ authoritarianism (Silitski 2012). The notorious stability of Lukashenko’s regime was attributed to such factors as the use of preventive, anticipatory actions against political opponents and civil activists; employment of populist rhetoric; the rigid state control over the media; certain flexibility in relations with the neighbours and utilisation of the country’s geopolitical stance. This, to an extent, explains why Lukashenko was able for so many years if not to thrive but at least muddle through effectively in the face of internal and external pressures (Frear 2019:3).

Until 2020 many experts believed that there were no serious and obvious prerequisites either for the internal transformation of government institutions or for the emergence of a revolutionary situation in Belarus (Shraibman 2017; Wilson 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, an unexpectedly unfolding 2020 presidential election campaign and the dramatic subsequent events that followed, have disrupted this prolonged period of a socio-economic stagnation. Only then it became clear that behind the seeming eventlessness of the ‘situation

of halted development’ there was an ongoing ‘latent structural transformation of the social environment’ (Editor’s note: *Ab Imperio* 2014) informing the large-scale societal changes.

1. The 2020-2021 Belarusian protests

Lukashenko’s first election in 1994 was the only one recognised by the international observers as fair and honest. The subsequent ones were rigged. However, the electoral process was organised in a way to eliminate any direct evidence of frauds. In 2020, the regime once again relied on its tried and trusted tactics such as the pre-emptive elimination of other ‘unwanted’ opponents, pre-approved committees at the polling stations, early voting, ‘vote counting’ according to the pre-set indicators, etc. So, the main opponents – Viktor Babarika and Sergey Tikhanovsky – were detained before the election date on trumped-up charges, in 2021, both were convicted to 14 and 18 years respectively. Valery Tsepkalo, who was not allowed to register as a candidate and threatened with detention, had to leave the country. The independent observers were not allowed at the polling stations (some of them were detained either on the eve of or on the very Election Day).

Alternative candidates and their teams had no illusions about the regime’s methods and developed several ways for preventing or disclosing the fraud. For the first time in the history of Belarusian elections, special online platforms for alternative vote counting were created.¹ A couple of months prior to the elections, in June 2020, Pavel Liber, one of the founders of the *Voice* platform,² wrote on his Facebook that ‘when the majority of the country’s population have a smartphone, this crowd of people can be turned into one big digital polling station’. Although the authorities became aware of the creation of independent online voting platforms (such as *Golos* and *Zubr*) prior to the 2020 elections, their attempts to interfere using legal means were unsuccessful at that time. Despite a lack of privacy at the polling stations (the voting cabins were stripped of curtains), the voters managed to photograph their filled-in ballots and later send them to the voting platforms.

Following the elections day, on August 10, 2020, the Central Election Committee announced that Lukashenko ‘won the elections’ with the impressive support of 80% of voters. The authorities knew what kind of reaction this would provoke. To prevent any grassroots communication and unrest, they blocked Internet services for three consecutive days. The election results were announced via the state newspapers and TV. At the same time, the regime unleashed a real terror against its people. But the television remained silent, communicating only ‘the good news’ of crop production and the like.

Incidentally, by cutting out the Internet the establishment has instantly united all those who disagreed with the electoral frauds around alternative sources of information. Belaru-

¹In July 2020, the Social Technology Hackathon 2020, initiated by the election campaign of Valery Tsepkalo, was organized in Minsk. The hackathon, which lasted for 26 hours, developed various solutions for the alternative counting of votes in the presidential elections. More than 200 people from around the world took part in it, among them were programmers, teachers, doctors, engineers, sociologists, marketers and representatives of other professions. There were winners in four nominations: campaigning (how to inform Belarusians about the upcoming elections); voting (how to ensure fair vote count); research (how to conduct independent case studies); projects for the future (what can be done for the country after August 9) (dev.by, 2020).

²At the time, he was a Senior Director of the department of Digital Strategy & Experience Design at EPAM CIS.

sians learned how to connect to the Internet via VPN and subscribed to various online resources, with the Telegram channel NEXTA ('someone' in Belarusian) quickly acquiring more than 2.1 million subscribers across the country's regions. The independent media (Belarusian division of Radio Liberty and the Polish TV channel Belsat) managed to stream the news for some time. However, the journalists – including foreign reporters – started to purposefully get assaulted and beaten up alongside the peaceful campaigners during the prolonged street civic resistance.

The repressions that began in the spring and summer of 2020 continue and intensify.³ The scale of state terror is astounding. There were more than 7,500 detained between August, 9–12, 2020; several people were killed (the exact number is unknown); more than 45,000 were detained and sentenced to various penalties during the autumn of 2020. By the beginning of 2022 there were already more than 1,350 political prisoners (politicians, human rights defenders, civil activists, bloggers, journalists, anarchists, etc.), some of whom were sentenced by the regime to enormous prison terms (up to 20 years).

Searches, arrests, mass layoffs at the state enterprises are still taking place all over the country. Hundreds of media resources were first blocked and then declared 'extremist'. In a few months of 2021, almost the entire civic sector was obliterated. To date, more than 650 NGOs have been terminated.⁴ As a result of the repressions, the mass migration of Belarusians to other countries commenced. The outflow to Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Latvia, Georgia, Russia and other countries amounts to at least 300,000 immigrants; some of whom needed to relocate even further post-February 2022.

Due to the sustained escalation of violence and the legitimization of lawlessness post-2020 elections, the regime turned into a reactionary one and transformed into a military dictatorship, no longer hiding its totalitarian nature. In turn, ordinary Belarusians, emerging leaders and now more consolidated diasporas succeeded in drawing global attention to the country, which for too long was associated with the 'last dictatorship of Europe' and was perceived as a silent satellite of Russia. The Nobel Peace Prize award of 2022 to Belarusian Human Rights activists Ales Bialiatski, alongside two organizations (The Ukrainian Center for Civil Liberties (CGS) and Memorial, one of Russia's oldest human rights groups) is the latest confirmation of this. In light of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the situation in the post-Soviet region became more dramatic, thus making the future trajectory of the Belarusian regime's development highly unpredictable and uncertain.

2. Belarus and academic research

Meanwhile, the dynamics and peculiarities of the Belarusian case have given a new impetus to academic research.⁵ It falls within a general trend of a comparative analysis of various

³On the eve of the celebration of the new year 2021, Telegram channels published various memes on the topic of historical parallels – for example, '2021, but feels like 1937'. Unfortunately, the jokes turned out to be a prophecy.

⁴The full list and the data for the liquidation of NGOs in Belarus in 2021, monitored and updated by Lawtrend and OEEC, can be found here: Prinuditel'naia likvidatsiia OGO 2020–2023 (obnovliaetsia) (n.d.).

⁵During 2019–2021, experts and analysts paid a lot of attention to the processes and changes that have taken place in the region since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, the restoration of independence in the Baltic countries, the collapse of the USSR and the dismantling of socialism as a political system. Until the

forms of totalitarianism and an insight into the history of national liberation, anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements, as well as an interest in scenarios and theories of revolutions.⁶ What is particularly important here is a critical rethinking of the Soviet experience, which until recently rarely went beyond theoretical discussions in the academic milieu and thematic stereotypical media headlines.

There are attempts to draw historical parallels with the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (fascism, Nazism, Stalinism), comparisons with the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the experience of Polish Solidarity in the 1980s, the overthrow of Ceaușescu in 1989 or such events in Ukraine, as the Orange Revolution and Maidan 2014. They are combined with an analysis of current processes and changes in various spheres of the life of the Belarusian society, with discussions about gender equality, the feminist movement and analogies between the state terror and domestic violence, with reflections on new identity politics and with studies of contemporary Belarusian culture (which has made a real aesthetic revolution during the last two years).

Then, the Belarusian case also attracted the attention of those researchers who had not previously included Belarus in their sphere of interest. To a certain extent, this is due to the current media and political conjuncture.⁷ Various international academic communities started to follow the events in Belarus in connection with political repressions, which affected many Belarusian scientists, teachers and students (see, for instance, Holt 2021). However, another important factor is the peculiar nature of the events, which have become a kind of ‘laboratory’ for studying such issues as, the role of women and gender agenda in the protest movements; biopolitics and the pandemic under authoritarian regimes; the use of digital technologies in crisis political circumstances; the phenomenon of ‘cyber partisans’ in the context of the global hacktivist movement, etc.

Next, if we consider the reset of scientific research on Belarus from the point of view of changing formats of knowledge communication, there is a noticeable convergence of academic enquiry and media. Following the French sociologist Louis Pinto, we could call it ‘medial reconversion’⁸ (Pinto 1994: 33–34). Throughout this period of political turbulence,

summer of 2020, Belarus remained on the periphery of these discussions. However, the events that took place within the country in 2020–2021 cannot be considered outside the context of post-socialist transformations in other former Soviet republics and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

⁶The demand for the historicisation of existential experience under totalitarian condition manifested itself in all areas of intellectual activity, including media, literature, theatre, visual arts, etc. Who could have imagined a year and a half ago that the former actors of the Janka Kupala Theatre (now acting as Free Kupalovtsy) would have staged Brecht’s *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* or Orwell’s *1984*? Or that the texts of Alexander Solzhenitsyn (especially *The Gulag Archipelago*) and Varlam Shalamov will become the core reading for the immersion into the study of Stalinist terror for tens of thousands of Belarusians, whose interest in the practices of systemic violence will be due to their own traumatic experience of encountering a penitentiary system that has not undergone any changes since Stalinism?

⁷In 2020, global media covered political events in Belarus, drawing attention first to the peaceful nature and duration of Belarusian protest, and later on, to the growth of political repressions against the Belarusian people. In 2021, when Lukashenko’s regime turned into a direct threat to other countries (primarily to neighbouring Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Latvia) the problems of trafficking, sanctions, an artificially created migration crisis on the borders with the EU, air piracy and the like came to the forefront in news. After the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine in February of 2022, the case of ‘the last dictatorship in Europe’ started to be discussed in the framework of international security issues, as Lukashenko’s regime was recognised as the co-aggressor in this war.

⁸By ‘reconversion médiatique’ Pinto implies the theoretical treatment of current political-journalistic issues in the media (along with some other meanings that he attributes to this concept).

which is still far from over, historians, sociologists, philosophers, political scientists, psychologists have responded in real time to the request of the Belarusian society in understanding what is happening ‘here and now’. And not only in the format of interviews or statements on social networks (predominantly on Facebook), but also through directly addressing a wide audience in Telegram channels, YouTube and other platforms. As a result, the demand for expert knowledge in the media and public sphere has significantly increased. This unsurprisingly coincided with the regime’s concerted efforts to make public intellectuals and opinion leaders invisible by hiding them behind bars or forcing them to leave the country. According to Elena Gapova, in this ‘continuous act of collective knowledge production’, ‘political engagement and professional reflection come together in a gesture of resistance to persistent authoritarian patterns in academia and the public sphere’ (Gapova 2021).

3. Scholars as citizens, scholars at risk

The articles published in this thematic issue focus on the ongoing and yet unfinished political present, that spans a year and a half from the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 to the end of 2021. This *Editorial* provided merely a snapshot of the events in Belarus in the given period describing this ongoing ‘present’. Simultaneously, the contributors draw on the relevant aspects of the situation on the ground to provide further details for their arguments where necessary. This ongoing referencing to the unfinished ‘present’ in most recent academic publications, including those published in this special issue, can be explained by several reasons.

Firstly, the development of the situation in 2020–2021, described above, in a certain sense, annulled the previous period. This concerns not only the social contract of the state with its citizens unilaterally terminated by the state (compliance with the law and Constitution, guarantees of order and security, civil rights and freedoms, etc.), but also the annihilation of the entire previous life with its priorities, values, way of life, everyday worries, ranks, family ties and professional interests. In the case of some media outlets (www.tut.by as the most telling example), theatres (Kupalovsky, Modern Art Theatre, etc.) and all NGOs, ‘zeroing’ can be understood quite literally: the access to the past was blocked, as they ceased to exist. As a result, the media and cultural landscape changed, becoming absolutely unrecognizable. This is to say that the ‘past’ for many Belarusians no longer exists, and the future has not yet arrived, although the concept of ‘new Belarus’ is the common denominator for all those who support change. As repressions intensify and the course is taken by the state machine to destroy everything seemingly unsafe, the past is bracketed, while the present has been paused.⁹

Secondly, nothing has finished yet. Tens of thousands of people have gone through or are going through imprisonment, physical torture and symbolic violence; and hundreds of thousands of people ended up in political exile, without a clear idea of either their personal imme-

⁹That is why the concept of ‘now-time’, or *Jetztzeit*, that was elaborated by Walter Benjamin in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940), seems to be a proper word for characterising the perception of these turbulent times, which are impregnated with revolutionary possibilities. Benjamin defined *Jetztzeit* as a ‘time filled by the presence of the now’, it is ‘a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop’ (Benjamin, 1999: 253–254).

diate future or the future of the their country. In other words, both communities, those who remained in Belarus and those who were forced to leave, live one day at a time. This also applies to the obsession with the ‘present’, which, in turn, manifests itself in an epistemological inclination towards a kind of ‘presentism’, due to political circumstances in Belarus.

The fixation on this temporality points to an extreme corporeal precarity, as, for instance, some of the contributors were displaced during the process of writing, becoming nomads, and more intangible one as the identity of the researcher and its privileged position of the producer of knowledge are challenged. It also acknowledges their stance as individual subjects witnessing history unfolding in front of their eyes who simultaneously need to reflect on a complex socio-cultural *collective* trauma. The non-linear, prolonged and extraordinary nature of the ongoing changes inevitably affects the reflexivity and modality of the authorial position and identity of the contributors. This over-engagement with the events is self-reflect(ed) where possible by the authors. It also becomes a unique point of the volume, as the affective narratives constitute a testament to the unprecedented course of events and draw attention to the role of the researcher. This novel scholarly positionality goes beyond the point of criticism of subjective bias and becomes an empowerment strategy feeding into academic enquiry.

Finally, this volume also raises an issue of crossovers between academic work and activism, as the narratives challenge a neutral stand-by observer’s stance and venture into the space of an (emotionally) engaged citizen. This positionality is acceptable and even welcomed in some disciplines and methodological approaches including cultural, gender studies, ethnography, community-based participatory research, citizen’s reporting, etc. Perhaps, its relevance should be reconsidered and applied to other disciplinary enquiries occurring during similar rapid large-scale dramatic events. As the contributions to this special volume show its insight remains topical and informative for our understanding of the current processes ongoing in Belarusian society to date.

4. The structure of the issue

This special issue consists of a set of articles and 5 opinion pieces. The first article by Almira Ousmanova called *Analog Dictatorship against Digital Multitude* highlights an outdated nature of the regime by juxtaposing analog and digital technologies. Then, the paper by Antonina Stebur and Olga Davydzik provides an insight into the *Features and Effects of the Digital Technologies in the Belarusian Protest*. The following two articles investigate various aspects related to the use of Telegram in Belarus: Gleb Koran’s *Telegram Belarusian Protests of 2020: Affective Tool for Populist’s Uprisings* and Anton Saifullaeu’s *Strategy of Language Resistance in Telegram During the Belarusian Civic Movement*. In turn, Andrei Vozyanov explores Instagram affordances in his paper titled *Ugly Repressions, Protest’s Beauty and Emotional Community on Belarusian Political Instagram*. The article by Andrei Gornyxh problematises the role of traditional media in Belarus and money flows in Belarusian authoritarianism.

These contributions in one way or another reflect on two parallel political, cultural and media realities that have formed inside and outside of the country: anachronistic-illegitimate-

authoritarian and forward-looking democratic one. They also reveal a complex process of authorial self-reflexivity in the situation of their overinvestment in the situation on the ground. Final paper by Andrei Zavadski and Ksenia Robbe called ‘C’mon, Turn Swan Lake on’: *Memories of the 1990s at the Belarusian Protests of 2020* engages with a broader timeline providing an in-depth account of the memory politics in the protest as compared to the perestroika years and the 1990s.

The opinion pieces represent shorter accounts or *narratives* from/of the ‘revolution’. They will be particularly useful for those who want to have a concise but comprehensive account of the most relevant dimensions of the protest. They start with the one by Volha Kananovich, entitled *Beyond the ‘Telegram Revolution’: Understanding the Role of Social Media in Belarus Protests*. Then, Hannah Stähle talks about a specific aspect of the uprising, namely: *The Unintended Female Revolution?* This is followed by Sasha Razor on *The Protest Art of Antonina Slobodchikova*. The last two pieces deal with the religious and youth groups’ roles in the protests respectively: Regina Elsner *A Religious Factor in Belarus’ Protest: Mediation of the Political Crisis by the Church?* and Kristiina Silvan *Battleground “Lukamol”: the Belarusian Republican Youth Union between a Rock and a Hard Place*. The volume ends with an overview of the cinematic works prompted or/and reformed by the events of 2020 prepared by Dariya Amelkovich.

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¹⁰ Pseudonym.

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