Features and Effects of the Digital Technologies in the Belarusian Protest

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Abstract: In the following article we aim to show, firstly, how IT and, more broadly, digital systems determine the specificity (both in a positive and negative sense) of Belarusian protests. And secondly, the systems change or call into question traditional political or philosophical categories such as citizenship, state boundaries, care, division into private and public spheres, representation, etc. The digital sphere plays a significant role in Belarusian protests and its potential is used to a much greater extent than is usually the case when protesters use social networks to quickly exchange information and organise events. Here we analyse not only the use of social networks, but also the creation of new IT products and platforms with the help of which citizens are 'connected' to the protest movement. Digital systems have proposed new organisational forms – horizontal and leaderless. The protest itself can be described as shimmering and peripheral. Thus, it was this horizontal format that was opposed to the rigid hierarchy of power and gave us a new sense of common future.

Keywords: digital technologies, Belarusian protests, actor-network theory, communication, innovative society, social transformation, horizontal solidarity, networking

> I demand a fantasy!
> I demand a dream!
> Future!
> Aliaxey Talstou
> *If the Past Will Not End* (2020)

Belarusian protests, like other protests, use IT tools for communication, organisation and quick updates. However, in the Belarusian case, this IT potential is embedded in the contextual logic of the movement, which determines the specificity and transformational power of the events of 2020–2021. This article analyses the depth of IT penetration into the protest movement, which is reflected not only in the use of the power of social media, but also in the development of complex infrastructure programs that allow organising a decent-

ralised, distributed, shimmering resistance. The article notes that this feature of the protest movement became possible, on the one hand, due to the growth and development of IT within the country, on the other hand, it is noted that the 'protest-technology' tandem became possible due to the network logic of both phenomena. In addition, the text presents an analysis and research of those transformations and reconfigurations that become possible due to the wide and non-superficial use of technologies in protest. Among them are the emergence of horizontal and complex, non-hierarchical forms of collective action, building networks of solidarity and mutual support, building alternative infrastructures, the practice of prefigurative politics, etc.

The study of the phenomenon and the impact of the digital environment on protest activity in Belarus in 2020 included both an analysis based on theoretical approaches and on a series of high-quality sociological interviews. The latter is a series of 5 in-depth interviews with the IT specialists who are involved in the development of protest IT platforms and programs and the leaders of the development team. These interviews were conducted between October and December 2020 and the respondents are anonymised to ensure their confidentiality and safety.

In theoretical terms, the study was carried out based on approaches to the analysis of social structures and the principles of their organisation as theorised by Bruno Latour, Judith Butler, and Levi Bryant – from the point of view of the principles of creating collectivities, the functioning of hierarchical systems; Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben – from the standpoint of the study of biopolitics and biopower, the transformation of the methods of production of power relations and the incorporation of implicit mechanisms of subordination into the social body. The authors were also interested in the theories of cyberfeminism, within the framework of which the analysis of the emancipatory potential of technologies was carried out. In addition, Twitter and Tear Gas by Zeynep Tufekci played an important conceptual role, which explores in detail the strengths and weaknesses of social media in the Arab Spring protests. The indicated theoretical foundations create a conceptual framework for studying current events in Belarusian society, as well as creating prerequisites for understanding the concept of a common future and re-organization of the social systems.

1. Fragile technologies

When analysing Gezi Park protests, the researcher Zeynep Tufekci metaphorically notes there were only two things to completely envelop the protesters and permeate the entire protest – Twitter and tear gas. Thus, she emphasises that technology, and above all, social networks, became an integral part of the protest movement, '[I felt] that it could have been almost any twenty-first-century protest [square]: organised through Twitter, filled with tear gas, leaderless, networked, euphoric, and fragile' (Tufekci 2017: xv). The power of technology was used by protesters all over the planet: in Gezi Park, Tahrir Square, Moscow Bolotnaya Square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv, by protesters in Hong Kong and the Occupy movement, etc. In this respect, the protests in Belarus 2020 in regards to the use of technology and the power of social media for the coordination, communication, campaigning, meetings, etc., are not something innovative or unprecedented. Rather, we can say that the Be-

larusian protest, in this sense, continued the classic line of the 21st-century protest movements.

Returning to Zeynep Tufekci's thesis, it should be mentioned that the clash between Twitter and tear gas reveals not only the rootedness of technology as a tool of the protest movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries but also their disparity. Tear gas jeopardises our fragile bodies, while social networks, according to the researcher, can be presented as fragile; the meetings organised through new technologies – as short-lived. '[However, these perspectives assume that] people who connect online are doing things only online, and that the online world is somehow less real than, and disconnected from, the offline one', Zeynep Tufekci argues (Tufekci 2017: xxv). According to the researcher, the technologies themselves make it possible to quickly bring together and coordinate the protesters, to affectively connect them to the protest, however, high speeds have a negative effect since the protesters do not have time to create stable physical infrastructures or establish deep interpersonal connections.

Moreover, in a broad sense, technologies can act not only as a tool for bringing people together but also as a tool for disintegration, intensifying atomisation and social inequality. Societies might appear to be extremely inwardly disconnected and excluded from the political process, with the very sphere of politics turning into a professional craft supposing a certain master toolkit, management in demand, and established interaction procedures and mechanisms. In this regard, technological progress and the digital environment play a significant part, exacerbating the passive anonymous participation of individuals in society, in the political process, establishing new forms of control and safety standards, as well as individual consciousness massification. Or vice versa, by creating the illusion of protest activity, technologies can negate people's real participation in the resistance. In one interview, a Belarusian IT-developer actively involved in the creation of protest platforms, shared his fears that the generation of protest platforms and Telegram channels that provide a low barrier to the political participation of citizens could reduce the number of those who take part in street protests and thereby lead to protests fading away. He called this process 'a divine Like phenomenon' (Interview 2020), where the participation in a real protest movement is boosted by following news and leaving online comments.

Another technology-related issue is connected with the problem of knowledge and information. Technologies can create opportunities for innovative development, sociality transformations, a new agency, and the creation of social ties on a fundamentally different basis. In such cases, various forms of communication come to the fore, emerging as constituent elements in society (Luhmann 2006). Digital environment has increased social system complexity, provoked the growth of emergent objects arising as a result of various fields of knowledge interaction. Often, these new objects are difficult to describe and qualify and their boundaries are hard to be outlined. At the same time, social space digitalisation, the incorporation of technologies into the social body and relationships are important for transferring knowledge and information; in general, the adaptation of gathered information requires special skills (Nowotny 2005). In a society of knowledge and competencies, innovation is taken for granted and is seen as accelerating historical and social time, whereas practical arts, such as marketing and management, have become more visible. '[…] The post-World War II approach associate's management with projects that introduce new technological systems […].

They are no longer committed to maintaining a system for the mass production of standardized items. They tolerate and even embrace heterogeneity' (Nowotny 2006).

In this situation, technological development can play not only a unifying role but also create new entry barriers and lead to new social and political inequality configurations. As an example of new barriers, we can draw the situation of the internet shutdown on August 9–12, when the state tried to block the internet access across the country, which resulted in people having no internet access for 3 days. However, on the very next day, many users found ways to bypass blocking through VPN services with a complex encryption system. 'Psiphon Inc., based in Toronto, has registered over 1.7 million unique users in Belarus, which is almost a fifth of the total population of the country,' the Belarusian internet Observatory informs (Internet blocking 2020). However, only 20 percent of the country's population were able to use VPN technology, while the others were deprived of access to information, which means that technologies can also have entry barriers that do not ensure equal access for all and in the long-term might lead to social inequality reconfiguration.

In fact, in a society of innovation any tool or mechanism can work both ways: on the one hand – towards enslavement, social inequality and asynchrony, increased control, technocratic management, the emasculation of social relations, neutralisation of political engagement and the disappearance of humanitarian mission, and on the other – towards emancipation and liberation, increasing the level of transparency of closed systems, creating new forms of political participation and principles of collectivity, characterised by fragility and instability. Likewise, rethinking the concepts of social capital and social bankruptcy, information competencies, the creation of forms of solidarity that cannot be translated into commodity relations, people's ability to form spaces of interaction, regardless of the state and its institutions are vital for (re)gaining social balance. Therefore, fears and hopes for new technologies and their use in various protest movements around the world are equally justified.

At the same time, it is worth approaching the Belarusian protests from the technology-wise perspective, since it enables us to grasp the unique components of this event and outline the transformations and potentialities that can be found in the link between technologies and the protest. The protests were ongoing for more than 150 days – from August 9 and for more than six months in a row with the election campaign as their starting point. From the onset, technology played a huge role in the interactions between citizens and the state. So, all three main opponents who announced their candidacies for the presidency were in one way or another connected with internet technologies. Sergey Tikhanovsky was a successful YouTube blogger and hosted his own channel *Country for Life* [Strana dlya zhizni]. Valeriy Tsepkalo was the initiator of *Hi-Tech Park* (Decree 2005) – also called the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe, and in 2005–2017 was heading this IT infrastructure. Victor Babariko was one of the founders and investors of two crowdfunding platforms – *Ulej* and *MolaMola*.

The candidates, the joint headquarters and the protesters themselves actively used technologies as their political tools. Announcing his intention to run for office, Victor Babariko, for instance, used a Google form and Facebook to launch an initiative group and receive as many as 10,000 applications in two days. And on July 18–19, Minsk hosted *Social Technology Hackathon 2020*, aimed at developing solutions for alternative vote counting in the presidential elections. At this hackathon, one of the most important protest initiatives appeared – *Golos* [Vote] platform. The mission of the initiative, as stated in its description, was to 'enable

everyone to know how many votes were cast for candidates at their polling stations and compare this information with the protocols data' (Golos 2020). In fact, it is public infrastructure for counting and monitoring the transparency of the elections. In total, 1,261,015 users were registered at *Golos* platform, that is, ⅕ of all the voters living in and outside Belarus. *Golos* initiative is one of the country's first horizontal self-organised structures, built on the principles of information technology and platform economy to consolidate citizens and solve political issues.

Today, there are hundreds of initiatives launched to enable resistance via complex IT solutions. Among them are Probono.by (a unified contact centre for victims), *Golos* platform, *Krama* [Shop] mobile application, a civil control of the judicial system, *dze.chat* [Where Chat] platform (an aggregator of courtyard chats and publics), *Agitka* campaign platform, etc. In November 2020 alone, more than 100 Telegram channels were launched, representing a variety of civic initiatives. Researchers mention such important channels as *Golos Platform* (148.3 thousand subscribers), *Cyber-Partisans* (79.5 thousand), *Karateli Belarusi* [Punishers of Belarus] (72.5 thousand), *Belye Khalaty. News* [White Lab Coats] (48.4 thousand), *Lists of Detainees (Zhodino + Akrestsina + Baranovichi + Mogilev)* (34 thousand), *Coordination Council* (24.6 thousand), *Chestnye Lyudi* [Honest People] (22.1 thousand), *Strike Committee of JSC Belaruskali* (15.8 thousand), *Listovki 97%* [Leaflets 97%] (10.4 thousand) and many others. (Shelest et al. 2020: 15).

Thus, technologies in the Belarusian political field are embedded in the very logic of the protest, they are a part of its very fabric, and also, despite long-term resistance and fragility of connective communities, exist on fairly stable grounds. This fact has been mentioned by numerous researchers – for example, Grigory Asmolov, a Russian researcher of the role of information technologies in crisis situations, says, 'What is happening in Belarus is an important example of how information technologies can help turn a political crisis into an opportunity for political change, despite the fragile nature of "connective actions"' (Asmolov 2020). It provides a basis for a more careful study of the technological dimension of the Belarusian protest and its features.

2. Networked organization of the protest

To understand why the use of technologies in Belarus appears to be more resilient in comparison with other similar protests, and how the protesters actually manage to avoid the trap, Zeynep Tufekci speaks about when it comes to technologies fragility and the disproportion between them and offline infrastructures and real violence against the protesters on the part of the authorities, it is worth addressing the characteristics inherent in the protest movement in Belarus that can provide explanations for such an effective and sustainable use of technological tools.

In her speech at *The World without Labour* (2020) biennale, Dina Zhuk, one of the members of eeefff art group, states, 'It is important for us that this year's events in Belarus somehow rethink the future horizon. And it is changing not through the emergence of new technologies, but through the reinvention of relationships between people, where technological tooling occurs based on political necessity' (Zhuk et al. 2020). Obviously, technologies by them-

selves cannot be described as subversive; neither can it be stated that it was technologies that triggered the protest. Rather, the point is about considering technologies (IT platform solutions, social networks and instant messengers) as tools for communication and collective political action. A closer look, however, reveals tighter relationships and links between technology and the protest itself. This could be traced not at the level of content, but above all – at the level of form and logic of the existence of both phenomena.

The 2020–2021 Belarusian protest is quite different from its predecessors – the protests of 2006 and 2010, which also emerged as waves of disagreement with the election results in the country. It also differs significantly from protests in the neighbouring countries: for example, the Euromaidan in Kyiv (2013–2014) or Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow (2012), with which it is frequently compared. The same can be said about its similarities with protest movements in other regions: the phenomenon of the Arab Spring (2010–2012) and the protests at Taksim Square in Istanbul (2013). Although certain parallels, including those related to the power of social networks use, can surely be drawn. However, it is the focus on identifying the differences that help understand the specifics of the relationships between Belarusian protests and technologies.

While describing the peculiarity of the protests that swept around the world in the 2010s, Judith Butler characterised them as follows, 'Groups suddenly coming together in large numbers' (Butler 2015). In other words, the main idea behind this kind of protest is the seizure and retention of public spaces, such as Istanbul's Gezi Park, adjacent to the central city square Taksim or Independence Square in Kyiv. As a rule, central streets and squares become the places where the public could openly express their will – the places of political resistance and protest movements epicentres. This was the case of Minsk in 2006 when a tent camp was set up on Oktyabrskaya Square, or on December 19, 2010, when the main actions of the protesters were concentrated on Independence Square, where the Government House and the Central Election Commission (CEC) office were located.

However, in 2020, the geography of the protest and its tactics changed dramatically. It can be described through the image of networks characterised by a non-hierarchical system of organisation, decentration, constant transformation, instability, the absence of leaders, flexibility and complexity. Protests form complex networks, both at the level of communication and at the level of tactics of meetings. The networked organisation of protests makes them similar to industrial equipment, which, as a rule, is also described through the logic of networks. In this vein, the link between protests and new technologies as tools turns out to be stronger and deeper. They converge both at the level of form and at the ontological level.

From the very beginning, the protest in Belarus was not localised in the centre – neither at the level of geography, nor at the level of organisation. Thus, one could observe active protest movements not only in Minsk but also in other cities and towns, which became a new milestone in the country's political life. This sets a completely new logic of Belarusian protests that differed from that of previous years. Oktyabrskaya Square – a place previously seen as iconic for political activity – this time remained out of protesters' focus at all. The same could be said about Independence Square: despite the fact that people gathered there in August, it did not become the epicentre. On the contrary, almost immediately, resistance began to be dynamic rather than static. Despite protesters' constantly changing their tactics, it could still be described as having a migratory, 'shimmering' nature – an important distin-

guishing feature of the whole movement. In the first month, the protests were mainly organised as marches – women's marches on Saturdays and Sunday marches, in which anyone could participate. Later*, The Retirees' Marches* on Mondays and *The Disabled People's* marches on Thursdays (also called 'marches of people with unlimited abilities') were also organised. All the marches took the form of many-kilometres – so-called 'walks' around the city. So, on August 16, *The March of Freedom*, attended by 400–500 thousand people, began on Independence Square, moved through the entire city centre towards Minsk – Hero City Stele and headed towards the presidential residence Palace of Independence. The entire march was over twelve kilometres in total. On August 29, during the *Women's March*, the protesters also walked several kilometres. On September 1, during *The Students' March*, the protesters walked about twenty kilometres. Thus, from the very onset, the protest did not use the tactics of seizing and keeping a certain spot, but was rather dispersed; moreover, it gradually began to leave the city centre for suburban areas.

On November 29, due to the increased repression and violence against the protesters, an even more obvious nomadic strategy was applied during traditional Sunday marches. The protest was concentrated not around central streets, but at backyards of residential areas. The point of such protests was not about gathering in one large column somewhere along a certain street or a square, but rather about showing up everywhere at once, getting dispersed throughout the entire city in the so-called 'sleeping areas' traditionally excluded from the political life of the country.

Contrary to the logic of centralised gatherings, sleeping areas and backyards began to show their activity from the first days of the protests. Such districts as Novaya Borovaya, the courtyard on Chervyakova Street (better known as the *Square of Changes*), and hundreds of other yards across the country, since the beginning of the protests, were gathering together – seemingly, for reasons unrelated to any political agenda, but for drinking tea, for example. Later, as a part of such initiatives, proposals to give lectures or set up backyard concerts followed. Initially, a courtyard, as a place for the transgression of the public and private spheres, was perceived as a safer place in comparison with central streets and squares, where the cordons of riot police and special equipment were lined up. Gradually, however, they turned into focal points of solidarity and resistance.

The turning point in the final transformation of sleeping areas into key points of the protest movement concentration and the zones of people's gathering was the death of Roman Bondarenko, who was severely beaten on November 11 by law enforcement agencies members and so-called 'tikhari'[1] in his own neighbourhood. Roman died from the beatings the next day. This tragedy radically politicised 'courtyard' activities, and by the end of 2020, the network organisation of this protest movement had become even more obvious. By bringing together both online and offline, shifting from the centre to the periphery, taking forms of numerous activities throughout the country, bridging the public and private spheres, the protest turned out to be comparable to information technologies, coinciding with it in its architecture and principles of implementing connections between actors.

Moreover, not only at the level of tactical forms of assembly and resistance, but also at the level of choreography and infrastructure, building relationships and protest can be described as a network. When carefully analysed, women's solidarity chains, a symbol of

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[1] A popular name given to plan-clothed policemen.

protest, also look like networks. The chain of women, standing shoulder to shoulder and stretching for several kilometres, is a facade of a complex configuration of protest infrastructure, with underlying structures of care, logistics, communication, horizontal coordination and support consisting of 'human-technology' coupling. It is also about Telegram channels that track the movements of police cars around the city, legal support provided by advocates, the work of drivers who drive near 'solidarity chains', so that the protesters have a chance to hide from riot police when the risk of detention is high; it is about people who fetch coffee, tea and water, provide protesting women with food, etc. Such a complex networked form of protest organisation makes it possible for them to 'shimmer', remain active, free and more flexible at the same time.

We describe the protests as decentralised, deprived of any leadership and not strictly correlated with national symbols or nation-building ideas, not belonging to any party in their agendas, organised according to networking principles, formed spontaneously across cities, districts or streets. And here the principle of communication, the types of established connections, the ways of decision-making and information transmission play a significant part, as well as emerging institutions in the civil society already now capable of effectively performing tasks while existing as a network.

Online form of the protest is also a dynamic, unstable and constantly reconfiguring resistance, where actors can find themselves at different distances from one another in constant motion. Moreover, it is an expanded understanding of the protest, which includes not only the fact of going out, but also online activity taking different forms: a strike, a refusal to pay household bills or an economic boycott one can join by using a special mobile application *Krama*. Not only does such a protest stand in opposition to the existing hierarchy of power, but it also re-assembles new political, social and economic relations, as well as reinvents or at least presents a draft of new forms of collective interactions.

At the same time, the reasons for the emergence of a networked form of protests should also be pointed out. It is important to note that initially, the election campaign was not strictly networked; on the contrary, it had clearly visible leaders and an organisational structure. However, due to the work of the repressive machine, even before the beginning of the elections, all three main opponents of Lukashenko had either been arrested or forced to leave the country. Today, most of the active political actors are in prison (like Maria Kolesnikova), or abroad (Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo). Many researchers mention the leaderless and self-organised nature of the protests. The exclusion of leaders and symbolic figures from the political race marked the start of the networked organisation.

Moreover, the role of the security apparatus and the unprecedented level of violence against protesters should be specially emphasised. According to Vyasna Human Rights Organization, there are 1,442 police officers per 100 thousand country residents (Vyasna 2018) – the highest indicator in Europe. It makes any offline resistance extremely difficult, especially taking into consideration the fact that, starting from August, 9, to suppress the protesters, the government has been using almost all of its resources, including the army and conscripts. This level of violence can be described as unprecedented.

According to human rights activists, during the protests, more than 30 thousand people were detained, which is 0.5 percent of the country's total adult population; most of them – beaten and even tortured. By December 2020, 169 prisoners were recognised as political, 900

criminal cases had been started against the protesters, whereas the Investigative Committee had not initiated a single case either on the fact of violence exerted by law enforcement agencies against civilians or on the fact of 10 related murders (Vyasna 2020). The authorities had been regularly using water cannons, special equipment, stun grenades, rubber bullets and tear gas against the civil population. Such an asymmetrical response to peaceful manifestations and gatherings aimed to express disagreement with the election results and the policy of the state apparatus made both real confrontation and the occupation of any public spaces in the city centre impossible.

This disproportion is pointed out by the artist Marina Naprushkina in an interview given to Sergey Shabohin for the art project *Social Marble: Dynamic Archive of the Rise of Civil Society in Belarus* (2020). Marina says,

> People have nothing but their own defenceless bodies to oppose the violence of the state. And so out they come full of hope as a sign of support and solidarity to find themselves torn to pieces, beaten and even killed by the state terror. The situation is underlined by the awful inequality and inequality of the two opposing forces. (Shabohin 2020)

In this regard, from the very beginning, the protesters had to look for new forms of resistance, rooted in logic of 'the strength of the weakness'. Horizontal and decentralised, this networked resistance became possible when it had recognised its weakness and codependency. In doing this, it thus illustrates the logic of Bruno Latour when he says that the idea of dependence can be presented as an emancipation project since it recognises the fragility of the world and requires a reassembly of social, political and economic relations (Latour 2018).

The city architecture also contributed to the emergence of online protest forms. Given the fact that most Belarusian cities were actually rebuilt after World War II, the central city arteries were made to look like wide, multi-laned avenues with squares organised at their intersections. The downtown, as a rule, was moved deep into the city centre or slightly to the periphery. Urbanism can be approached and explained politically. Such squares are easy to block, since not many smaller streets where protesters can hide and where it is problematic to locate special equipment lead to them. Instead, there are one or two wide large-scale avenues that cut the square, exposing its front part, so those serve more for power exposure than for citizens' public assembly. It is precisely because of vulnerability and fear of violence that static meetings in squares and the capture of such spaces became impossible. And again, the networking was the answer to its own vulnerability and fragility.

Thus, the networked form of protest emerged from a situation of complete exclusion, the recognition of co-dependence, impossibility to build resistance 'on the enemy's territory'. As a response to despair, shock in the face of violence, the protest placed weakness and instability at the core of resistance tactics. And since networked logic underlies the very protest movement in Belarus, technologies such as social networks, messengers and IT platforms provide an opportunity for coupling. Such an organisation allows seizing appropriate technologies for the needs of the protests, as well as applying its logic to reinforce resistance tactics, which informs a more profound use of technology.

In an interview given to Reform.by online media, the philosopher Olga Shparaga, while reflecting on the nature and architecture of the Belarusian protests, emphasises the idea that people no longer need a strong leader, but rather a strong society capable of self-organisation

and solidarity, which has been formed against the background of deep shock caused by violent actions of the state.

> It is exactly that very form of solidarity that philosophers advocate – when people solidarise around the idea of people as such, as humanity. They believe that no one deserves to be mistreated, no one's basic rights and freedoms should be violated. And now we see how this idea unites everyone across professional, age and gender differences – people want to be active citizens and they speak it up. People do not want to live under authoritarianism and are ready to search for a common language to achieve their goal. (Shparaga 2020)

A protest can be viewed as a clash of two ontologies and two systems: the rigid hierarchical model and the actor-networked one. Various theoretical perspectives articulated by Bruno Latour, Levy Bryant, Judith Butler, Zigmunt Bauman and Giorgio Agamben reveal the extent to which injustice and viciousness are rooted in the established system of relations, where the subject's position in the society is fragile and vulnerable, while power and control become increasingly deeper parts of our existences, to the level of the most intimate attitudes in attempts to impose ideas about the state's care and security, at the same time absolutely not guaranteeing that the established institutions would not be turned against us when the state feels a threat to itself. The risks related to the appropriation of the state, dissolution of its functionality into horizontal and networked forms of connections, erosion of its monolithic hierarchical system is quite tangible in the Belarusian situation, when, in the pandemic, civil initiatives took up the functions of social guarantees provision, initially promised and not fulfilled by the state, using tools and the principles of digital environment organisation. At a certain point, information technologies balanced the authoritarian position of the state, breaking from the inside the idea of its universal, unalterable structure and unity. In this regard, the digital environment matched society's expectations from the nature of interaction, having overcome the reduced perception of the exclusively instrumental application of technologies in the Belarusian protest, merging with the system of social relations and institutions with deeper foundations and starting to act as a future social transformations substrate and prototype.

The transformative potential of digital technologies in the Belarusian political situation makes it possible to highlight their deeper impact on the types of relations and connections in society. We have tried to trace the transformation of theoretical models about society and systems of relations and connections between individuals based on the principles of instability, fragility, horizontality, hybridity and to acknowledge risks and threats inherent in the systems of established institutions, as well as those core points of the emancipation of individuals that will help us reconstruct perspective models of a common future.

3. Rigid hierarchies and crisis of the political

A specific feature of the Belarusian protest is its political or ontological confrontation between the rigid authoritarian and, therefore, patriarchal hierarchy of the state and the unstable, fragile horizontal network-based form of the protest. In other words, the point is not

about changing political power, but about changing a paradigm and a possible reconfiguration of political, social and economic systems. Different basic attitudes underlie each of these systems, and thus – different principles and models of governance, citizen involvement and inclusion/exclusion systems. Redefining modernity foundations also affects the processes of rethinking of such terms as 'state', 'society', '(dis)connectedness', 'visibility and presence', 'political activism', and 'action without co-presence', as well as the very nature of collective action as something that brings together time, space and publicity as its constituent elements.

The central subject, or rather the object, of the Belarusian state was an apolitical citizen. The relationship between the authoritarian power and citizens partly reproduced the classic subject-object structure. The role of the individual as an object had to do with indifference, non-interference, non-choice, consumption, maintaining a neutral value both for one's security and for the authority. In his text, *Belarusian Protest: Fighting the Silent Majority* (2020), Pavel Barkouski analyses the reasons for the deprivation of the political in Belarus and focuses on state terror, which achieves the goal of shifting a citizen into the field of an implosive mass that can only contemplate and enjoy the political scene, while remaining indifferent to what occurs around. 'But the transformation of citizens into silent masses in the common European context, something, for example, Baudrillard or Guy Debord also wrote about starting with the 1960s, can be connected with a certain loss of trust in the political, which occurred largely due to the absence of alternatives in the social agenda: the victory of liberal democrats over their socialist rivals, the rise of economic logic over the logic of civic action, fatigue caused by an infinite number of social transformations without any tangible result' (Barkouski 2020).

In her text, *To the Genealogy of a 'Community of the Shocked': Common Sense/ Sensus Communis/ Koine Aesthesis* (2020), while referring to the events of August 9–11, 2020, in Belarus, Tatiana Shchyttsova returns to the concept of common sense as a substrate of sociality, social contract, supposed common agreement about the principles and mechanisms of existence in a team. Social system is supposed to remain stable and exist since we have a common idea, common experience about concepts important for the collective (good, evil, normativity, deviation, etc.). For a considerable part of Belarusian society, the year 2020 brought significant shocks that disrupted the state of sleep and complacency, making people realise that the current system and institutions are simply unable to ensure contract guarantees for the majority, focusing on the president's personality and decisions instead.

The pandemic, the election race and campaign, firstly, clearly revealed a critical separation of the state apparatus from the civil society; secondly – influenced the formation of horizontal solidarity and initiatives that responded to people's basic needs for effective and efficient cooperation, and thirdly – exposed the catastrophic, fatal inability of government institutions to exercise their powers in the future without going against the society. In fact, the 'social explosion' of August 9–11 destroyed previously existing parity, completing a rapid transfer of the critical mass of people to the political dimension based on a new understanding of common sense. 'At its core, the Belarusian revolution is the collapse and reset of 'common sense'. A reset, during which a common moral sense should become the basis for the establishment of common sense in our country' (Shchyttsova 2020). In this emerging new cooperation, there is no place for the existing state system, because both its management and

the manifested unprecedented and asymmetrical violence brought it 'out of the brackets', making it redundant to the required common sense attitudes.

Before 2020, the Belarusian political space had shown signs of a hybrid model of governance, seeking to defend the visible centre of power by combining it with implicit control techniques that were already present in other societies. At the intersection of these combinations, in the ratio of violence, repression, moderate rights and freedoms, there were forms of compromise between civil society and the power apparatus. In general, the very existence in the modern social system is a process of establishing a correlation between the subject's autonomy and the dictate of society, the analysis of social institutions and practices that promote both adaptations in publicity and de-autonomisation of the individual, shaping conventional notions of free will to (self-)determination and action, its effects in the conditions of disproportionate technological and economic development.

At the same time, hierarchical relations in the Belarusian state were built on the principle of patriarchal family model scaling, where all the power was concentrated in the hands of the head of the family – in this case, the head of state. In this regard, many researchers draw attention to the president's non-accidental 'popular nickname' – Batska[2], which certainly indicates a patriarchal dimension of both the Belarusian government and society itself. Women's solidarity chains and marches against the authorities' violence, the statements they articulated in their posters, revealed that this 'family ties' logic was actually present in a much wider context of the whole society pointing at the vulnerability of each, as well at the inclusion of each in the system of violence and punishment. For the rigid vertical power structure in the current political situation, there were no priority groups or individuals excluded from the logic of repression, we all found ourselves under the patriarch's pressure:

> At women's marches women were saying that the violence was affecting the entire society. And they were saying this with the help of different slogans. The most important thing was that the posters feminists usually took to women's marches (for example, 'Beatings today – sentenced tomorrow') were later spotted on other marches organised by a broader public. A poster designed to support the Law to Combat Domestic Violence has become a symbol of the state that the entire society experiences today. This means that the figure of a woman subjected to systematic violence in the patriarchal system has now become something the majority associated themselves with. (Shparaga 2020)

The protest has exposed to a maximum the hierarchy of power, as well as the exclusionary mechanisms that apply to the vast majority seen by the state as a resource. Here, the reference to the patriarchal model of power is not accidental: the father's figure is not only a figure responsible for endowing others with privileges, but it also carries out punishment. When discussing ethical principles that are very selectively followed by the authorities, in her interview with Sergey Shabohin, the Belarusian writer and researcher Volha Hapeyeva said: 'In patriarchy, this rule only works when women or people with disabilities are "obedient", otherwise this regime can use violence and even kill' (Shabohin 2020). This is what the Belarusian government did with Belteleradiokampania employees who went on strike on August 17. The journalists who took part in the strike were simply fired, and in August, 19 media work-

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[2] From Belarusian colloquial name 'father'.

ers from Russia were brought to take their posts. That is, 'disobedient' subjects were replaced with those from other resources.

Moreover, one of the main features of patriarchal relations is the rigid centralization of power, where all the main infrastructural levers get concentrated in the hands of the few. Distributing and depriving both are the privileges of the subject of patriarchy. Novaya Borovaya, one of opposition residential areas in Minsk, for three days in mid-November remained with no hot and cold running water and heating – those were simply cut off by the state, jeopardising the dwellers' primary needs. In this regard, the connection between the hierarchical authoritarian model of the state and biopower seems to be interesting. In the socio-political dimension, biopolitics is an implicit form, a 'new technology of power' (Foucault 1997: 242). Described by Michael Foucault as a disciplinary measure, biopolitics was transformed into total macro-care forms, with the subjects identified as the population, establishing new tactics of control over the 'global mass' and targeting groups of influence with different levels of priority.

Agamben describes the generation of new invasive data accumulation institutions (the creation of databases, statistics, monitoring, accounting and prevention systems, etc.), interacting with 'bare life' as forms of such pervasive control. The philosopher analyses the shift of the concept of 'identity' from the field of social recognition, the process of incorporation into the social body through reputational gains into a set of biological data, where DNA acts as a bio-fat:

> … my identity and identification are defined by senseless patterns that an inked-up thump leaves on a card in some police station… This is something I have no idea about, something I in no way can identify myself with and something I at the same time can't get away from bare life, the sheer biological fact… (Agamben 2014)

Subjective bio-data is no longer a purely cultural phenomenon, it is something more profound, naked and at the same time objectifying, something a person interacts with intimately and, at the same time, has only a superficial idea of, and, finally, something that belongs only to me and what builds me into superimposed institutions, making me permeable and accessible, vulnerable and subordinate.

Thus, subjective existence is defined not by the fact of recognition, reputation, publicity, or social status, but by the fact of recording and collecting various data seen as tools for bodies and systems of control in the implementation of surveillance and prosecution. The state uses modern technology to track down protesters and bring them to court. There have been cases where people were sentenced to 10–15 days of prison for a photo on Facebook. The mobile phone became a target – the first thing law enforcement officers checked when detaining a person is whether (s)he is subscribed to opposition Telegram channels, equating this with extremism. If the user happens to be one of the administrators of such a channel, (s)he is brought to trial for 'organizing unauthorized mass events'. The fact that the state actively uses IT for repressive purposes is mentioned by the Belarusian researcher Almira Ousmanova, who writes:

> Every Belarusian citizen who takes to the street (moreover, if s/he makes a post on social media) becomes a target for persecution by the state repressive apparatus. The wiretapping of mobile communications, tracing contacts on social networks, video recording

each protester and facial recognition with the help of a special software – this is what ev-
eryone who dares to express their disagreement in one form or another faces these days.
(Ousmanova 2020)

The social state forms the idea of a 'neutral citizen', which must fit into the image of a stable
system of relations; everything that goes beyond this perception must be defined in terms of
control, surveillance and repression (Bergman 2020: 356). 'The social state is less focused on
the causes of our anxiety and more on its symptoms' (ibid: 24). Autonomy, as something that
defines the boundaries of the subject's private existence in society, his or her inviolability, is
the sphere of one's direct influence, in the modern world is presented as a politicised variable
that must be inscribed in the context of care implemented by the state. State institutions take
on responsibility, defining the degree of autonomy and security standards, forming the prin-
ciples according to which it is ensured, and thus turning autonomy into a field of implicit
confrontation, the fight for its boundaries.

    Alongside with the biopolitical dimension of the Belarusian authorities expressed in the
surveillance system, the use of photographs, videos and biometric data to control the protest-
ers, the Belarusian government uses what Foucault called the power over death. The level of
violence was really terrifying. As *Mediazona* reports (2020),

    Every third person received moderate injuries and mutilations. More than 600 people
    were beaten not during the rallies, but after being detained in police stations and in the
    detention centre on Okrestina Street. There have been at least 3 cases of sexual violence,
    one of the victims was a minor. (Litavri et al. 2020)

Today, violence is an explicit manifestation of power. As researchers note:

    Power is made of black rubber – one of the important slogans used by the protests taken
    from a famous song of the *La Contra* group – very accurately expresses the role of the
    Belarusian government today. Reliance on the power apparatus and open threats articu-
    lated by the president emphasised the unethicality of any hierarchical structures and, most
    importantly, the very figure of the president himself. (Talstou et al. 2020)

Due to the inefficiency of public administration institutions, the inability to overcome the
vertical understanding of the relationships between the state apparatus and the citizens, the
authorities consider violence as the only possible method of fighting the protesters.

    Thus, the model of the Belarusian government can be described as hybrid and based on
the rigid vertical structure of control, built on the principle of the patriarchal family. How-
ever, in this model some elements of biopolitics can also be discerned, where control over the
citizens is done by means of new technologies. However, it was the protest that exposed the
paradigmatic discrepancy between the logic of the actions performed by the state and the pro-
testers.

4. Lines of resistance

When describing the Belarusian protests, Almira Ousmanova defined them as One against the Many: 'Contrasting the analogue dictatorship to the digital multitude' (Ousmanova 2020; see also her article in this special issue). Despite the fact that the state, as shown above, is quite active in using technology for repressions, such a strong division seems to be extremely important, since it indicates that the Belarusian protest is a confrontation of two models with fundamentally different configurations and basic attitudes. Belarusian dictatorship is built on the principle of a rigid hierarchy, while the protesters represent a horizontal dynamic networked model devoid of any leadership. At the same time, such a state of affairs means that the protesters need to develop their territory: create new parallel infrastructures, take care of their vulnerable bodies, build their own economy and principles of relationships. As Nikolai Spesivtsev, a member of eeefff group, notes, 'In order to slow down the logistics of the state, the logistics of oppression, you need to build your own logistics. And for it to be effective, some other underlying foundations should be discovered' (Zhuk et al. 2020). In other words, the technologies used by the protesters today make it possible to create or rather to draft new relationships, to practise the future and build new lines of resistance. Among them, it is important to highlight and describe the following points of tension and concentration of the political.

4.1 Politicisation of care

The politicisation of care had begun even before the protests broke out and were associated with the state's response to COVID-19 and its complete disregard for the pandemic. As a result, people themselves started showing solidarity to help both the sick and health workers. This is how, for example, the horizontal self-organised initiative *ByCOVID* arose. However, it was in the light of the confrontation between the fragile human body and the machine of violence and aggression that the category of care came to the fore during the protests. After the disproportionate aggression of the authorities and violent dispersal of the demonstrators on 9–11 August 2020, the infrastructure of care – in the form of help to the victims – began to form. The established infrastructures, aimed at providing psychological, legal, financial support, as well as help related to missing persons search and human rights issues, are essential in the transformation and formation of network society structures. These initiatives provide various types of assistance and support – for example, car sharing. In *Auto 97%* Telegram channel, each user coordinated drivers' movement during protest marches and 'walks'. Drivers often helped protesters by rescuing them from riot police. But most importantly, in this Telegram channel, people shared resources: information, time or seats available in the driver's car when travelling to pre-trial detention centres to bring packages to prisoners.

Like the protest itself, these care infrastructures are horizontal, fundamentally decentralised and built according to the principle of networks. For example, *Probono.by* – a unified round-the-clock contact centre for victims, which connects them with the necessary initiative or specialist – operates following horizontal, non-hierarchical principles, using complex software and having a fairly large team of both their staff and volunteers.

Prior to the pandemic and protests, care generally existed in two registers: in the private sphere, that is, outside the political, or was understood as a sovereign's or a head's care of his people. However, thanks to access to technologies, the society, bypassing the state, created its own care infrastructures. With the help of new technologies, these initiatives re-assembled new collectives and speeded up solidarity processes. In this regard, the emerging structures of care in the political sense turned out to be new revolutionary ways of society's organisation and called into question any hierarchical, authoritarian structures and heroic figures.

These care infrastructures are built on the following principles: horizontal interaction, lack of hierarchies, the cooperation of various professional and social actors. They bring together businesses, IT, workers, psychologists, NGOs, students, journalists, etc., the lack of competition being one of their important features. In such systems, solidarity and cooperation present a much more productive and effective principle of interaction than competition. In other words, it is within these very new infrastructures, based on an innovative technical basis built around the idea of self-organisation and solidarity of various divided social groups, the politicisation of private sphere and everydayness with their structures shaping and making the existence of the public sphere possible where the mechanisms of political life change actually emerge.

4.2 Power transparency

It is important that technologies used by the protesters allowed demystifying the authorities, making them more permeable and transparent. On the one hand, IT shattered the myth of the complexity of political participation and created opportunities for civic participation in politics. On the other hand, working with big data simplified social control, making power transparent. The same way the state used face recognition and data processing technologies for surveillance and control over its citizens, the protesters could monitor the activities of individual institutions and agencies.

The first technology-related initiatives emerged during the election campaign and were aimed primarily at maximum removal of the obstacles to political participation. For example, *Chestnye Lyudi* initiative (Honest People 2020) called on citizens to run for precinct commissions and spread clear instructions, which were used by thousands. To reach this goal, an interactive map of all the polling places across the country enabling the locals to become observers was created. As a result, about 10 thousand observers reported violations at more than one thousand polling stations. Thanks to social networks and Telegram channels, many people became politically involved. Thus, by taking simple and clear actions, such as becoming an election observer or applying to the CEC, people (who did not consider it as radical political actions) got to know the work of the state machine related to their exclusion from politics and the process of making decisions important for the country.

In addition to the platforms that introduced people to political activities, websites and applications were created that allowed them to exercise control of the state. For example, *Civil Judicial Control* project (Zubr 2020) collects and processes data on the judges who hear protesters' cases and makes all their verdicts public. As many trials were held behind closed doors and in some cases, it took the judge no more than 10 minutes to deal with one administrative case, the platform accumulated all the data on the cases, making the system more per-

meable and restraining the arbitrariness of the judiciary against the citizens. The platform accumulated the statistics on the total number of cases and punishments and in December 2020, it estimated that the total number of days the accused were sentenced to was 64,939 (Zubr 2020). Also, the site listed all the names of judges who considered the cases of protesters and made indictments. It made clear which of the judges cooperated most actively with the authorities – starting August 9, 2020 some of them sentenced several hundred civilians who were exercising their constitutional right to publicly and peacefully express their position.

Special attention should be paid to the activities of *Cyber-partisans* who hacked the websites of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Investigative Committee. At the end of September 2020, an anonymous group found an unusual way to contact the security forces. They hacked the ERIP system, that is, virtually all the bank information terminals issuing receipts, where, along with the standard information the following appeal to the security forces could be read:

> If you are familiar with law enforcement officers, riot police, their relatives or acquaintances in particular, please tell them that lustration is not far off and they will ultimately bring harm only to themselves, their children, wives and close relatives, it is not too late to come to their senses and take the side of the people. Cyber-partisans. ("Hackers threaten ... " 2020)

In mid-September, they launched the *Black Map of Belarus* (Black map 2020) containing all the contact information about law enforcement officers – riot police and police force. The map and the 'List of security officers' made public together with NEXTA Telegram channel caused a mixed reaction among the protesters.

Although being in a 'grey' area, all the projects mentioned above add to the transparency and permeability of the authorities and enable the collection of data on law enforcement officials and employees who violate the law cooperating with the state.

4.3 Alternative infrastructures

When on August 7, on the eve of the election day, the head of the Central Election Commission, Lydia Yermoshina, described *Golos* as a shadow CEC platform, she had every reason to do so. Certainly, *Golos* did not aim at intercepting elections and conducting its own voting, separate from what the CEC was responsible for. But thanks to crowdsourcing and big data, it turned out to be effective in taking away the state's monopoly on counting votes. The very process of counting ceased to be impenetrable and mystical. Thanks to the initiative, the elections became as transparent as possible, and subsequently, the falsification was proved in more than 500 polling stations.

Golos platform is one of the first horizontal self-organised IT-based structures in the country that follows the principles of platform economy to consolidate citizens and solve political problems. New technologies simplified the process of forming infrastructures and entire sectors alternative to the public ones. For example, *Belye Khalaty* [White Lab Coats] association is in fact an unofficial union of Belarusian doctors. It provides updates on the situation with the coronavirus and makes available the data on beatings and rapes in pre-trial detention centres. The members of this association also express professional solidarity, or-

ganise joint events and strikes. Moreover, *ByMedSol* financial aid fund was launched for doctors in particular. In general, this infrastructure is important not only because it shows the inefficiency of state unions, but also because it creates working alternatives to the structures previously monopolised by the state.

The system of backyard communities is one of the most important technology-based infrastructures launched as a part of the protest movement. In the centralised system of the Belarusian state, local governments are virtually deprived of any power, and all the financial and communication flows go through the central government organs, with which you need to coordinate not only the budget but also any activity. The system of courtyard communities, scattered across the country in autumn 2020 as 'shimmering' points of resistance, did not just form a new infrastructure but also reformed the point of joint actions and relationships. *Dze.chat* – talks with neighbours – is a unified platform started in the country to accumulate the information about all the chats of this kind in Belarus. According to the study by the sociologist Oksana Shelest, there were more than 1,100 backyard chats in Belarus with a total of 550 thousand users interacting there (Shelest 2020). These chats helped their users, the residents of sleeping areas and blocks of flats, get acquainted, communicate, coordinate actions, help each other and organise events that included not only protests, but also lectures on philosophy, political science, concerts and other forms of joint actions. With technologies and offline activities, new forms of interaction and new collectivities emerged, which arose by bypassing the state and were built on the principles of cooperation, sharing and resource allocation that provided emancipatory potential and political dimension of these new forms of collectivities.

5. Future. Instead of conclusions

The IT sector creates conditions for the growth of a different infrastructure that provides more opportunities for emancipation and the rise of horizontal cooperation involving numerous actors and solving local tasks. Technologies make it possible to develop strategies and form a basis for long-term changes, they turn into an effective tool of political action in the welfare state, not excluding its concept, but enriching it with a big number of meanings and connections, aggregating spaces entirely composed of active agents and spontaneous groups.

An important factor in the existence of digital spaces is the hybridity of the formed groups that include both human and non-human agents and machines that undermine the totality from within. In 'The Democracy of Objects', Levi Bryant reveals the significance of set theory for the social system, where 'what the power set reveals is the bubbling pluralism of "the" world beneath any unity or totality. Any totality, or whole, in its turn, is itself an object or One alongside all sorts of other ones' (Bryant 2019: 279). The world appears in the form of the whole, the totality, a closed system that tries to reach some organic unity, to create the inviolability of ties, to naturalise order, as created by nature itself.

However, the world does not exist as organic totality, and collectives are not something pre-established, originally given and final in the flow of unstable connections, formed and broken spontaneously. Objects of the world exist and are valuable not per se, but due to their

functionality and ways of connections they establish. '….Collectives must be built by the objects that deign to enter into structural couplings with one another' (Bryant 2019: 281).

Based on Latour's sociology of associations, Bryant emphasises the need to study the types of connections between objects and the nature of their construction. 'While sociology addresses society, social forces, power, meaning, language and many other lowly human-related entities, explaining why people behave the way they do, the sociology of associations focus on how relationships are forged in creation assemblies' (Latour 1999: 304). The perception of the world as an activity composition reopens the prospects of its development, the design of the future, the liberation from the oppression of another collective.

In such a picture of the world, where the subject has the same status as the object, it is impossible to give priority to any particular world (natural, human, technological), since all act as free agents in systems of mixed interaction and the absence of artificially limited agglomerations. The actor-network theory primarily focuses on identification of the network configuration, which allows actors to liberate themselves becoming a point of reference and access – provided that there are no pre-established groups and collectives with clearly defined interests (i.e. there are no deep determinants that form a total suspicion). The principles of connections between actors in unstable systems lie in the narrative autonomy, in the active story, where each is a bifurcation point, event or source of translation instead of a simple transfer without changes, which includes hierarchies, horizontal network connections and hybrids (Latour 2010). By involving different environments and actors into collectives, for their effective interaction and information exchange, it is necessary to create diffuse models that would enable to adapt new knowledge and information at different levels of its perception, also by means of overcoming the 'internal-external' dichotomy, which prevents the formation of closed immutable systems (including professional communities with political environment being one of them, for example). And the digital environment is, among others, also such an open, diffuse and non-pre-set architecture.

All this brings us to shaky ground – the question of the future. The Belarusian artist and researcher Olya Sosnovskaya, when describing the temporality of the protest, uses the grammatical construction of the English tense *Future Perfect Continuous (2020)*, which emphasises the non-linearity of time, especially when it comes to the perspective of long-term protests. On the one hand, thanks to new technologies and new forms of the organisation of social relations, collective interaction, attitude to Another as someone fragile, the recognition of mutual dependence is realised as an emancipatory strategy of relations and suspension of the dictates of the market. Protest products and platforms fall out of the logic of profit and monetisation – they are in the process of the formation of other types and principles of connections and explore the logic of another organisation instead. One can feel that in Belarus the future was 'practised' on the streets. It no longer seems unrealistic and distant. The utopian horizon of the future and the struggle for it have always been an important agenda of leftist thought. But at the same time, working with the future and fighting for it lies not in the realm of pure fantasy, but in the realm of the political. And this struggle cannot end or stop. So, Olya Sosnovskaya concludes: 'Today, when I feel more than ever that to imagine the future is to struggle – a gesture of demand, the imperative of living the future *now*' (Sosnovskaya 2020).

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Interviews

An interview with an IT developer on the role of technology in the Belarusian protest (2020) 29 November. Zoom interview by Antonina Stebur.

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