



Strategy of Language Resistance in Telegram during the Belarusian Civic Movement (Summer 2020–Winter 2021)

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Abstract: The 2020-2021 Belarusian civil protest combined not only *traditional* methods of disobedience, but also forms of digital counteracting, broadened the concept of information space and in many ways transformed it. Throughout the protests, media space was not only freed from regime control but also significantly influenced independent media. As a result of this evolution, so-called citizen media with their own language and unique narrative strategies emerged from an oppressed, subjugated and intimidated journalism. The new language is informative and brief (telegram language), capacious, sharp, but not vulgar, skillfully operating with facts and half-facts. In many ways, it was the language of these new forms of media that triggered a reaction of civic resistance and radical counteraction by the authorities. The article focuses not only on the use of language tools for presenting information, but also on how and why the language of Telegram channels became dominant in the public opinion of Belarusian society after the elections on August 9, 2020.

Keywords: Belarus, media, Telegram, protest, language, discourse, power, election

The 2020–2021 Belarusian protest can be viewed from several perspectives. There is no doubt that the protest itself, which has all the signs of a spontaneous social event, has a deeper structure in which the causes of civil discontent lie. Therefore, several critical perspectives should be considered here first. After early 1990s, the post-Soviet Belarus entered the stage of its postcolonial existence. Until now, this theoretical framework has not been fully reconsidered in the intellectual and political space of Belarus, but it can potentially explain the discursive processes of contemporary Belarus and opens new avenues for research (Saifullayeu 2020). More precisely, the postcolonial optics allows us to explain the manipulateness of symbolic language, the behaviour of elites and ideological preferences of society post-1991.

Viewing Belarusian society within the framework of postcolonial criticism allows one to understand the manipulative properties of the language of elites and its instrumentalisation within the borders of the counter-discourse. This allows us to analyse the contextual purpose

and properties of the language used in civil protest. For example, some quotations in the text containing associative language elements with the help of the historiographic narrative (for example: Lukashenko=*agrofürher*, police=*Gestapo*, etc.) become clear only when we understand the mechanisms of colonial engineering in the space of memory in combination with the behavioural model of post-Soviet elites and the inability to get rid of the (post)imperial knowledge as such.

Still, using the postcolonial markers to analyse the language of media space in a certain period might not be productive from a practical point of view. This is due to the absence of a critical analysis of the context in which this media language is placed. However, it is possible to consider its external functions, which is to create a certain strategy of using the language in the format of civil protest. It draws the attention to the binary properties of language, which intensify the polarisation of public opinion in relation to the authorities and vice versa.

The symbolic weight of media language (and the so-called new media), is largely revealed by Bourdieu's theory of capitals. While various regional variations of postcolonial theory can be used to explain the cultural and political context of dependence and the schematic thinking of local elites, Bourdieu's theory of capitals helps identify the social and class content of discursive structures (including the case in question) and the external functions of the narrative in a particular period. In other words, knowing the main actors of a particular event and the political motivation of both sides, it is possible to analyse the manipulative meanings of media language in the symbolic space of discourse. Today, the various modes of mediation create not only reality, as Bourdieu wrote about television (Bourdieu 1998: 22), but directly influence the public consciousness in favour of the political interests of certain circles.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Belarusian regime relatively easily controlled the internal media space. However, Russian mass media, especially TV, unequivocally dominated the information field. In 2002, ONT (Nationwide Television) started its broadcast, which was the first significant step of the Belarusian authorities towards limiting the influence of Russian media. The popularity of Russian entertainment content and the economic inability to create a mass, competitive product was combined with the need to control the information field. ONT was a hybrid of Russian entertainment content and Belarusian information content, and it still broadcasts according to a similar principle. Ruthless suppression of independent mass media with simultaneous propaganda of old values in a new, capitalistic format kept the public consciousness in a lethargic sleep. During Lukashenko's first two terms in office (1994–2006), mass media without any significant obstacles broadcasted an ideological format of reconstruction of the Soviet frames in a non-Soviet state. In other words, the language of power created the ideological foundation of Lukashenko's autocracy via unilateral mediation. However, together with the digitalisation of the information field and the accompanying commercialisation of the media space, even direct control of the state media could not bring the necessary ideological effect.

Unhindered Soviet-style propaganda was becoming anachronistic in the era of Internet development in Belarus. The legitimising functions of ideology were devalued in the public consciousness and became something like a *justification* for the elites themselves. The gradual increase of the Internet community in Belarus in the 21st century has left the ideological format de-actualised by many 'informal' choices (Ousmanova 2008: 17–18), including

public informational behaviour. The symbolic field of power began its gradual regression, and, during the fifth presidential term of Alexander Lukashenko, it stopped feeding off and feeding to the political capital of the elites of the Lukashenko regime. So, in autocratic states such as Belarus, this diversity of mediation is a major problem for the censorship of the information field.

If we consider the Belarusian protest as an act of society's political manifesto, then the doom of the struggle against the regime (the consciousness of doom is also correlated with language) during autumn–winter 2020–2021 is compensated by the symbolic struggle, and as a result, it is the symbolic and performative aspect that becomes dominant. In public consciousness, the symbolic struggle takes, as Bourdieu wrote, two forms: the subjective and the objective (Bourdieu 1990: 143). On the objective level, the act of demonstrating individual self-representation leads to the consolidation of consciousness on the collective level. The simultaneous demonstration of the individual, autonomous actions of the subject makes the act of resistance more noticeable and visible in public space. In turn, on the subjective level, the symbolic action can lead to an attempt to change the perception and evaluation of societal structures. The nature of symbolic struggle brings the effect of autonomisation in relation to the (political and ideological) structures to which the protesters belong (Bourdieu 1990: 135). In the Belarusian case, it is the act of symbolic protest that becomes the main driving force of social autonomisation, and the language of protest becomes the main tool of disobedience. Spontaneous, in essence, and organised in a new medial format, the civic language of the Belarusian protest, expressed in Ariella Azoulay's words, destroyed the syntactic sequences in the existing ruling language and made violence visible to the naked eye (Azoulay 2013: 1).

1. Telegram in Belarus in 2020

Belarusian society in 2020 stunned both internal and external observers. The prolonged peaceful resistance became a multidimensional space of social declarations and an opportunity to appeal to power. This was already not just a (quasi)political movement against Lukashenko but a socio-political, cultural, digital and informational resistance against autocracy in its post-Soviet state. Until now, it is difficult to offer a methodological assessment of the Belarusian protest. Different political and intellectual forces and different social classes were involved in the protest movement, which in turn contradicted the established stereotype of a weak national identity of Belarusian society and a lack of communal solidarity. As the protest developed, comparisons with other post-Soviet revolutions, including Euromaidan, lost their logic and validity, as the multiplying forms of peaceful protest radically differed from other 'revolution' in the post-Soviet space.

One of the main factors giving uniqueness to the Belarusian protest is the media and their influence on the logistics and emotions of the protests. Under conditions of total state propaganda and a limited range of alternative sources of information and their monotonous ideological sounding, people found themselves in an information trap. Both state and independent media under conditions of strengthened censorship until 2020 can be seen as formulaic and predictable in their content. This predictability has to a large extent defined a precise boundary in the matter of viewpoint divisions among information consumers. At the same time, one

should keep in mind the strong Russian media influence, which participated in shaping public opinion in Belarus to the same extent as the Belarusian media.

During 2020, the Belarusian media space evolved dynamically. The binary division of the information field into state (and pro-Russian) propaganda and non-state media has deepened not only in terms of content, but also in the form of information and radicalisation of the media language on both sides. Rapid growth of the popularity of messengers as a source of information influenced both the content and form of the media language, which was flexibly adapted to the demands of the dynamically developing situation in the 2020 post-election period.

In the post-Soviet space, among the multiple offerings in the instant messaging market, the use of Telegram, due to its reputation as the most secure instant messenger, was steadily growing. Its infrastructure that significantly expanded the capabilities of the messenger was developed in 2015. It included a possibility to create channels (equivalent to microblogs) and supergroups, users were given the opportunity to create not only the so-called *individual blogosphere* but also to create an informational space, which with the help of chat-bots, one could tailor it to the audience (Stepanov 2018: 240–241). Telegram's reputation as a safe place for users to communicate without fear of de-anonymisation and censorship by the authorities contributes to its popularisation in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet.

Under conditions of increased information censorship on the Internet in Russia and Belarus, Telegram became an island of freedom of speech, which in turn, in the context of the post-Soviet hostility to the omnipresence of power and its sacred semantics, has an additional symbolic meaning against the background of social media (vk.com, ok.ru) and messengers controlled by the authorities. For example, in Russia, after the blocking of Telegram by Roskomnadzor in April 2018, its audience continues to grow. According to research conducted by Deloitte in 2020 after Telegram was unblocked by the Russian authorities, the instant messenger recorded an 11% increase in users compared to 2019 and is currently used by 36% of users ('Mediapotreblenie v Rossii...' 2020: 10).

In Belarus, the trend of increasing popularity of Telegram in the period from 2017–2019 can be seen in the statistics of registered channels in the Belarusian segment (Belaruskii Telegram [<https://t.me/BelarusTelegram>] 2018; 2019) of Telegram as a rate of over 50% is recorded (Shelest et. al. 2020: 9). In 2020, an unstable intra-political situation due to the tensions between the public and the authorities related to the coronavirus pandemic, the pre-election campaign and events following the August 9 elections led to an explosive increase in the number of users of Telegram in Belarus. It is illustrated by the rise in popularity of the NEXTA Live channel, which in August 2020 experienced a dramatic increase in its readership audience and became the most popular Telegram-channel in the Russian-language Telegram space (see Image 1). At the end of December 2020, the channel maintains the 11th position in the world ('Telegram-kanaly Belarus' 2020).

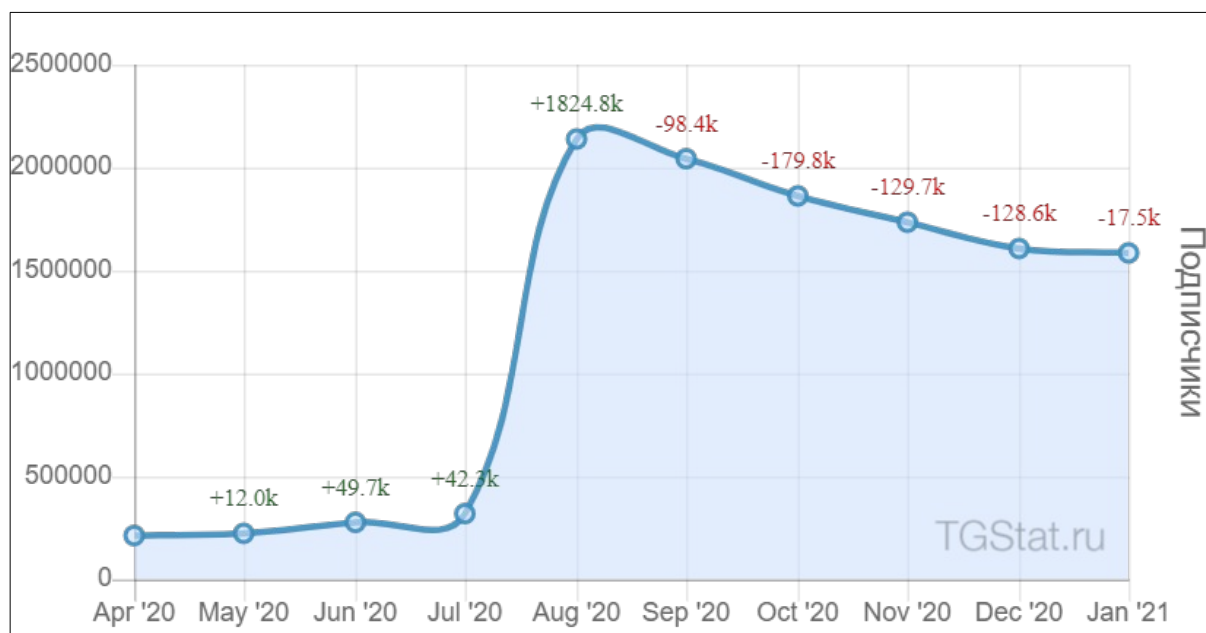
Image 1. Nexta Live telegram channel subscriber growth dynamics in 2020.

Image description: A table showing an increase of 1824.8k telegram channel subscribers in the course of July 2020.

Source: <https://by.tgstat.com/#> (05.01.2021)

According to a report by the Center for European Transformation (CTE) in Belarus, during 2017–2019 Telegram’s audience doubled in number of channels and their readers respectively (Shelest et. al. 2020: 9–12). An explosive growth of Telegram users is observed in 2020 when in August 2020 the number of active Telegram users was at about 2.4 million users (Shelest et. al. 2020: 8), which is about 35% of the population of Belarus with the most active users of the Internet network aged from 15 to 69 years (Obshchaia chislennost’ naseleniia... 2020:13). According to the popular statistical service for Telegram tgstat.ru, as of early 2021, out of 30 channels in relation to subscribers only one channel does not relate to socio-political topics – @koko_by [https://t.me/koko_by] (‘Telegram-kanaly Belarus’ 2020).

Significant in terms of Telegram’s growth is the adaptation to the new media reality by the leading non-state Belarusian media. By the start of 2020, a specific information field was formed, which may be divided into state, opposition, commercial media (ideologically neutral and non-state but non-apolitical). Naturally, the increased role and importance of the Telegram forced the major media to restructure the ways of producing content, which, in turn, has contributed to the mastering of new language techniques and forms of content. This process particularly affected the opposition media (some with foreign funding) and the news-commercial media, which began to actively use Telegram for more efficient communication with their readers. Popular opposition and commercial media outlets increased the number of subscribers to Telegram several times such as Onliner.by by 4 times (Onliner tgstats.com 2021), kyky.org by 50 times (Kulyary KYKY tgstats.com 2021), Belsat by 24 times (‘Belsat’ tgstats.com 2021), Nasha Niva by 38 times (Nasha Niva tgstats.com 2021). For example, the largest Belarusian news portal tut.by, which in August 2020 had 160 million pageviews

(December 2020 Overview... 2021) increased its audience in Telegram by 15 times during 2020 (TUT.BY Novosti tgstats.com 2021; see Image 2).

Image 2. tut.by telegram channel subscriber growth dynamics in 2020.

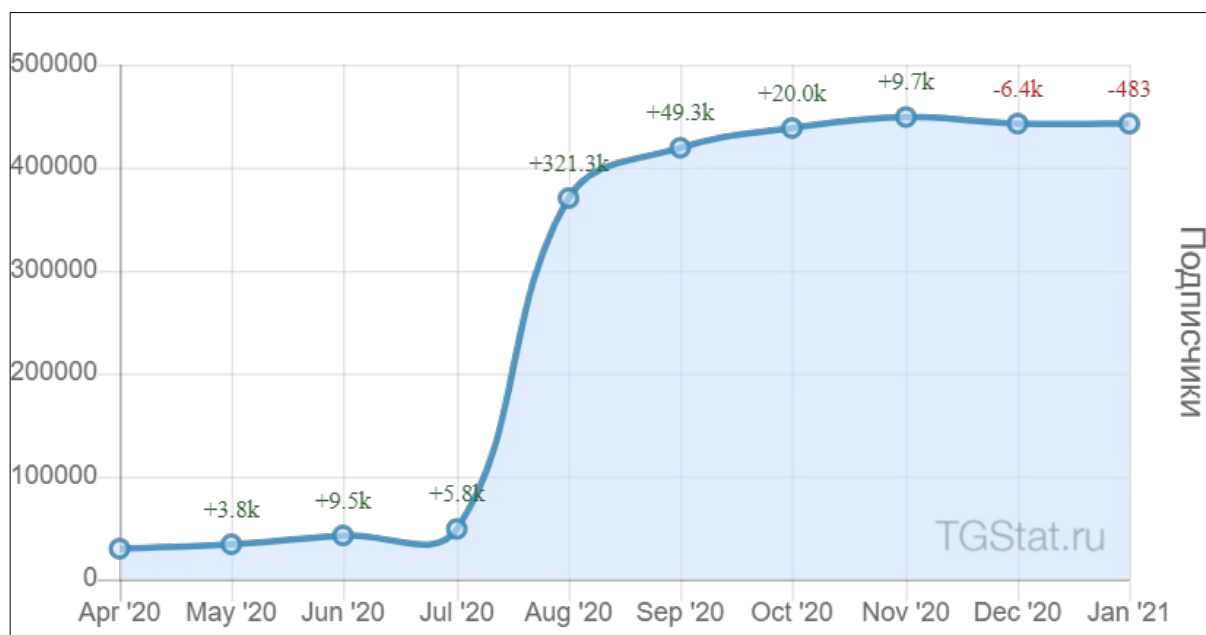


Image description: A table showing an increase of 321.3k telegram channel subscribers in the course of July 2020.

Source: <https://by.tgstat.com/#> (05.01.2021)

State mass media could not catch up on time. Only in the post-election period the authorities recognised that Telegram can be used to create a counter-discourse. In this category are primarily new channels, which were created between 2019–2020. Official media are not popular in Telegram, the first in terms of subscribers channel of the state news media BELTA is in 83rd position in the space of Belarusian Telegram having as of January 2021 about 17.500 subscribers ('Telegram-kanaly Belarus' 2020). The pro-Lukashenko Telegram-channels in the ranking of the top 30 of the Belarusian Telegram by number of subscribers were only *Pul Pervogo* (t.me/pul_pervogo) and *Zheltye Slivy* (t.me/zheltyeslivy) channels. Both channels have very similar characteristics – they used similar language and had around 96.000 subscribers ('Telegram-kanaly Belarus' 2020). They were created as a response to the growing popularity of opposition channels on Telegram. *Pul Pervogo* is an unofficial presidential channel, registered on November 7, 2019, providing updates directly related to Lukashenko. *Zheltye Slivy* was registered on May 29, 2020 – with the focus on the counter-narratives to the opposition channels. Unlike the *Pul Pervogo* the content is not created around the 'insides' and presents an opposite (mirror image) ideological picture to the opposition and commercial channels. The explosive growth in the number of subscribers took place in August–November 2020 (see Images 3 and 4).

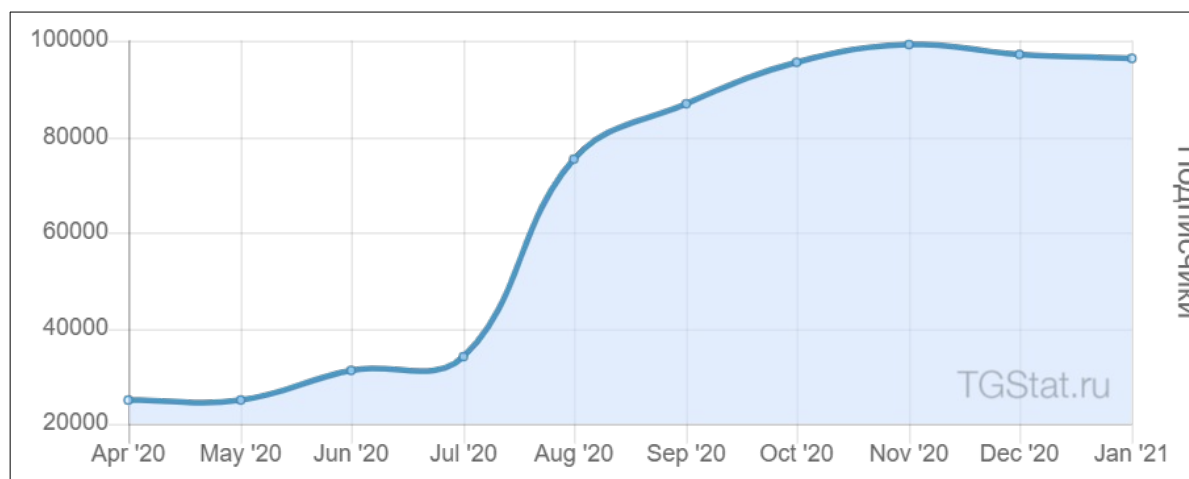
Image 3. Pul Pervogo telegram channel subscriber growth dynamics in 2020.

Image description: A table showing an increase in Telegram channel subscribers in the course of July as well as between August and November 2020.

Source: [https://by.tgstat.com/channel/@pul_1_\(05.01.2021\)](https://by.tgstat.com/channel/@pul_1_(05.01.2021))

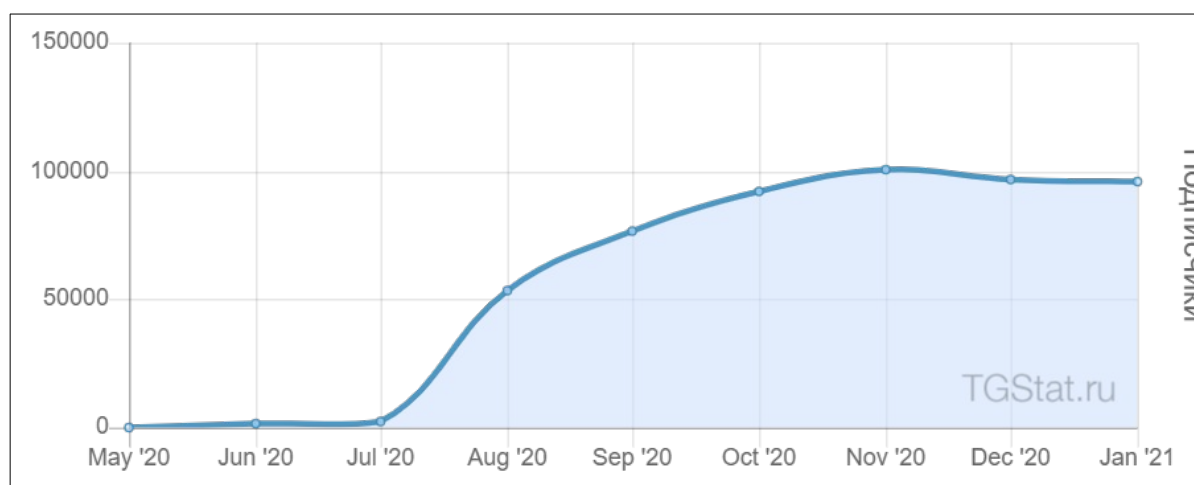
Image 4. Zheltye Slivy telegram channel subscriber growth dynamics in 2020.

Image description: A table showing an increase in Telegram channel subscribers in the course of July as well as between August and November 2020.

Source: <https://by.tgstat.com/channel/@zheltyeslivy> (05.01.2021)

2. Language of the channels in Telegram

Using Telegram as a media platform requires appropriate skills not only to operate the service itself (use of bots, advertising, collaboration with other platforms), it also requires the ability to create an appropriate language environment, linked to a specific form of language.

This environment determines the uniqueness of the content to keep the reader coming back for more news to a particular channel. In this situation, it works for the so-called *opposition media*. This opposition should be understood not as a political opposition (although there is no doubt about it), but more like a civic opposition. This is due to the fact that the source base of opposition channels consists of audiovisual materials, documents and testimonies sent by witnesses. These are people who directly take part in protests or experience repressions from the authorities and share their experience, usually anonymously, by sending the recorded material to the channel administrators.

Why do opposition media adapt better to Telegram? There are several important factors. First, the very essence of Telegram implies communication using concise messages and notifications, which in this way generates short and laconic forms of language. If the information contained in these messages is transmitted in a live mode, they would be short messages with an audiovisual attachment without the load of interpretation and analysis. With this mode of mediation, language is freed from the framework of censorship in any sense; it is often the language of emotion, of re/compensatory aggression and neologisms.

The analytical content (the author's interpretation of events or event planning) is also an important element of the content, which through analytical material advances the reader's own interpretation. By the end of 2020 (when the protest strategy started to change due to the reduction of its scale in the winter period), the opposition channels started to put more emphasis on the analytical content. As a result, when the intensity of reader-sourced content decreased, channel administrators focused more attention on creating larger-format texts, which maintained the intensity of notifications and allowed for a more measured content. A perfect example of this is the NEXTA and NEXTA Live channels, the two largest in subscriber terms on the Belarusian Telegram. Similar content restructuring of these channels was undertaken in early 2020 in February (NEXTA [https://t.me/nexta_tv] 05.02.2020).

In contrast to the pro-state and commercial channels, the opposition channels still had a wide audience within the Belarusian blogosphere on Telegram until the intense phase of political events in Belarus in 2020. The topics of the channels included the internal political processes in Belarus, avoiding content directed against the top leadership of the state and focusing instead on criticism of local authorities: 'I will try to write here about problems/solution options and situations where people need help. I'll try not to spam/flood. The main topics: housing and utilities, ecology, stupidity of officials. But hopefully there will be some positive things, too' (Motolko Help [<https://t.me/motolkohelp>] 2020). One of the examples is the MotolkoHelp channel (t.me/motolkohelp), which became an important public information source in the post-election period. With the existing structure and character of the channel (collection of information from citizens) in the post-election period, the channel using its already existing logistics of information collection re-oriented itself into an oppositional public medium with elements of (civic) investigative journalism.

The nature and carefully cultivated image of Telegram as a platform that is free from authority's censorship and corporation's interference to Telegram, combines elements of blogging and social media and creates a kind of free space. In the case of opposition channels in Belarus, this phenomenon was fully utilised. The narrative was freed from the journalistic form of storytelling and foregrounded the emotional aspect of the message, allowing for a terminological revision of the main actors of the events. Channel editors have unlimited lin-

guistic possibilities. In fact, with the help of language, social sublimation took place. So, at critical moments during the protests, when it is impossible to overcome the use of violence by the authorities (who presented it as a lawful action in the state media), the demonisation and delegitimisation of authorities and institutions subordinated to them appeared. In general, the delegitimisation of power by November 5 became one of the fundamental factors shaping public sentiment not only on channels in Telegram but as a programmatic point of the opposition camp.

The liberation of language from established forms of narration allowed for a much wider use of allegorisation, metaphorisation towards the main actors of the protest. Similar linguistic tropes were used not only in the heroisation of the protesters, but also in the demonisation of the authorities and, in particular, the special services involved in the pacification of the protests. Using a broader instrumentarium provided by the language of blogging (author's vision) in social media, the author (Editorial Board) acquires the effect of trust, sympathy and mutual experiencing of the events.

The Belarusian protest is a multilayer and very dynamic process based largely on a specific language of resistance and cultural manifestations. One reason for this is the peaceful, non-violent character of the protest cultivated by the protesters. It led to a resourceful reaction of society in forming new and unexpected forms of protest. The selection of an appropriate language of resistance on the part of society was also conditioned by the platform affordances of the new media. Precisely Telegram channels largely contributed to the creation of allegorical terminology towards particular segments of power (executive, judicial, legislative, force structures). So, there was the terminological adaptation to describe the actors of protest or their actions, e.g. concepts from the narrative space of World War II or terms from the *alive* language demeaning homosexual groups (Belarus' *golovnogo mozga* [https://t.me/belamova] 2020), the use of animalistic epithets (NEXTA Live [https://t.me/nexta_live] 23.03, 10.08.2020) and slang (Maia Kraina Belarus' [https://t.me/mkbelarus] 2018).

For example, a message coming from the opposition channels can be reframed in order to bolster emotion towards *silovik*¹ violence. In the translations given below, the various expressions for *silovik* are marked in italics. Original message sourced from Telegram-channel news portal onliner.by published on October 11 at 1:44 PM on the day of the so-called Pride March includes a brief description and video showing the brutal pacification of the March by the uniformed services: 'A violent dispersal near the stele: people stood in a hitch, did not disperse, the *law enforcers* [in the message, the term used is *siloviki* – A.S.] came and started beating the protesters with truncheons' (Onliner [https://t.me/onlinerby] 11.10.2020). A message from NEXTA's Telegram feed appeared at 1:49 PM showing the same video but with a different description: 'In Minsk, *fascists* attack passers-by near the Stele! Video by Onliner' (NEXTA [https://t.me/nexta_tv] 11.10.2020).

An interesting phenomenon is the terminological extension of power and its structures via the creation of a kind of external sociolect around it, i.e. a designated variety of language addressed to a specific social group – the so-called *siloviki*. This external sociolect presents binary oppositions that contain the fundamental semantic divide – good and evil. Well, in the focus there are representatives of the uniformed services, who are categorised as an absolute

¹ A collective term of Russian origin for representatives of the uniformed services (army, police, OMON, KGB, etc.).

evil, which is captured with a local accent. The terms *fascists*, *Nazis*, *Gestapo*, and *karateli*² are used not only to emotionally load the video for the channel subscribers, but also to set the recognisable intersubjective frame of us–them, us–not–us. The reference to World War II and, more specifically, to the Great Patriotic War, is not accidental. The tradition of remembering the war comes from the Soviet times; it was preserved by the official structures of knowledge in post-Soviet Belarus. The Great Patriotic War represents a huge space of manipulative historical narratives with a binary division into good and evil, including a separate myth complex in relation to Belarus. Therefore, it is the best suited category for the evaluation of good and evil in the Belarusian sociocultural space. It is a universal way of traumatising and over-emotionalising actions and their actors, due to its roots in political and historiographic traditions, the material field of memory of Nazi victims abundantly presented in Belarus and as one of the basic nation-forming components of the (post-Soviet) discourse on history (in the cited fragment these comparisons are in italics – A.S.).

3. The Face of Lukashism

The video captures the events of August 10 in Grodno. A unit of *punishers* ran into the dormitory of the Grodno State Agrarian University. The dormitory residents went outside to see what was happening, but when they saw the *Nazis* in uniform and special equipment, they went back inside. Then the *punishers* broke into the dormitory (note that it was a state dormitory) and started beating a man who was there. When the janitor tried to interfere to protect him, one of the *Gestapo* guards swung his truncheon at her and hit the table, which was covered with glass. The glass itself broke. One could see how distressed the woman was by this behaviour of the uniformed Nazis. It is clear that no Lukashenko's 'court' will bring the cockerels to justice for beating people. But have they at least paid for the glass? It's public property 😊 (NEXTA [https://t.me/nexta_tv] 08.12.2020).

Comparisons of the autocratic regime in Belarus to the Nazi regime in Germany in the 20th century is a frequently used semantic substratum for the construction of an external sociolect in relation to the governing camp in Belarus. For example, the morphological derivation of the word *agrofürher* combines a direct reference to the concept of *Führer* (Adolf Hitler's title) with the appendage 'agro-' referring to the image status of the Belarusian economy as oriented towards the development of the agrarian sector and the stereotype of Alyaksandr Lukashenka based on his biography as the 'chairman of the kolkhoz'. Further examples include comparisons of the Okrestina Detention Centre with the Auschwitz concentration camp (Karateli Belarusi [<https://t.me/karatelibelarusi>] 2020; Onliner [<https://t.me/onlinerby>] 5.11.2020; NEXTA Live [https://t.me/nexta_live] 15:35, 15.08. 2020; NEXTA Live [https://t.me/nexta_live] 12:23, 15.08.2020), ghetto – reflected in one of the actions in Minsk yards (Belsat [<https://t.me/belsat>] 03.12.2020), occupation – in the parallel sense Nazi occupation = Lukashenko occupation.

² Comparison of the representatives of the Interior Ministry services to the *Einsatzgruppen* during the Nazi occupation of the USSR (and Belarus, respectively).

Image 5. Performance in the Cascade housing development.



Image description: A sign in an urban setting at night saying “Ghetto 8.2” and “Flaggeplatz”.

Source: <https://t.me/kascadlive/634>

An excerpt from the description of a series of photos from the Telegram channel of residents of the Cascade housing development who held a protest action against the *siloviks* appearance in the area of the housing development in order to monitor the residents and their social activity: ‘The Cascade was under the occupation of the siccing Nazis in the corners. Appropriate signs appeared here. Now everyone who sets foot there will know that this is an extremely dangerous neighbourhood, where extremely dangerous people live. But it is only dangerous for the regime! [...]’ (Kaskad Live [<https://t.me/kascadlive>] 20.01.2021; see Image 5).

Although Telegram due to its form of reporting (push news) allows more freedom in the use of specific forms of language, its metaphorisation or allegorisation, it should be emphasised that news and commercial channels as well as official, state-owned media try to avoid similar analogies in their descriptions of events. In addition to the ethical formalisation of the journalistic style of narration, the content of the commercial news media and official media is intricately linked to other platforms, primarily to their own portal. Telegram in this situation serves only as a kind of platform for converting subscribers of the channel into readers of the portal, as evidenced by the limited and dry language of the message, short form of the message, often an external link leading to the site of the core portal is added to the message.

Live content is free of the pathos television's dramatisation, obvious propaganda and direct manipulation of consciousness. The spontaneous nature of the publication, intensely delivered to the reader, rejects the manufacturing inherent in television as recalled by Bourdieu in *On Television* (Bourdieu 2008: 19). That is, the recipient of the message understands that the specific material is not being *televised*, and the commentary attached to the video reflects his emotional overexcitation by events (violence from the authorities and repression). In this case, a peculiar ideological filter of the receiver works, who dramatises what he/she sees on his/her own.

Due to the specificity of source providing and the mobility and speed of information, in *breaking news* mode, it is possible to cite an initial source – including opposition channels that practice more *alive* description. Then the news is filled with appropriate journalistic interpretation. For example, the news about the beating of a woman and a man sitting on a bench by OMON (riot police) on August 10, which initially appeared on the NEXTA channel. In the news, the semantic amplification in the term OMON soldiers is in italics.

A guy and a girl were sitting on a bench, and a crowd of *black-clad fascists* jumped on them and started beating them, shouting 'you have to stay home', 'that's the fucking change'. Then they knocked the cyclist down, broke his bike, beat him up and left him on the asphalt. Molodezhnaya metro station, across from 'Corona' in the courtyard. (NEXTA Live [https://t.me/nexta_live] 01:33, 10.08.2020).

The same action in Belsat Television's Telegram-channel edition (funded by the Government of the Republic of Poland) was given without an ethical burden when characterising OMON's actions. The video caption was framed as direct speech (which we hear in the video) with censored swearing:

OMON: You should stay home. Change, fuck it. You wanted change?!

Minsk.

Video: NEXTA. (Belsat [<https://t.me/belsat>] 10.08.2020).

This mechanism also works the other way round, i.e. a message appearing in the channels of information-commercial media is processed in the opposition channels with the use of *alive* language. This is the message of October 11, 2020, which initially appeared on the Belsat TV channel containing a short video from 9–11 August in Minsk on Okrestino Street (location of Okrestina Detention Centre) showing the violence used by the police against detained participants of the mass post-election protests. The content of the Belsat's message contains short information explaining the process of the beating (who is being beaten, how, where and when), an ideogram (angry face) has been used to emotionally reinforce the message, and at the beginning and the end of the message there are red exclamation marks (to draw the reader's attention):

! There is a video showing militiamen beating up people at the 'Akrestsino' 😡

The video was filmed between August 9 and 11.

Caution. Brutal video ! (Belsat [<https://t.me/belsat>] 11.10.2020).

The news portal tut.by in its Telegram channel notifies of the appearance of footage showing people dressed in police uniforms beating up protesters and, referring to Belsat, indicates the time and place, while referring to NEXTA it informs that the footage was taken from an *avtozak* (prisoner transport vehicle):

There is a video of the beating of detainees by people in police uniform.
 ‘Belsat’ reports that it was filmed on August 9–11 in Minsk on Okrestina Street. Nexta reports that the footage was taken from a police truck.
 Video: @Belsat. (Tut.by [https://t.me/tutby_official] 2020).

The start of the message is given more journalistic treatment, as the effect of doubting the ‘officially unconfirmed’ information is introduced (‘People in police uniform’) and a kind of shifting of responsibility for the information obtained (‘reports’). However, it is worth noting that a similar style is characteristic of opinion-forming news portals with their own network of journalists and officially operating as mass media³.

In contrast, the opposition channel NEXTA Live exercises a freer interpretive approach. NEXTA Live does not doubt the place, time or participants. Compared to the way the news was described by tut.by or Belsat, NEXTA Live states the fact of police violence, defines the victims as ‘not only protesters but also random people’, and states where the recording was made (*avtozak*). An important narrative element in this message is the emotional aspect (‘treated the captive Belarusians’; ‘And they [cops-AS] do it with obvious sadistic pleasure. Just look at their eyes and faces’) or a reference to traumatic events, e.g. with the help of slang used for the police authorities (*musora, menty*)⁴ or the use of metaphorisation towards the authorities and the police (in the quoted fragment this aspect is marked in italics – A.S.). The mention of the so-called *law default* refers to the terminologically criminalised power (‘And Lukashenko and his gang still deny the use of torture against the detainees’) pointing out to the power *gang* systematically using certain methods of violence (a special Lukashist ritual). In the news content, the use of a certain type of language against the authorities or their representatives serves to construct a binary division between *our* victims and the *foreign* repressive power.

The current level of violence from *Lukashenko’s lackeys* toward the protesters reminds many of the events of August 9–12. In this connection, we would like to *remind you* of how the *musors* treated the captive Belarusians in those days. Among them were not only protesters, but also random people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We are sure you have heard many such stories.

We publish a video taken from a truck during the ‘hot’ phase of the confrontation. It shows the detainees being driven through a ‘corridor’ – *a special Lukashist ritual* where

³ It is necessary to mention, that, according to the decision of Minsk court for tut.by, the status of mass media has been suspended since October 1, 2020, while, according to the decision of Minsk commercial court for tut.by, since December 3, 2020, they have been deprived of the status of mass media, and since January 19, 2021 the verdict will be valid.

⁴ Musor – a pejorative term for representatives of militia or police structures. It comes from the Russian-language abbreviation MUS (Moskovskij Ugolovnyj Sysk – name of the Moscow Criminal Investigations Department until 1917). In slang it also has a so-called *double semantic bottom*, because literally the word *musor* in Russian means trash.

the *menty* line up and beat the people coming out of the police truck. And they do it with obvious *sadistic pleasure*. Just look at their eyes and faces.

We would like to remind you that all the *monsters* of the ‘corridors’ are still at large. And Lukashenko and his *gang* still deny the use of torture against the detainees. NEXTA Live [https://t.me/nexta_live]11.10.2020).

Telegram in 2020 challenged the existing censorship in Belarus and persecution of journalists of *traditional* mass media (radio, television, news portals). Provision of information by the opposition channels in Telegram allowed not only to change the rules of the information field, but also to make this field more independent from conventional journalism. According to the annual Reporters Without Borders report, Belarus was ranked 153rd out of 180 countries in 2020 in terms of the media freedom index (2020 World Press... 2020). In 2019, more than 60 administrative cases were initiated against journalists, bloggers and freelancers (SMI u Belarusi u... 2020: 7–20). From a report by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (Media v Belarusi 2020... 2020), the media control by the Belarusian authorities has intensified. In the post-election period (after August 9, 2020), the authorities actively used various tools to restrict the work of the media: arrests of journalists, licence withdrawal, criminal and administrative cases and financial penalties.

Under these conditions, confidence in alternative sources of information and analytics was growing. State media used by the authorities as a tool for propaganda and disinformation of society enjoyed low trust among male and female citizens of Belarus. According to Sociolytics data published in *The Washington Post*, more than half (54.3%) of Belarusian citizens prefer non-state media, while 16.3% use both sources of information and around 30% (29.4%) use the state media, with 43.3% of respondents never watch state television at all (Greene et. al. 2020). Critical selection of information sources is undoubtedly a big problem for the government, which cannot stop this process even with the help of a nationwide internet blackout, which took place in August–September 2020. The failure of the blackout method led the state structures to devise a strategy for an alternative perspective on the actors and events of the protest. It is worth remembering, of course, that it was not without the advanced help of specialists from Russia, who were *invited* at the crisis moment for the authorities of the state media strike in August–September 2020.

Attempts by the authorities to dismantle the narratives of Telegram media or to delegitimise them with the *credibility* of an official source were stuck in the inability to create other, different forms of language and narrative style. For example, the most popular pro-government presidential channel on the Belarusian Telegram space Pul Pervogo (t.me/pul_pervogo) represents itself as a *first-hand source* (an unofficial Telegram channel of the administration) or the main source of insiders from President Lukashenko’s camp. Due to the ideological constraints and the support of the repressive state apparatus, the language of pro-government channels in Telegram is distinguished by a clearer algorithmicity. The linguistic structure of the pro-government channels like Zheltyye Slivy (<https://t.me/zheltyeslivy>) is based on the so-called *mimicry objection*, i.e. the creation of an immediate counter-narrative to the content coming out of the opposition channels by reversing the semantics of the content, its marginalisation or discrediting the actors of the events:

The bulk of today's protesters are instasams, bloggers and roomies playboys who, in their spare time from doing nothing, look for favorable perspectives and light for their photos so that their signatures grow in their accounts. Feeling the catharsis of getting thumbs up 😊. (Zhelyte slivy [<https://t.me/zheltyeslivy>] 2020).

This news is from September 19 – the day when the traditional Saturday Women's March took place in Minsk. The content is constructed on the aforementioned semantic reversal, challenging the *heroic* image of women participating in the protests coming from opposition channels. The editors of the Zhelyte Slivy channel marginalise the female participants of the March by pointing out the discrepancy between the alleged ideals of the protest and the opportunity to *take a cool picture* for the social media rankings and acceptance. This mini-story with overtly masculinist undertones diminishes the value and meanings of the protest by suggesting that it is merely a popularity stunt.

The next element in the structure of the language is the language of propaganda, which in the state channels contains quite aggressive content towards the protesters. In the case of the opposition channels, the language evokes an emotional reaction causing polarisation towards political opponents. The propaganda language is freed from the formal and official journalistic forms. In case of the opposition channels, the content is full of irony and sarcasm, although Lukashenko's camp always allowed highly offensive vocabulary towards social groups incompatible with the politics of power.

After this encounter with the information conditions that were relatively new, the whole repressive apparatus was used against not only the administrators of opposition and news-commercial channels but also against the participants of, for example, neighbourhood/district chats. By the end of 2020, the services began not only to detain channel administrators but also to practise hacking and data theft (Ivashkevich 2020). Like all autocratic-isms, for a long time, Lukashism hoped to create its own ideology, which would distinguish it from other systems of government (Saifullayev 2021: 92). But in just a few months of civil protest, Lukashism became a phantom idea, and its followers became associated with aggressive adherents of the regime. The language of protest, including new modes of mediation, dismantled numerous attempts to create faith in a *vozhd'*, faith in the system.

4. Conclusion

The use of social networks and messengers during revolutions and mass civil protests is not a new phenomenon. There are known cases of the use of social networks during the Arab Spring in 2011 (see footnote: Wolfsfeld et al. 2013; Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos 2012), protests in Hong Kong in 2014 and 2019–2020 (Lee et al. 2020). The above Telegram was actively used by protesters in Hong Kong in 2019–2020 (Schechtman 2019). The uniqueness of the Belarusian case is that the communicative functions of the messenger Telegram were used not only to coordinate the protest, but also as media enriching the civilian language repertoire or their counter-discourse. The liberation of language from its media form, in the Belarusian case, disarmed the authorities, who had not (and do not have) the opportunity to format their highly ideological language. Popular language understood by everyone and used

daily by society, slang expressions and vulgar terminology that were used in the new media went beyond the stigmatised framework of the dominant language (media, power, ideology) (in reference to Bourdieu 1990: 155). Telegram became a civic communication platform not only because of its basic functions, but also a place of common language, reflecting a wide emotional gamut of protests, traumatised society in its perception of repressive power and stimulating the public to fight the regime.

The narrative strategies of the opposition channels on Telegram were transforming as more forms of protest unfold. A trend that can be observed in the fall–winter of 2020–2021 is the formalisation of the language of the channels' editorials. The language adapted to the journalistic style of describing events, namely: short bullet point forms of information, a gradual medialisation of sources and news takes place. Along with this, the so-called *district chats* and channels were developing in Minsk and other large metropolises of Belarus. District chats were not only a place of communication for residents, organising logistics of local protests, they also served as mediation and exchange of information about the situation in the city and the country. If previously the activity of similar chats/groups was mediated by large opposition channels like NEXTA Live (Shelest 2020), this tendency changed along with the change of narrative styles of the largest news channels in Belarusian Telegram. There is no doubt that the language strategies, primarily of opposition channels, will undergo further transformations and adjust to the new media and information priorities, while the issue of security and protection of the channels from intrusion by the services coming to the fore.

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