



Analogue Dictatorship against Digital Multitude

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Abstract: The political crisis in Belarus that unfolded in 2020 uncovered a deep divide within Belarusian society. Two years after the division between the archaic regime and the large part of the society seeking political changes became even more acute. In this text, I propose to reflect on the ideological and informational gap between the supporters of the authoritarian regime and the adherents of changes in Belarus through the prism of a conceptual pairing of ‘analogue dictatorship’ and ‘digital multitude’. Analogue dictatorship’s two main features are the use of outdated technologies of state governance and of methods of ideological indoctrination with the reliance on ‘old media’. The concept of ‘multitude’ is considered in the context of the development of digital technologies and new tools of communication, which fostered the formation of horizontal ties, non-hierarchical modes of communication and building the infrastructures of solidarity, thus playing a crucial role in the unfolding of Belarusian revolution. The tactics applied by the authoritarian regime in Belarus for retaining its power represent a sheer example of how the ‘analogue dictatorship’ attempts to hinder the emergence of digital democracy.

Keywords: analogue dictatorship, Belarus, cyberpartisans, multitude, digital technologies, protests, revolution, Telegram.

For Belarus, the country which gained its independence on the ruins of the Soviet empire in 1991, the events of 2020 became a turning point in the modern history of the country. Two years after the presidential elections of 2020 and subsequent protests Belarusians continue to ask themselves the question: if it was a Revolution, then why did it not achieve its political goals and did not dismantle the System? If this was not a revolution, then what was it, and how then Belarusian protest can be defined?

Classical revolutions envisaged the scenario of violent armed struggle on both sides. Belarusian protest from the very beginning developed as a peaceful, non-violent resistance, carried out in line with the Constitution, which is supposed to guarantee the rights of citizens to directly participate in the political life of society and the state; the freedom of assemblies, demonstrations and picketing; freedom of opinion and free expression of one’s beliefs. The

very word ‘Revolution’ seemed inappropriate in those circumstances: fair elections were supposed to bring the change, and no other ‘scenario’ was planned.

At the same time, a counter-revolution – an armed seizure of power by the current political regime and its subsequent retention through the state repressive apparatus, loyal to Lukashenko – from the very beginning of the electoral campaign of 2020 implied a violent scenario. The state violence (both symbolic and physical) that erupted during August 9–12, 2020, did not cease after the end of the electoral campaign. Instead, it soon turned into a new ‘norm’ of everyday life under dictatorship, and the scale of political repressions in the country only grew with each passing day.

When I started to write this text in the autumn of 2020, Belarusian mass protests were still underway. Now, two years later, the situation has become dramatically different. After the rigged elections, Lukashenko lost legitimacy both inside and outside the country. However, the regime succeeded to retain the power in its hands via the means of violence and propaganda as well as the support of Putin’s Russia. The street protest has been paused, thousands of people are in prison (by October of 2022 more than 1,350 people were recognized by the human right organisations as the political prisoners)¹; hundreds of thousands Belarusians had to flee the country because of political repressions; the independent media have been closed, blocked and declared ‘extremist’; civil society has been destroyed with more than 600 NGOs liquidated since summer 2021; the ‘purges’ conducted at various factories, universities, municipalities have continued throughout all this period since 2020 and reached an unprecedented scale, comparable with the Stalinist era. As a result of the escalation of violence, the regime has transformed itself from an ‘adaptive authoritarianism’ (Frear 2019) into a military dictatorship, which relies exclusively on the state repressive apparatuses. Despite the variety of prognoses (and in particular after the beginning of military aggression of Russia against Ukraine in February 2022), no one can answer the question of how long Lukashenko’s regime will last. The situation may change at any moment or may continue for years.

Despite the idea of the ‘national unity’ promoted by the state media, independent surveys conducted in 2021–2022 show that Belarusian society is deeply divided. So, the data obtained by Chatham in November 2021 shows that ‘Belarusians feel there is acute social tension in their country: almost everyone surveyed states that social tension exists, while one in every five respondents considers the situation catastrophic. A perception that there is social tension is closely related to many factors, with the strongest of all being a sense of a lack of personal safety’. Further, ‘only one-third of Belarusians are prepared to call the state built under Lukashenko their own. Most of the survey respondents do not trust this state to some degree, and do not believe that the state protects the interests of Belarusian citizens’ (Chatham House 2021).

It is worthy to note that the political and cultural divide in Belarusian society triggered by usurpation of power by Alexander Lukashenko was shaped long ago, back in the mid-1990s. However, until 2020, those dissatisfied with the regime were thought to be a minority. Yet the election campaign of 2020 made evident not only this cleavage, but also its scale (which was proven by the *Golos*, *Zubr* and *Honest People* online voting platforms). This divide got

¹ The figures are constantly changing, as dozens of people get detained every day, sometimes by entire families or even by work units.

further entrenched with the intensification of political repressions. Having said that, this societal rift is deeper than the cleavage ‘between supporters and detractors of the country’s president Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The demarcation line polarising Belarusian society concerns its people’s core values’ (Astapenia 2021). In many cases the lines of separation go across the same professional, class, gender and age groups, and even within the families.

To understand these ideological, axiological and informational cleavages, I propose to use a conceptual pair of ‘analogue dictatorship’ and ‘digital multitude’. In the first part of the paper, I seek the answer to the following questions: how does Belarusian authoritarianism differ from classical dictatorships and other contemporary autocratic regimes in its employment of instruments and means of communication? What role do the ‘old media’ and state ideological apparatuses play in maintaining the authoritarian system and its power vertical (alongside with the state repressive apparatuses)? Can mechanisms of the monopoly on dissemination of information be efficient in a digital society?

The second part of the text addresses the following questions: what role did new media and digital technologies play in the political mobilisation of Belarusians in 2020? How did the forms and formats of the Belarusian protest change, starting with the election campaign and moving on to its current phase with a view of available technological tools? And last but not least: to what extent did the peaceful and leaderless Belarusian protest embody the democratic potential of the digital society?

1. Analogue dictatorship: defining the concept

Scholars, who study ‘how modern dictators survive’, make a distinction between totalitarian regimes that dominated in the 20th century, and modern dictatorships that continue to exist, and even strengthen, in various parts of the world. Dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, ‘terrorized their citizens, killing or imprisoning thousands, and deliberately publicized their brutality to deter opposition’, combining, thus, ‘repression with indoctrination into ideologies that demanded devotion to the state’ (Guriev and Treisman 2019: 100). Meanwhile, as Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman argue, in the 21st century, there has emerged another, softer type of authoritarianism, embodied by Chávez’s Venezuela, Putin’s Russia, Alberto Fujimori’s Peru, Mahathir Mohamad’s Malaysia, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, etc. The leaders of these states come to power through elections, and in most cases, they keep the ‘democratic façade’ and ‘use various tricks to camouflage the repressions against their opponents’ (Guriev and Treisman 2019: 108). Guriev and Treisman call such regimes ‘information autocracies’ and see their key element in ‘the manipulation of information with the help of censored or co-opted media’ (ibid).

Does Belarusian authoritarian regime fall under this definition? The anomalous Belarusian case remains open for various interpretations. For two and a half decades Belarus under Lukashenko’s ruling most often was referred to as ‘the last dictatorship of Europe’ (Bennett 2012; Wilson 2012). Vladimir Matskevich, Belarusian philosopher,² calls it ‘the first dictatorship of XXI century’, as, in his view, it has anticipated a certain political, populist demand on

² Vladimir Matskevich was recently sentenced to 5 years of prison and was recognised by the human right defenders as the political prisoner.

the authoritarian methods of governance in some other post-socialist countries (Matskevich 2021).

The political and economic system that was built under Alexander Lukashenko, combines elements of the Soviet managerial model and economic mechanisms of state-monopoly capitalism, which developed under the cover of the populist rhetoric of preserving ‘socialism in one country’ (Wilson 2012: 240). A certain durability of this system (and its inertia) has been largely due to the consolidated vertical model of governance that Lukashenko has built over the decades of ruling, but also to the well-coordinated work of the ideological apparatuses, which replaced the Soviet ones. However, over the period of the last two years (since 2020), the regime became much closer to the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, than to contemporary information autocracies. The state machine switched to the ‘emergency mode’, whereas violence became the only way to hold on to power.

I would propose to consider Belarusian authoritarianism as a case of ‘analogue dictatorship’. The ‘analogue’ here implies several meanings: first, in a broad sense, this word refers to a set of outdated technologies that were widely used before the advent of the digital era (‘analogue’ as not digital, not computerised); second, ‘analogue’ means analogous, similar or comparable to something else (in general or in relation to some concrete features). Given that in its methods of governance, Lukashenko’s regime often copies the patterns and rituals of the Soviet past, reproduces (selectively) Soviet historical narratives and even at the level of rhetoric borrows clichés of Soviet ideology, I consider this dictatorship is ‘analogue’ also in a sense of its simulative, imitative character.

This term allows for characterising not only the ruling regime, but also the electorate loyal to it. I refer to those social groups that, due to various social reasons and demographic factors, remain adherents of the notorious stability which Lukashenko claims to be his main achievement. Their political views, set of values and behavioural habits are marked by the ‘hysteresis effect’, if we use the concept of Pierre Bourdieu³. In my view, the hysteresis effect has also to do with the inability to adjust to new technologies of communication and the lag of patterns of media consumption amid the transition from old media to new media (Theophanidis and Thibault 2016). Meanwhile, the custom of watching news on TV and the trust for information received from the ‘old media’ play an important role in non-democratic societies (such as Belarus or Russia), where television remains the most efficient instrument to promote propaganda messages to the target audience. Television viewers and the consumers of other ‘old media’ are among those who can be called ‘analogue citizens’ – by this term scholars, who study the digital divide and demographic profile of Internet usage, imply that group of population that lives in advanced societies but do not use the Internet (the statistical data may vary in different countries, but in general it may refer to one-fifth of adults) (Gauvin et al. 2015). I do not claim that Lukashenko’s electorate statistically coincides with the number of active viewers of the state TV. However, there are reasons to consider them ‘analogue citizens’ for all the reasons described above.

Thus, with a use of the concept of ‘analogue dictatorship’, I focus on two aspects of the functioning of the regime, namely, the use of the outdated technologies of governance and

³ With this term Bourdieu describes the effect of lag or malfunction of the habitus amid changing circumstances, when ‘dispositions function out of phase and practices are objectively ill-adapted to the present conditions because they are objectively adjusted to conditions that no longer obtain’. As a result, the presence of past experience in habitus becomes an obstacle for adapting to the changed reality (Bourdieu 1990: 62).

the methods of ideological indoctrination relying on the ‘old media’ that were characteristic of authoritarian regimes in the 20th century. It may seem that the regime managed to hold on, among other reasons, because it learned how to manipulate public opinion and develop propaganda narratives in the age of the new media, catching up with new trends and media formats, using various digital platforms and social media for the promotion and imposing its ideological messages. Yet, I argue that these new instruments cannot be efficient per se, as the content and the model of one-way communication in essence remained the same. Classical authoritarian modes of interpellation and ideological indoctrination are dysfunctional in a society that has been already changed by the development of digital technologies.

2. How analogue dictatorship functions:

The work of ideological state apparatuses and instruments of symbolic violence

As mentioned above, Lukashenko’s regime relies on a well-coordinated interaction of the repressive and ideological state apparatuses, combining physical and symbolic violence to govern. Whilst this system was built long ago, the mechanisms of its functioning have been improved during the long period of Lukashenko’s rule. When describing the mechanisms of functioning of the state machine in Belarus, I find it useful to evoke some key ideas from the classical work by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*. Althusser makes a distinction between two types of state apparatuses – Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The RSA is constituted by the government, the army, the police, the courts, prisons, etc. ‘Repressive’ means that the State Apparatus ‘functions by violence’, although repression, e.g., administrative repression, ‘may take non-physical forms of repression’ (Althusser 1971: 142–143).

Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime provides lots of examples of how physical and non-physical repressions on behalf of RSA are combined. There is a state-sanctioned violence in the streets and in prisons, detention of people under trumped-up administrative and criminal charges, sentencing in courts (where riot policemen act as ‘witnesses’ and ‘victims’, depending on the case), economic and tax pressure on politically active citizens, direct interference into the banking sector and so on. But the most striking example of such combination of different methods of violence on the part of the RSA are the so called ‘confession videos’, which the regime began to use over the past year as the main method of pressure on detained people and their relatives as well as a means of intimidating those who watch these videos. After the elections of 2010, such videos, recorded with the detained activists and then broadcast on television, were perceived by many as weakness or betrayal of those who agreed to do so. However, these days the vast majority of the media audience finds this not only to be a barbaric propaganda technique, but also feels sympathy for those who had to go through this (first beating, then forced video recording with repentance and subsequent broadcast via the state TV, YouTube and Telegram channels).

The work of ISA is usually less visible and organised in a more complex way. RSA acts as a single body, whereas ISA is constituted by an array of social institutions – religious, educational, family, legal, political, communication and cultural ISAs, which are formally not

part of the state. If RSA functions ‘by violence’, the Ideological State Apparatuses function ‘by ideology’ (Althusser 1971: 145) and use methods other than physical violence to achieve the same objectives as RSA. In democratic societies these multiple institutions produce different political realities and translate different ideologies. However, in the totalitarian state, all ISA are subordinated in one way or another to the dominant ideology and reinforce the control of the RSA⁴.

In Belarus, the regime switched on to the formation of ISA in the beginning of 2000s. The process of their consolidation took several years and included the following key elements of this system: the creation of pro-government parties and unions (Belaya Rus’ (2007), youth organisations (such as the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (2002); the elaboration of the main principles of ‘Belarusian state ideology’⁵ and the subsequent introduction of courses on ‘state ideology’ in all universities; the return of ‘professional ideologists’ (those who act by ‘blackmail and demagoguery’ (Althusser 1971)) along with the departments of ideological control to every municipality, university, state plant and factory, and so on; strict and ubiquitous censorship; the closing of private higher educational institutions; ‘information hours’ in schools and military divisions, etc. Thus, Belarusian authoritarianism has created an extensive network of ideological apparatuses that closely interact with each other and are controlled by the power vertical.

According to Althusser, to ensure the subordination of individuals to the established social order, they have to be transformed into ‘subjects’. This is done through interpellation of ‘concrete individuals as concrete subjects’ (Althusser 1971: 171). Once the individual, being hailed by the authorities (*Hey, you there!*), recognises himself as the one to whom the hailing is addressed, s/he becomes subjugated to the ideology.

Speaking of Belarusian authoritarianism, the question is how exactly the power regime interpellates the concrete individuals? (*hey, you, such and such*). What is the modality of communication between the agents of power and the subjects? It should be noted that the effective functioning of the power vertical does not leave room for dialogue. All messages from the top to the bottom are transmitted as orders in a commanding tone. The model of one-way communication is most characteristic for the penitentiary system and military structures, however, in Belarus this has become a rule for all spheres of governance and functioning of public institutions. The failure to comply with orders or an improper performance entails punishment (such as removal from the office, be it a minister or the director of a secondary school). Yet it should be noted that such model of communication, including non-trans-

⁴ Here is just one but telling example. Victims of police terror during August 9–12, 2020, when describing what they had to endure in the detention centres, said that the riot policemen who were beating them, constantly demanded that their victims sing the Belarusian anthem and shout ‘Lukashenko is my president’ under the blows.

⁵ The phenomenon of Belarusian state ideology and modes of its functioning have been analysed by many Western and Belarusian scholars (Bekus 2010; Leshchenko 2008). Not plunging into the detailed analysis of its theoretical propositions (which mostly represent a hotchpotch of inconsistent ideas, formulated in Soviet-like style), I would highlight only two points here. Firstly, ideology is defined as ‘a kind of environment that feeds the centre of political decision-making, where the legislative, judicial and executive branches of power form a single block’ (Kniazev and Rechetnikov 2004: 3). Secondly, in the same handbook for the students of higher educational institutions, the authors state that the ideology of the ‘Belarusian path of social development’ is an ‘*ideal model of social structure*’ [italics are mine – A.O.].

parent rules, failures and errors in signalling from top to bottom and reaction from below⁶, is characteristic for authoritarian regimes in general.

This type of communication also implies a distinct language⁷. The analysis of the ‘language of power’ in contemporary Belarus deserves a separate study; here I would make only a few comments in order to make my argument more grounded. Language is a very effective means of indoctrinating, which does not require the involvement of a repressive apparatus, but, on the contrary, supports and reinforces it. The study of the ‘philology of our misfortune’ (as Viktor Klemperer would have said⁸) calls for the analysis of relations between ‘words and things’, signs and their referents that are characteristic for the language of power; of the rhetorical devices and vocabulary used by Lukashenko in his public speeches; of the unwritten rules of communication between the officials and the president, between the authorities and citizens; of the metaphors, clichés, pronouns used in this communication. Here it is worth mentioning that Lukashenko addresses everyone only in singular ‘you’ (ты), whereas of himself he often speaks in the third person. His vocabulary includes many insulting words and derogatory expressions⁹, that he is not ashamed to apply even to the political leaders of other countries. It is a ‘language of hate’, whose offensive and indecent rhetoric permeates all levels of the power vertical and is translated through the state media channels. In other words, language plays a key role in the implementation of symbolic violence.

In today’s Belarus, an individual who disagrees with the regime can be identified by the language s/he uses. Dissent manifests itself in a discursive form too. There is a linguistic ‘divide’ between the opponents and supporters of Lukashenko, although it is not only about the choice of Belarusian or Russian in everyday usage¹⁰. I am speaking here of a particular language of resistance, shaped by the protest culture¹¹. It is characterised by a reflexive attitude towards the language as a tool of communication, which undermines the language of power by ironically distancing itself from it, by transforming the ‘call by authority into farce’ (Martell 2017: 2).

Belarusian protest elucidated a deep crisis of Belarusian state ideology both as a system of representations and as a regime of subjugation. The development of the political situation in Belarus clearly manifests that the wrong ‘call by authority’ might cause the ‘misinterpella-

⁶ For more detailed analysis of the systemic features of ‘totalitarian communication’ see: Postoutenko 2010.

⁷ The analysis of the ‘vocabulary for the vertical’ was made recently by a Belarusian politician and philologist Vintsuk Viachorka (Viachorka 2020).

⁸ The linkage between totalitarian regime and a particular type of discourse in Belarus has a lot in common with the phenomenon, described by the survivor of Nazi regime Viktor Klemperer in his philologist’s notes on the relation between totalitarian ideology and the vocabulary it produces (Klemperer 2006).

⁹ Lukashenko’s jargon is virtually untranslatable into English and other languages: his ‘idiolect’ derived from the creolisation of Russian and Belarusian, but it is also an amalgam of Soviet ‘langue de bois’, rural vernacular and of colloquial expressions from the gangsters’ 1990s (to give but few examples: ‘lousy fleas’ [vshivye blohi], ‘grant suckers’ [grantososy], ‘high-ranking paedophiles’ [vysokopostavlennyye pedofily], ‘sow’ [svinomatka], ‘boar’ [hriak], ‘crooks’ [zhul’e], ‘petty people’ [narodets]). There are many virtual collections of his most notorious phrases on the internet (see, for instance: <https://shorturl.at/cnZ48>; <http://www.orator.ru/lukashenko.html>; <https://ria.ru/20200808/1575520091.html>).

¹⁰ Speaking Belarusian in public and private spaces has been a marker of different political cultures for many years. It is no coincidence that Lukashenko uses ‘trasianka’ (a mix of Belarusian and Russian language) in those cases when he mentions opponents of the authorities in a negative way.

¹¹ The use of language and linguistic aspects of the Belarusian protests in 2020 have been recently analysed in depth by Aleksander Kiklewicz and Helena Pocięchina (Kiklewicz and Pocięchina 2021).

tion'. Belarusians who are not willing to be subjected to the dominant ideology refuse to practise rituals of ideological recognition when being interpellated by the regime.

3. Old and new media under the authoritarian regime

Belarusian state has an almost unlimited monopoly on the circulation of information in what concerns printed media, radio and television. Obviously, the state monopoly on broadcasting existed and still exists not only in authoritarian states. This trend, when 'the state remains a key player in the public sphere and continues to exert strong control over public communications', is known as statism (Chalaby 2010: 75–77). However, the transformation of media systems and legislation in the domain of public communication after the collapse of the USSR took place in different ways in the post-Soviet countries. For example, in Russia 'Vladimir Putin had wrestled back control over broadcasting from the oligarchs but had set the press free' (Chalaby 2010: 77), while Lukashenko was simply lucky: having become president in 1994, he found the media systems practically untouched by the reforms and got the mechanisms for media control in the form in which it was carried out in the USSR.

State media in authoritarian and totalitarian states have a very specific set of functions: they must serve 'administration's communication needs', to 'act as the mouthpiece' either of the ruling party or of the autocratic leader (as in case of Belarus), 'conveying the ideology, indicating the latest political orientation and publicizing the views and decisions of the government and bureaucratic agencies'; in times of crisis – mobilising the population and in addition to that prescribing the 'right values' and 'proper behaviour' (Chalaby 2010: 71, 73). All these functions were carried out by the Soviet media before the perestroika, and this is exactly what the state media in Belarus continued to do after Lukashenko came to power.

During the first years of Lukashenko's presidency, independent media did not pose much of a threat to the regime, their audience was not very large, their circulation was not significant, and their resources were very limited. However, the development of the Internet and satellite television in the late 1990s was bound to lead to the formation of an alternative public sphere. And this is what happened when *tut.by* was launched in 2000, then Belsat in 2008 and later, other new independent media resources that worked exclusively online. Without the independent media that have been developing in the internet space for at least two decades (long before the advent of Telegram), the Belarusian revolution of 2020 would hardly have happened.

For decades, the state exerted strict control over independent media. The authorities applied different methods of pressure on the media – by blocking access to independent information resources, depriving them of financial resources (for example, through the regulation of the advertising market), and blocking print runs and distribution through kiosks. Belarusian and foreign journalists have been detained, fined or jailed. In the 1990s–2000s, several Belarusian journalists were killed (in some cases, it was masked under the suicide).

During the last two years the media suppression has become unprecedented. In 2020–2022, journalists of the independent media and bloggers were detained, beaten, shot, taken hostage, sentenced to 10–18 years in prison (Said 2021). More than 30 journalists remain in custody. The biggest independent Belarusian media outlet *tut.by* was blocked in May 2021,

its journalists were detained. Belsat, Radio Liberty, Euroradio, Nasha Niva and many more resources were branded ‘extremist’. By the end of 2021, the majority of independent journalists, political analysts, experts and oppositional politicians had to leave the country.

Meanwhile, for Belarusian authoritarianism television remains the most important of all the media. It is worthy to note that in Belarus, all 5 TV channels are state-owned and are firmly built-in into the presidential power vertical. As I have mentioned above, the interaction between the state repressive and state ideological apparatuses has been tightly coordinated – at least, since the beginning of the 2000s. The stability of the regime was largely ensured through the monopolisation of its right on television broadcasting. Many programs of the political broadcasting department are directed by former military officers, and propaganda materials for broadcasting on television (especially when it is necessary to discredit political opponents or justify the actions of the authorities) are prepared not by journalists, but by KGB ‘curators’.

Lukashenko’s core electorate are pensioners and countryside residents. These people might use the internet for communicating with their family members or watching popular Russian shows, but the state TV remains the main news outlet for this audience. However, TV is also the major source of information for police and the army. This explains why such a battle over the control of the content of the state TV channels has been unfolding in the post-election period: the viewers of the state TV must be ‘protected’ from a different picture of reality.

On August 10, 2020, the Central Election Committee (CEC) announced that Lukashenko ‘won the elections’ with the impressive support of 80% of voters. The authorities knew what kind of reaction this would provoke, and to withhold the data and prevent the ability to quickly communicate with each other, they blocked the internet. The results of the elections were communicated through printed state newspapers and broadcasted on TV. There was no internet for 3 days. At the same time, the regime unleashed a real terror against its people. But the television remained silent about this. During 61-hours of Internet shutdown, TV broadcasted news about harvesting, record milk yields, endless TV-series, popular Russian talk shows, etc. State radio stations broadcasted news on cinema, show business, advertised new services and so on. The Soviet practice of ‘reading between the lines’ was brought back from oblivion, as Belarusians started to interpret in their way the titles of the broadcasted TV series, such as *The Road to Emptiness*, *Alex the Fierce*, programs *Goodbye* and others.

The regime assumed that blocking access to the internet will prevent people from taking to the streets, while the old media (TV in first instance) will successfully manage the task of communicating to the population only ‘the good news’ and lessen people’s outrage. But then something got wrong. The authorities made a huge mistake by cutting out the internet. With their own hands, they united all those who disagreed with the electoral frauds around alternative sources of information. Belarusians learned how to connect to the internet via VPN (Psiphon and Tachyon) and subscribed to various Telegram channels. Overnight, Telegram became Belarus’s principal news broadcaster, while regular outlets also switched to it. Telegram channels continuously posted up-to-date information about what was happening in different cities and helped people organise themselves and coordinate their actions with each other through district’s chats.

The key role in this mass mobilisation and synchronisation of people's protest played Telegram channel NEXTA ('someone', if to translate from Belarusian), founded a few years ago by young Belarusian journalist Stepan Putilo. The number of its subscribers increased overnight and in August 2020, it had more than 2.1 million followers. 'It posted tips on setting up web proxies, maps of police locations, addresses protesters could hide at, and contacts for lawyers and human-rights groups. It has become a one-stop revolutionary cookbook' (Williams 2020). What I personally find most incredible in this story is not that Telegram-channels 'orchestrated the protest', but that they really brought together people not only from the same town and even the same district, but from different regions and even remote places: within few days, the entire country had become a single organism.

Meanwhile, even under these conditions, the independent media (Belarusian division of Radio Liberty and Belsat) continued to stream the news. During the events of August 9–12, a real hunt was announced for the journalists (as it turned out later, the security forces used the code word 'Safari'). The riot police began to shoot and beat them just as brutally as the rest of the detainees. Even foreign, officially accredited journalists encountered this barbarity. When the photographs, videos and personal testimonies of beaten and injured Belarusians (about 7,000 people were detained) started to spread around thanks to independent Belarusian media and Telegram channels, the state media totally ignored this brutal reality.

Two weeks later, the authorities could no longer pretend that nothing happened (since it was the state violence that brought people to the streets), but their response was unbelievably cynical. Lukashenko claimed that those videos and photos were merely fakes. In order to compromise political rallies against violence and electoral fraud, the protesters were named provocateurs, radicals, alcoholics, parasites, drug addicts, prostitutes and sheep manipulated from abroad.

How did the journalists of the state media react to all these events? Dozens of them, shocked by what was happening, got outraged that the state was preventing them from fulfilling their professional duties and forcing them to lie. They started to quit their jobs, and because of that many popular programs were closed.

The regime did not give up. Throughout the entire election campaign, Lukashenko constantly repeated the need to strengthen the military as well as information security of the state. However, in order to replace the resigned Belarusian journalists, the authorities hired journalists and PR-specialists from Russia to ensure the information security of 'independent' Belarus¹². In order to make Lukashenko 'great again', PR-specialists began appropriating and reversing the symbols and practices of the protests of the regime's opponents. Starting from August 16, the authorities organised dozens of rallies with red-green colour state symbolic in different cities, mobilising the power vertical at all levels, delivering 'captured' state employees by buses to the predetermined locations. Soviet patriotic songs and contemporary Russian pop-music were played to create an atmosphere of people's holiday and presented as 'Belarusian patriotism'.

The state TV channels started to broadcast these organised 'rallies', editing them in full accordance with the rules of agitprop. When there were 6,000 Lukashenko supporters at the rally, those magically transformed into 50,000 in the news reports. The biggest rally of the

¹² For several days, Belarusian television broadcast the name of the country as 'Belorussia' instead of 'Belarus', which is an outdated Soviet spelling used in Russia.

opponents of the regime (on August 16), with more than 300 thousand people only in Minsk, turned out to be 'less than 20 thousand'. The most notorious media reports on this rally pictured Lukashenko flying over the now empty streets of Minsk at sunset in a helicopter with a gun and saying with satisfaction that 'all the rats have run away'.

In other words, a presidential candidate who allegedly won the elections with 80% of the population's support decided to conduct the post-election campaigning under the slogan 'for peace and stability'. The audience of the state TV were to receive a confirmation that everything was fine, and the legitimately elected president enjoys, as ever before, an unre-served support. But most of all this pacifying picture was needed for Lukashenko himself. The pro-government ideologists were and continue doing about the same thing that the main character of the film *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003, dir. Wolfgang Becker) was doing, when fabricating the TV reports on the non-existent political reality for his mother who came out of a coma, in order not to damage her psyche with the news on changes that have taken place after the fall of Berlin wall.

Thus, since summer 2020, the Belarusians have lived in two parallel media realities. But at the same time, the crisis creates preconditions for a different future. One of the consequences that have already come is the withdrawal from the Russian media field: as analysts note, the segment of Belarusian Telegram and YouTube has begun to dominate the domestic consumption of media content. Many Belarusians get information from these resources, and they have also become much more likely to read and watch independent media broadcasting in the Belarusian language. Another consequence is discussed below, where both sides of the digital technologies in the authoritarian regimes are reviewed.

4. Horizontal networking vs vertical command system

Techno-utopians and techno-pessimists give different answers to the continuing debates on whether digital technologies improve democracy or represent a threat to it (Ford 2021: 274–275). Indeed, we witness the growing and often uncontrollable use of the digital instruments of discipline and surveillance that not only undermine the democratic values but, in some cases, even threaten basic human rights (such as freedom of opinion and expression, as well as the right to privacy). The application of these tools in authoritarian regimes lead to repressions, and makes every individual vulnerable to persecution by the state. The quantity and the very character of violations of basic human rights under the authoritarian regime in Belarus with the help of old and new communication technologies will undoubtedly become a special case not only for the legal assessment of these actions, but also for the scholarly studies of relations between digital technologies and political regimes.

What matters in case of authoritarian regime in Belarus is the combination of the old and new communication technologies that are used for increasing the scale of repressions: while paying a special attention to promoting its ideological agenda in the old media (such as television), the authorities continuously strengthen the measures of control over the use of the internet and various digital platforms by ordinary citizens and the independent media as alternative sources of information – up to a complete outage of the internet and the restriction of

internet-based media outlets (which implies the violation of the human rights)¹³, and neglecting its own legislation. Wiretapping of mobile communications, tracing contacts on social networks, video recording of each protester, face recognition with the help of special software – that is what everyone who dared to express their disagreement in one form or another faces these days in Belarus.

For years, Lukashenko's regime intimidated Belarusians with colour revolutions. In 2020, the anti-Maidan agenda came to the forefront in Belarus and Russia ('do you want it to be like in Ukraine?'). Propaganda continues to insist that the virus of revolution has been brought to Belarus from abroad, ignoring its main 'adversaries' – Belarusian people and new technologies of communication. The advancement of communicative technologies led to various societal changes, including the formation of new political culture, new forms of communication and the emerging of new professional and social groups who question Belarusian regime's legitimacy with the help of new technological platforms. During the 2020 election campaign for the first time in the history of post-Soviet Belarus, the opponents of the regime managed to collect and present indisputable evidence that the election results were rigged, despite all the obstacles created by the authorities. This has become possible exclusively due to digital technologies such as independent online voting platforms before election day.

Unable to prevent this, the authorities nevertheless actively tried to interfere before and after the elections. On August 6, Lukashenko gave a command to check the legal status of these initiatives. Lidiia Yermoshina, the head of the CEC, called it a 'harmful and criminal project' and 'political scam'. On the same day, the General Prosecutor's Office announced that the online platforms *Golos* and *Zubr* – which called for voters to photograph their ballots at the polling stations and submit the pictures to participate in an alternative vote count – tried to conduct opinion polls and research without accreditation, subjecting its founders to administrative responsibility. At the polling stations within the country and abroad (under the pretext of a Covid-related 'complex epidemiological situation'), the curtains were removed from the booths. However, it did not stop people from taking pictures of their filled ballots. The subsequent internet ban only slightly delayed the submission of these photos.

Few weeks later, the platform *Golos* together with the *Zubr* and *Honest People* initiatives presented a final report on how the presidential elections in Belarus were held and how their results were calculated (Voice 2021). They had processed a large amount of data, which they received before and after Election Day (photographed ballots and publicised results at different polling stations throughout the country) and came to the conclusion that the elections were rigged, and their results were invalid. Frauds were detected at every third polling station. The final figures announced by the CEC differ significantly from the actual results. As Pavel Liber, one of the creators of the platform *Golos*, said: 'For the first time, it became possible to prove that the elections in Belarus were rigged. The data of 'Voice' do not prove Tikhanovskaya's victory [since the data are incomplete], but at least it has been documented that Lukashenko did not get 80%' (Radio Liberty 2020).

¹³ According to the UN, disconnection from access to the Internet, regardless of the reasons, is disproportionate and violates paragraph 3 of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The UN insists that all states are obliged to provide constant access to the world wide web, including during political unrest. For more details, concerning the outage of the Internet in Belarus and the legal aspects of it, see *Ekonomicheskaja gazeta* 2020.

Belarusian authorities reacted immediately. They restricted access to the online platforms *Golos* and *Zubr* by adding them to the list of restricted resources (together with more than 70 media outlets). Then the authorities added many proxy services to this list, since it was through them that the public accessed popular messengers during the Internet lockdown. The regime was not prepared for numerous instances of public disclosure of the fraud at the polling stations. Observers or even members of the electoral commissions who did not sign lists with falsified results recorded video and audio messages and then sent them to the media and Telegram channels. Independent observers, who in most cases were forced to remain outside of the polling stations, counted the number of voters from the street and filmed thousands of manipulations and frauds. Smartphones together with the newly created platforms¹⁴ made it possible.

The teams which created these projects operated and continue to do so in line with the principle of a horizontal, decentralised network of people. It has been an essentially leaderless movement, which acts according to the model of expanding social networks through different levels of social interaction. The electoral campaign of the representatives of Tikhonovskaya, Babariko and Tsepkalo has also been based on a *network* model of civic initiatives. And this is exactly how the protest movement of Belarusians, who rallied after the elections, was developing after the elections. Through the horizontal communications and community-building that rapidly evolved in various Belarusian cities and towns, local districts and residential yards, the new forms of self-governance have been born out of the grass-roots initiatives.

‘Can we design technology to be genuinely democratic – to support and facilitate democracy reliably rather than undermining it?’ (Ford 2021: 275). In response to this question, I would argue that Telegram is certainly a great example of a democratic media, which challenges the passivity of users and allows for connecting and mobilising people on the basis of their feedback and mass involvement in the circulation of information. Belarusian authorities consider this regime of communication as an orchestrated top-down (and West-to-East) provocation, ignoring the community-based forms of horizontal communication. This technology revealed its democratic nature in Belarus under very particular, almost laboratory circumstances, responding to the urgent social demand. It is a great example of what new technological platforms can do when traditional (even though internet-based) media outlets remain under the control of the state authorities. The above-mentioned digital platforms *Golos* and *Zubr* are another example of how technology revolutionises ‘the process of “Rule by the People”, as they enable Belarusians as users and “digital citizens” to employ networked technologies to control and delegate voting power’ (Ford 2020: 1–2).

In 2021–2022, the forms of solidarity and mutual help have considerably changed if compared with the spring (COVID-19) and summer (presidential elections) of 2020. The priorities changed too. In 2021, due to an unprecedented scale of repressions and massive emigration, the assistance to political prisoners and their families came onto the forefront (to name but few projects of solidarity, developed through digital platforms – Bysol, Politzek.me, dis-

¹⁴ The developers of this platform are IT professionals, who have significant experience in creating and managing digital charitable projects in Belarus. Crowdfunding platforms had been successfully operating in Belarus for several years till summer 2020. When the pandemic began, they played a crucial role in building the networks for mutual assistance.

sident.by, vkletochku.org, Vyzvalenne 2020; human rights organisations – Platform, Viasna 96, civil control of the judicial system, and platforms that provide instructions for the digital security for citizens and for journalists, such as biaspeca.space).

With the escalation of the war in Ukraine, many Belarusian civic initiatives switched on to the programs of support for Ukrainians and Belarusians who fight on the side of Ukraine. However, the internal Belarusian agenda remains the most important one, and all platforms that helped to disavow electoral fraud continue working on new political initiatives. Among the most important steps one can mention the creation of ‘Digital Belarus’, a new platform that was announced by Pavel Liber and other IT activists in late 2021. It aims to build the ‘virtual country’, which once will become real (Bel.biz 2021). In other words, the moment when outdated and corrupted state machine will be replaced by e-democracy and its institutionalised forms, thanks to the new technological solutions, is a matter of the near future.

5. Belarusian partisans in the cyber age: is it possible to hack the authoritarian System?

‘We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us’ – that is the well-known tagline of the international hacktivist movement Anonymous. In 2020, the phrase ‘We will not forget, we will not forgive’, addressed to the authoritarian regime, became a popular slogan among Belarusian protesters. But between the global hacktivist collective and the protest movement in Belarus there is much more in common. Firstly, it has revealed itself as a decentralised, leaderless community acting both online and offline, coordinated by people themselves through the internet. Secondly, the principle of not disclosing one’s identity, characteristic for the Anonymous movement, has become particularly important during last year for all those Belarusian citizens, who stepped out against the regime in one form or another, and for Belarusian cyberpartisans in particular. It is both a matter of personal safety and the efficiency of their actions.

However, there are some peculiarities too. Firstly, the movement of cyberpartisans in Belarus emerged under specific circumstances in one particular country, in the situation of unrestricted and unpunished state violence and the violation of law. It is aimed, thus, against the concrete System of authoritarian rule. Secondly, the very question of anonymity has also acquired a particular dimension in the Belarusian context. It brought together two, previously unrelated issues – self-protection against digital identification methods and health safety. It is well-known that COVID-19 played a crucial role in the unfolding of the political crisis in Belarus. Lukashenko repeatedly stated that COVID-19 was nothing but a ‘mass psychosis’, and this inadequate reaction on behalf of the officials outraged Belarusians. Wearing a mask in public spaces became a hygienic norm in all countries, but in Belarus this practice acquired new functions and negative connotations. During the phase of active street protests in summer–autumn of 2020, the executors of the criminal orders (riot police, militia, judges) in absolutely every situation (whether it is a video recording of protesters by the unknown ‘men in masks’ in the streets, the court hearings or the operations for detention and surveillance) were hiding their faces under the masks. The evil became faceless, as the repressive apparatus received a mandate from the authorities on the anonymity of their criminal actions. Incident-

ally, in autumn 2020, one of the tactics of protesting Belarusians consisted in making the riot policemen drop off the masks under the slogan ‘All masks should be dropped!’¹⁵.

Since not a single trial on the criminal cases of shooting on the streets, tortures in the detention centres and murders (as in case of Roman Bondarenko) had been launched so far and with the open manifestation of protest becoming too risky, cyberpartisans began to act in their own way. The de-anonymisation of the executors of violence became a strategic goal: cyberpartisans started publicising personal data and information on the deeds of the policemen and judges on various Telegram channels (including NEXTA, Basta! and the Black-BookBelarus), considering it as a means of reminding the executors of their personal responsibility for the committed deeds and gathering the data for future trials.

Thirdly, Belarus is a country where the figure of the *partisan* has long been the symbol of protest: the people’s memory of the partisans’ movement is strongly associated with the period of Nazi occupation (1941–1944). Yet during the period of Lukashenko’s rule the partisans’ warfare gained a new impetus and acquired new forms¹⁶. In 2020–2021, the protest’s vocabulary reactivated the memory of the World War II, as Belarusians started to refer to the regime as ‘occupationist administration’ and to the riot policemen as ‘the chasteners’. The references to the Nazi occupation and the methods that partisans used in their fight became common during autumn 2020, when citizens tried to defend their right to the city. As in the World War II period, the struggle for the visibility of the symbols of protest in public spaces (a white-red-white flags or new iconic images such as a mural with ‘DJs of Freedom’) has played a very significant role. The photos of flags and videos of collective actions, disseminated through alternative media channels (Telegram, first of all), have been and remain both a manifestation of solidarity, and the form of the self-representation of a protest movement. The ‘occupationist administration’ spent a lot of energy and resources to ensure that those symbols and protest signs would be removed from public spaces, but in the night, the ‘guerillas’ were putting them back or placing them elsewhere, and not only in the city. The ‘railway’ partisans acted too: in October–November 2020, there were several cases of straining the wire between the rails by unknown people to trigger the railway automatics. In 2022, after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the ‘railway partisans’ conducted several successful operations in order to prevent the delivery of troops and equipment to Ukraine from the territory of Belarus.

In one of my earlier articles (dedicated to the protests of 2006 and new forms of emerging political subjectivity), I argued that Belarusian ‘situationism’ invents new forms of protest in response to the specific ‘situations’. In today’s Belarus any form of manifestation of disloyalty is qualified by the authorities as violation of law. Any, even the most innocent, forms of expression of one’s opinion (though guaranteed by the Constitution) are banned and prosecuted by the regime. It is under these conditions, that the image of the *partisan*, the fighter who chooses the unconventional means of struggle, is dear to Belarusians due to the im-

¹⁵ The authorities started to brutally respond to these actions: one of the most notorious examples is a sentence to Natallia Herrsche to 2 years and 6 months in prison, for her participation in the women’s march, when she pulled the mask off the face of one of the riot policemen who attacked the crowd.

¹⁶ There are media resources and art projects that have been named after ‘partisan’ – the most well-known are the media outlet founded by Pavel Sheremet (<https://belaruspartisan.by>) and the art magazine launched by Belarusian artist and writer Artur Klinau (<http://partisanmag.by/?cat=104>, etc.).

possibility to win the fight according to the ‘rules’ imposed by the authorities and to deal with lawlessness in the legal field. The itineraries of the protest marches in autumn 2020–winter 2021, which the riot police tried to surround, break off and block, were also the manifestation of the guerrilla’s tactics: to gather in small groups nearby the local meeting points, then to disperse using different roads to show up together in one place (similar to the striking strong blow), and then again, to dissipate, as quickly and unnoticeably as possible, in order to do the same on a different day and in another place¹⁷. The partisan tactics are convenient for protesters and are very annoying for the regime that pretends to hold civil disobedience under control. Guerrilla actions exhaust the ‘enemy’ by way of unpredictable actions; they steadily ‘undermine the forces of the opponent, who never knows where and when the next blow will be struck and so is compelled to maintain his readiness for battle at all times’ (Ousmanova 2009).

Needless to say, in the digital era, offline guerrilla activities are coordinated in a very different technological mode. In 2020–2021, the Telegram-channels became a sort of community media for Belarusians: they allowed exchanging news and coordinating collective actions. When it was still possible to gather on the streets, local chats were helping fix the meeting points and plan the itineraries for moving through the streets and squares so as to avoid the riot police. Not surprisingly, Belarusian authorities ‘appointed’ the independent media and Telegram as the organisers of the protests. The pressure on the Telegram-communities intensified in 2021 and continues till now: almost every day, Belarusian courts rule on declaring more Telegram channels ‘extremist’ (on this list, there are several hundreds of TG channels, with several millions of subscribers who, consequently, became ‘extremists’, too).

When open manifestations, street actions and other offline forms of protests inside the country became too risky (due to the omnipresence of video cameras and the employment of digital face recognition software by the police and the KGB), in response to the growing repressions, Belarusians switched to a high-tech partisan regime. In today’s Belarus, hacking can be seen as the revolt of the IT-class against violence, falsification, and the state of lawlessness.

In summer 2021, Belarusian Cyber Partisans declared the beginning of the operation called ‘Heat’¹⁸, which later headed to the second phase – ‘Scorching heat’. The group of hackers claimed responsibility for a number of cyber attacks on government and police databases in Belarus, including those of the Interior Ministry. Among the sensitive data that cyber partisans got access to, there are national passport database, mobile phone data, recorded conversations of the riot police commanders, recorded calls to the police, videos from surveillance cameras (including those in the detention centres and police cars), the database ‘Street Riots’ (set up by the Interior Ministry in autumn 2020) with nearly 40,000 people who participated in the protest activities, and so on. They obtained a massive amount of data that requires thousands of hours for processing. That is why they publicise this information by small bites, gradually, and disseminate it through Telegram-channel and via their channel on

¹⁷ Apart from Saturday’s and Sunday’s marches in the city centres, protest actions were taking place in parks and squares, on the outskirts of the city, in the courtyards of residential buildings, near fountains, monuments and so on. The regular evening ‘actions’, that were organised in the courtyards often took the form of musical concerts, lectures, tea-drinking, sport training, or some other joint activity.

¹⁸ <https://t.me/cpartisans/235>.

YouTube¹⁹, and do it in cooperation with some other Telegram-channels and initiatives such as ‘Supratsiu’²⁰, ByPol²¹ and others.

Hacktivism is a form of civil disobedience, which is often considered to be the crime against the state system, as it puts the security of the country under threat. Belarusian cyber-partisans claim themselves to be the ‘combatants for democratic values’ and say that ‘if the state uses all its instruments – such as laws and funds – to oppress peaceful citizens’, and the authorities ‘violate the constitution so crudely’, then it is their ‘duty’ and ‘a question of conscience’ to gather such information on the crimes of the regime (Deutsche Welle 2021). They hope that this information can be later used in the Hague International Court of Justice on the trial against Lukashenko’s regime. With their cyberattacks, they seek to expose the vulnerability of a structure that considers itself omnipotent and protected. The activities of cyberpartisans gained wholehearted support of Belarusians, who consider it to be one of the most efficient forms of struggle against the authoritarian rule under the conditions when offline forms of revolt are virtually impossible.

In my opinion, the phenomenon of cyberpartisans is evidence that the once monolithic authoritarian regime gradually transforms into a *collapsing state*²², approaching its end. Lukashenko’s ‘state’ first lost its monopoly on the production of one single ‘truth’ through control over the media and, accordingly, over the channels of information dissemination, and now we witness how it loses control over the storage and use of the most sensitive data, which is usually one of the major prerogatives of the State system.

6. Digital multitude, or politics as the common cause of the many

The leaderless Belarusian protests brought to the forefront a new political subjectivity that, in my view, can be understood as *multitude*. Multitude is a philosophical concept, that was first ‘launched in early modernity in the debate of Spinoza and Hobbes’ (Carson et al. 2021: 3), but only recently gained new impetus in the theoretical works of post-Marxist theorists, who introduced the notion in response to the global political and economic transformations that made the category of ‘class’ no longer viable. However, it can also be considered as a ‘category of practice’ (if we use Pierre Bourdieu’s term), that is applicable to the historical experience of many people, both in the 20th and 21st centuries. As a philosophical term, it explains ‘the new forms of political subjectivity’. As a category of practice, it allows for analysing its empirical appearances. It conceptually captures the class, gender, age, professional heterogeneity of the majority, which cannot be defined as a homogeneous social group or a union of such groups. According to Paolo Virno, ‘multitude is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many: a permanent form, not an episodic or interstitial form’. Following Benedict Spinoza, he argues that multitude is ‘an architrave of civil liberties’ (Virno 2004: 21).

¹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6QdTOMsUXip91wPx_giTPg.

²⁰ <https://telegra.ph/Manifest-o-sozdanii-dvizheniya-Supraciu-05-30>.

²¹ ByPol is a union of former security officers that was created in September 2020 (<https://bypol.org/en>).

²² According to Rotberg, ‘a collapsed state is a rare and extreme version of a failed state’, that is unable to perform its main functions, the major of which is to ensure the security of the country and its citizens. It ‘exhibits a vacuum of authority’, providing some semblance of order (Rotberg 2003: 9).

I am in favour of this concept because it does not imply the reduction to a common denominator such as ‘nation’ or ‘the people’ or any other terms that create the ‘figures of false unity’ (Saifullayeu 2017: 51), and which for this reason have been too often exploited by the ruling regimes. This concept embraces the multiplicity of personal interests and differences, which, nevertheless, may cease to be important in an emergency situation, when the life of one person is closely connected with the lives of Many others, and not in a figurative sense, but in the most literal sense. I consider Belarusian protest to be the empirical reality of multitude, and a vivid example of the politics of the Many, who took the task of getting rid of the dictatorship as a common and personal cause in the summer of 2020.

This concept makes it possible to understand and analyse the current Belarusian political situation from several angles. Multitude is a concept that answers the questions on how the formation of democratic political subject has developed in Belarus under the conditions that cannot be considered favourable for the consolidation and manifestation of collective interests; what constitutes the unity of people, that cannot be reduced or explained by class identities or political views; through what practices (described in previous sections) the Many realise their political agency²³. In addition to that, using this ‘umbrella term’ gives us ground for comparing leaderless Belarusian protest with a broader ‘spectrum of current struggles and debates about the forms of collective political subjectivity’, because ‘multifarious and protean protests or [...] seemingly leaderless protests’ in other countries also bring together people with very different political positions. (Carson et al. 2021: 2, 8–9).

The Many make use of the ‘right of resistance’, which ‘consists of validating the prerogatives of an individual or of a local community, or of a corporation, in contrast to the central power structure, thus safeguarding forms of life which have already been rooted in society’ (Virno 2004: 42). The resistance means ‘defending something positive’, and the right to resistance aims ‘to protect something that is already at place and it worthy of continuing to exist’ (ibid). This is an essential moment concerning the social composition and the non-violent nature of the Belarusian protests: people went out to the street or resort to other forms of protest in order not only to defend their civic rights against the state machine alien to them, but also to protect their political views and ethical values of their communal life – something that has been already existing.

Multitude is not only about the quantity of people who, in various forms, are fighting against the regime inside the country or from abroad. Another aspect of this concept is more important: the collective energy of scattered forces, types of social bonds, multiplicity of participatory practices, the creation and development of networks of solidarity, the awareness of oneself as a part of the collective ‘we’, as well as the synergy of the efforts of people and making their efforts to undermine and dismantle the authoritarian regime. In other words, the new Many represent a kind of ‘virtual collectivity’ and ‘centreless networks’ enabled by digital technology.

Multitude is represented by people belonging to different social groups and individuals who at some point realise themselves as belonging to a community. Moreover, in my view, this concept relates also to the technological solutions that allow this ‘multitude’ not only to

²³ ‘Political agency’ refers to ‘an emergence of a revolutionary political agent that has the potential for changing the world through collective practices, challenging its social and economic inequalities, exploitation and oppression, and creating new institutions and forms of life’ (Carson et al. 2021: 3)

interact and create networks and structures of solidarity, but also to declare themselves as the ‘majority’.

How sustainable is the political agency of the multitude? It should be understood that such a form of political subjectivity may be temporary, flexible, mobilised under certain historical conditions and adaptable to changing circumstances. Apart from that, as Mary Hawkesworth argues, ‘relations of domination and subordination rooted in race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality do not disappear when protestors march together or when revolutionaries struggle together against various modes of oppression’ (Hawkesworth 2006: 363). However, the fact that the ‘agency of crisis’ is not able to ‘engender forms of political organization’ (Carson et al. 2021: 9) is not a deficiency at all. In the case of the Belarusian people, once the current goal (dismantling the authoritarian system) is achieved, the new set of goals under different circumstances will foster the development of a new ‘chain of equivalential demands’ (Laclau 2005: 75) and a new agenda for the multitude.

7. Conclusion

By counterposing the analogue dictatorship to the digital multitude, I meant to underline two things. Firstly, the development of political crisis in Belarus unveiled the gaping chasm between the archaic power regime, based on the outdated technologies of communication and governance, and the new generation of people who choose the transversal, horizontal, non-hierarchical forms of interaction and self-governance. The modes of resistance, ways of self-organisation, forms of mutual support and manifestations of solidarity rely on a variety of existing technological instruments (various digital platforms, social media, mobile applications, etc.) and foster the creation of new ones, in response to emerging social demands.

Secondly, the analogue dictatorship, applying old methods of control, censorship, persecution and repression, is unable to suppress the protest movement, which by its very essence does not conform to the classical scenarios of a revolution (as a coup d’état). Belarusian r/evolution unfolds as the protest of ‘multitude’, consisting of individuals who invent politics every day by changing forms and formats of protest, using the grass-roots forms of organisation and strengthening the pressure on the regime from both within and outside of the country. It is a molecular revolution, the composition of which ‘does not need unification or the representation of a unified (class) subject by leaders, party and vanguard’ (Raunig 2016: 184). This form of revolution presupposes a gradual, seemingly imperceptible, but every day more and more tangible change in collective intelligence, which lays grounds for building a new, democratic, Belarus.

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