



# Telegram in Belarusian Protests of 2020: Affective Tool for Populist's Uprisings

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*Abstract:* Certain political uprisings might be associated with this or that particular digital platform (for example, 'Arab spring' and Twitter). The 2020–2021 Belarusian protest is well-known for the popularity of Telegram messenger among the peaceful protesters. This large-scale and longest uprising in Belarusian history might be well described as 'Telegram-revolution' in future. This article looks into the role of Telegram messenger in mediating the protests to the wider public. The notion of populism by Ernesto Laclau is employed to describe the agenda of the Belarusian protest, which united wide masses of the population against the common enemy, at the same time lacking a strong positive agenda. Paradoxically, two of the most prominent events in the history of Belarusian politics can be described as populist's in Laclau's sense. It was the election of Lukashenko in 1994 and protests against him in 2020. Affect here is understood as a specific means with which the users of Belarusian Telegram were involved in populist protest of 2020. It operates outside the rational way of understanding politics, emphasising the intensity of involvement itself. The article explores the affective involvement of Belarusian Telegram users in protests of 2020.

*Keywords:* populism, telegram, new media, Belarusian protest of 2020, affect

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Digital technologies are often used as specific tools during various political protests. But technology is embodied in specific platforms that in turn are arranged in a particular way. For example, from 1999 till the middle of the 2000s, the main platform that was used during times of political uprisings around the globe was Indymedia (Platon et. al 2003). It allows its users to create and share news horizontally without any centralized core. Indymedia is based on a non-hierarchical model when any activist can become a journalist. That implied a specific ethical model in bypassing news by the state or private-owned media.

However, with the growth of active users of the internet, the web becomes subordinated by the market logic of capitalism. The global social media platforms are the main drivers of this profit-oriented environment. The model of these platforms is based on the commodification of user's interactions (Srnicek 2016; Zuboff 2019). Obviously, for Indymedia (or any other activist-driven platforms such as Diaspora or Identi.ca) it was hard to compete with

such capitalistic enterprises. During more recent political uprisings Facebook and Twitter became the main platforms for coordination and communication among protests (e.g. see the 2010's protests such as 'Arab Spring', Occupy Wall street (Gerbaudo 2012)). In turn, in the Belarusian protest of 2020 the messenger Telegram became the main tool for coordination and communication.

Digital tools and especially communication platforms do not exist in a social vacuum. Communication technology does not just influence society but is also influenced by it. The goal of this article is to reveal the interrelationship between Telegram as a specific digital tool and the socio-political condition of contemporary Belarus. The first two parts of the article are devoted to the analysis of contemporary Belarus including the history of early Belarusian independence and the analysis of protest's mood during the presidential election campaign of 2020. The third part is about the history of Telegram and its popularity in contemporary Belarus. The last part looks into Telegram's 'Nexta' channel, which shaped the events of the Belarusian protest of 2020.

The main theoretical framework for researching contemporary Belarusian politics in this article are the notions of 'populism' and 'affect'. The first concept is based on the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005). I refer here to the specific ontology of politics that embodies 'chains of equivalential demands' that cannot be fulfilled by existing state institutions. Such understanding is based on two key focal points. First, it is the gap between the state and society. Second, it is the vagueness of demands (against the current government) and the absence of a strong positive program. It seems that the most important political events in Belarusian history satisfied both of these conditions, namely, Belarusian presidential elections of 1994 and 2020 and confrontation between the state and 'populistic opposition'.

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, the democratic institutions of the Belarusian state were weak. Consequently, the political culture of the people was low. Paradoxically, in 2020, situations almost did not change, as Lukashenko did not promote during the years of his presidency the engagement of people into the political activity. The role of Telegram in 2020 consisted exactly in supporting this new populism by the means of specific 'affective' content that pushed people to be involved in such activity.

The theory of 'affect' means involving people in action outside of the level of rational reflection. Instead, affect works and exists on a level of pure intensity that exists behind conscious experience (Massumi 1995). Affect is not synonymous with emotion and Brian Massumi suggested that 'emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized' (Massumi 1995: 88). At the same time, Kevin Barnhurst indicated that 'affect is a blind spot as long as political communication ignores representation and builds only on functions and media effects' (Barnhurst 2011: 574). So, this paper concentrates on affect as something beyond semantic senses and functions existing in pure intensity.

According to Zizi Papacharissi (2015) and Patricia Clough (2018), digital media are places where affect has started to be produced by the users themselves. This 'affective theory' is helpful to understand why Telegram became so popular in Belarus in 2020. Populism and affect can be seen as complementary notions. The first operates in the sphere of contemporary politics on an ontological level, but the second can be seen as a way of involving

people in political action. Both these concepts work on the level of intensity, they do not presuppose self-reflection of man as 'zoon politikon' into politics, but pure action and involvement in the protest. Telegram channel called 'Nexta' became the main protest channel in 2020 and it spread exactly 'affective content'. This channel was the primary source for information during events of 9-11 of August in Belarus. Afterward across Belarus were created a lot of 'local chats' in Telegram in which we can see how Telegram's users participated in the protest in 'affective way'.

### **1. Lukashenko's populism in 1990's: elections of 1994 and equivalential demands**

In order to understand the Belarusian political situation of 2020, we need to go back to 1994 to see why and how Lukashenko became president of Belarus. The victory of Lukashenko in 1994 was surprising, as in the second round he struggled to catch up with Vyacheslav Kebich. At that time Kebich was the prime minister of Belarus and had vast 'administrative resources'. The failure of Kebich was unusual for a so-called 'parade of sovereignties'<sup>1</sup> after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Usually, people from the top of communist party positions just took the presidential places in new republics without a problem (as Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan, Shevarnadze in Georgia, Kravchuk in Ukraine, etc.). But Lukashenko could hardly be seen as a person from top nomenclature, he did not occupy any important administrative post in the late Soviet Union or during the first years of independence of Belarus. It seems that his success could be explained by his populist agenda, which embraced popular demands of the wider Belarusian public in 1994. According to Ernesto Laclau populism is not just any specific program or political technology, but 'the ontological constitution of political as such' (Laclau 2005, 67). It is realized through the emergence of particular demands among the wide population. If unfulfilled by the institutional arrangements of the state it leads to the unification of these demands into a 'chain of equivalence' and a growing dissatisfaction. Laclau described this mechanism in the following way:

accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in the isolation from the others), and an equivalential relation is established between them. The result could easily be, if it is not circumvented by external factors, a widening chasm separating institutional system from the people (Laclau 2005, 73-74).

The state institutions of Belarus early in the 1990s could hardly fulfill the diverse demands of the population. Firstly, this was connected with the economic and political instability. Market reforms in the post-Soviet space in particular and East Europe in general led to mass impoverishment. It was accompanied by a rising level of interethnic strife (in some cases it led to such institutional arrangements as 'passports of aliens' in Latvia and Estonia). The Belarusian state could not 'protect' its citizens against 'market and nationalism' on the institutional level. In programs of candidates (except the program of Lukashenko) in the presiden-

<sup>1</sup> The emergence of newly independent states in the late 1980's-early 1990's. This phraseological unit became popular after the speech of Petr Zerlin at the Extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR in December of 1990. He was concerned about conflicts between the central state of the USSR in Moscow and powers of new independent autonomic states.

tial elections of 1994, we can hardly find any embodiments of these demands. Even more – those candidates were figures from the old communist establishment (who had created this weak institutional system or stood for nationalistic agenda (as Zianon Pozniak, leader of Belarusian People Front). But Lukashenko's strong anti-market program with his public speeches resonated with the public and united the population in their demands. His program embodied different equivalential demands of the population, which could not be fulfilled by newly formed political elites of independent Belarus.

Generally, the policy of the first decade of Lukashenko's presidency could be described in terms of 'egalitarian nationalism' (Leshchenko 2008). Leshchenko describes it in quite a paternalistic way like such 'ideology praises the collective, the nation, the state as the ultimate value, which means that people should relinquish self advancement and other typical values of 'deplorable Western individualism' and conform to the majority instead' (ibid, 1330). During the first decade of Lukashenko's presidency, this ideology worked on a mass level and resonated with citizens in relevant circumstances. However, during the last decade the social welfare politics in Belarus has been gradually degrading. Democratic opposition in Belarus (such parties as Belarusian People Front, United Civic Party, Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly) still mostly relies on the idea of strong nationalism (to include the country in a pool of 'European nations') and free-market policies. As Belarus did not face any 'national struggle' in its history and a big part of the population is working in the state sector of the economy, it is obvious that such opposition cannot rely on strong support from the masses. Belarusian sociologist Elena Gapova in the best way described this lack of support of opposition regarding Belarusian elections in 2001:

Europe, equated with prosperity and capitalism, became embraced as the model for the future political project, which is historically justified, since "we used to be there before". I have difficulty believing, though, that the enlightened ideal of European travel could be an attractive option for some impoverished babushka or countryside dweller who came to the polling station on 9 September. To them, the voyage is completely unrealistic and probably not even an object of desire; instead, it represents what the new rich can afford and do, at the expense of poor folks. (Gapova 2002, 646)

However, in the last couple of years, this symbolic contract between impoverished people and Lukashenko burst, as the state continuously attacked labour rights, did not redistribute incomes inside the population and stood aside from the free market economy. It led to an odd policy of state-oriented capitalism without democracy. It became one of the reasons for protest for a population with different political beliefs and agendas. The current politics of the Belarusian state is not suited for classical political positions – it is too restrictive for labour (it could not be social-democratic or communist)–and it is against the privatization of big enterprises and foreign investment (it is not pro-market or liberal). It seems that the populism of Lukashenko had stopped working by 2020.

## 2. United populist protest against Lukashenko in 2020

Belarusian protests in 2020 can be presented as the situation as the rise of new equivalential demands of people that inevitably lead to neoliberalism<sup>2</sup>. Some argue that current Belarusian economics by remaining out of 'true free market' aggravates certain grievances and gives a 'bourgeois character' to the Belarusian protest. In the case of Belarus, we see a specific merger between the market and state-controlled economy. The new equivalential demands of Belarusian protest, in that case, are ambiguous. They stood for some 'justice' in the economy, but remained vague about new economic formation without Lukashenko. It seems that without such 'justice demands without positive program' the protest could not be so popular. So, these demands are revealing populist and affective character of protest. They are not rational in building a new program, but just unites a wide range of people against the concrete economic tools of Lukashenko's state.

Also, the role of new media and the internet had a big impact on the protests of 2020. As of 2019 in Belarus, 82.8 percent of the population from 6 to 72 years old used the internet ('Belarus in numbers' 2020). But the internet itself does not automatically bring a 'spirit for democracy'. In the Belarusian case, it is more connected with the low level of understanding of the possibilities of the internet by the local officials. For example, in 2019, no one from the state-owned news-media got into top-10 popular internet-sites on PC-platform in Belarus, but there were two private news-media sites on the list (tut.by and onliner.by on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> places respectively) ('Gemius nazval...' 2020). The situation with the traditional media differs – there are no private TV channels in Belarus, no radio stations with some political content, and just a couple of independent newspapers. Unsurprisingly, with the proliferation of the independent new media the levels of trust in the state-owned TV channels or newspapers dramatically fell in the last years. So, in 2020 research showed an equal level of trust to state-owned and independent media (Shraibman 2020). But in 2021 Chatham House reported that only 17 % of Belarusians trust state-owned media (Astapenya 2021).

There also was a rise of Belarusian oppositional Youtube-bloggers in the last years. One of the most notable one here is a channel called 'Country for life' ('Strana dlya zhizni')<sup>3</sup> created by Sergey Tikhanovsky in March of 2019. Sergey presented himself as an 'entrepreneur' who for some time worked in Moscow doing 'video-production'. Even some independent anti-Lukashenko Belarusian internet media speculated about his biography and vague political position (Shvedovich 2019). Tikhanovsky posted interviews with people from Belarusian provinces where they complained about their lives and criticized the state. Tikhanovskiy in his videos was playing the role of the representative of these desperate people. This position paradoxically resembles the role of Lukashenko during his first election in 1994. As he claimed in 1994 he is 'neither with the left nor with the right, but with the people' (Wilson 2012, 166). On 6th May 2020 Tikhanovsky on his YouTube channel announced that he will be a candidate for the President of Belarus (Strana dlya zhizni 2020).

As we know, three principal male opponents of Lukashenko could not take part in the elections and Svetlana Tikhanovskaya had eventually become the main alternative candi-

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek predicted the sad fate of future Belarus without Lukashenko, but with a neoliberal government (Zizek 2020). But one needs to reflect on how we understand neoliberalism. Speculative constructions of market-oriented economists suggest that 'true neoliberalism' is always out of the control of the state. For the critics of neoliberalism it is nonsense as the state is the main conductor of market-driven reforms.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFPC7r3tWWXWzUIROLx46mg>.

date. The marketing achievement of her election team was to promote three women who opposed Lukashenko. The first was Tikhanovskaya herself, the second was the campaign manager of Viktor Babariko—Mariya Kolesnikova and the third was the wife of Valeriy Tsep-kalo—Veronika. Their election campaign led to naming Belarusian elections (and consequently protests) in Western media as the ‘female struggle against Lukashenko’ (Davalshyan 2020; Kuznetsov 2020; Walker 2020a). But in the program or even public speeches of Tikhanovskaya, we couldn’t find any specific gender or feminist agenda. On the contrary, she emphasized that she is ‘a usual housewife’ who just wants her husband back from jail. In public speeches, Tikhanovskaya announced that there are only two points of her program – new equal elections and releasing all of the political prisoners. Her internet-site had a more detailed program of ‘reanimation reforms’ reciting the typical neoliberal and nationalist schema of ‘bringing Belarus to democracy’ (‘Reanimacionnyj Paket...’ 2020). After this program’s criticism by the Belarusian state media and some leftist parties, it was removed from the site. This, Tikhanovskaya’s team tried to remain popular trying to appease those who would not support the neoliberal and nationalistic policies.

Tikhanovskaya constantly referred in her speeches to the ‘will of common people’ making it one joint publicly-voiced point of the united election team. It was a truly populist move as a more nuanced program could shatter ‘chains of equivalence’ of the electorate for different groups. She became a representative figure who symbolically united the equivalential demands of different groups of people. These demands express different political claims (as, for example, different positions of the provincial subscribers of Tikhanovskiy’s Youtube channel from the big-cities-dwellers’ supporting Viktor Babariko). So, the vagueness of the political program of Tikhanovskaya becomes a positive aspect of this new populism. It allows for many different demands not to be articulated in full (that would lead to a struggle between them), but pitching them as not potentially fulfilled by Lukashenko’s state<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, it seems that historical conditions as of the early Belarusian state in 1994 and as of 2020 are unique. In the early years of Belarusian independence, there were no institutional mechanisms that could provide the fulfillment of people’s demands. In 2020 after years of the constant repression of opposition parties and movements by Lukashenko, there is no possibility of the existence of any democratic institutions, too. And, the discontent of Belarusians with Lukashenko in 2020 coincides with a new successful election campaign of ‘women’s trio’ and the popularity of Telegram messenger.

### 3. ‘Nexta’ and the rise of the ‘most secure messenger’ in authoritarian Belarus

The history of Telegram began in 2013 as a co-owned project of two brothers of Russian origins – Nikolay and Pavel Durov. The last claimed that the ‘need for safe communication with his brother during standoff with Russian SWAT at his home’ (Hakim 2014) was the primary motivation to create Telegram. This cloud-based messenger is using a specific MT-Proto protocol (developed by Nikolay Durov). With it a simple way to connect with Tele-

<sup>4</sup> I am still not sure when we speak of populism in Laclauan sense whether we deal with some ‘ontological principle of politics’. It is more resembling a situation with poor institutional arrangements when different political agendas could not express themselves, so the only possible situation for them is to be united in a whole chain of equivalential demands. Sure, this view on populism withdraws it from political ontology and transfers it into history.

gram's servers via proxy (if the main internet channel is trying to block Telegram) is possible. Some researchers claimed that Telegram is the most secure among popular internet messengers (Sutikno et.al 2016, 913). The secured communication provided with MTProto occurs only when users choose the specific option in the application. However, few users of Telegram communicate with each other via such specific options.

The platform is not just a medium between two or more users (sure, there is the possibility to make group chats on the platform), but also allows the creation of channels. Any registered profile can share some content (text, audio, video) as 'channel'. Other users of Telegram can just 'subscribe' to the channel to regularly view its content. Newsfeed in Telegram is organized as messages you've got from users/groups or channels and always displayed chronologically, contrary to Facebook or VK. Telegram is still mostly an ad-free platform. It means that some channels can show the ads, but the platform itself does not collect data about its users and consequently does not individually tailor the ads (unlike, Facebook, for instance where the 'core business is to collect highly refined data about its users and convert that data into microtargeted manipulations (advertisements, newsfeed adjustments) aimed at its users to want, believe or do things' (Benkler et al. 2018: 269)).

Besides that, Durov claims that Telegram is a censorship-free messenger that will work with any content. In the early days of the platform, it was even used by ISIS (Yayla et al. 2017; Shehabat, et al. 2017) to spread its ideology and try to find recruiters. But in Russia and other post-Soviet countries Telegram was known for supporting another criminal activity – selling and buying drugs (Gulieva et al. 2020; Sukhodolov et al. 2019). It became possible with the dissemination of crypto-currencies and contactless acquisition of drugs – drug-users could find shops in Telegram, pay via Bitcoin, and coordinate the location of hidden drugs. So, it was quite unexpected to see its growing popularity during political uprisings in Belarus in 2020.

Telegram had a specific genre of media-content – 'insider's channels' – popular in the post-Soviet space. It means that the author(s) of a channel possesses specific 'insider' information about the government. It was a matter of time when anonymous channels with the content of such data arose. Sure, anonymity does not require any responsibility and there is a lot of unreliable information as well. Finally, such content also presupposes a specific societal viewpoint favoring conspiracy theories where the society is governed by the hidden actors who are pulling strings and governing the world. This genre was popular among telegram channels that confronted the government (as 'Nexta' discussed below). However, the officials also created their telegram-channels with controversial content, some of which probably connected to the secret services (e.g. a channel called 'Know anarchist by face'<sup>5</sup> which publishes personal data and rumors about anarchists, which is probably the most repressed group of people with particular political beliefs in Belarus).

Russian researcher Alexey Salikov considers that using Telegram by the Russian government is

an effective means of influencing public opinion by manipulating news feeds and news bias, leaking information, creating fake news, and throwing dirt; presenting pro-governmental points of view to a wider audience; and reaching out to some difficult, but very

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<sup>5</sup> <https://t.me/anarhodnoo>.

important parts of Russian population – young, well-educated, and political active urban dwellers. (Salikov 2019, 103-104)

In November 2019 a telegram-channel dedicated to the activities of Alexander Lukashenko<sup>6</sup> was created. It mostly includes such content as pictures or videos from ‘the backstage life’ of the Belarusian president. And it still stays anonymous despite many official state media links to channels in their materials.

One of the most popular telegram-channels in the world with political content is a channel about Belarusian politics called ‘Nexta’. Its popularity is primarily connected with ‘insider-content’. Originally, it was a Youtube-channel based on political-entertaining content (for example the first video on the channel was a satirical cover song of a Russian rock band mocking the hopelessness of Lukashenko’s Belarus (NEXTA 2015)). In the autumn of 2020, it had 532 thousand subscribers<sup>7</sup>. Telegram-channel was registered in May 2018. In Belarusian (Latin letter ‘X’ in Cyrillic reads as ‘H’) it means ‘somebody’ implying that the author of the channel can be any person from Belarus, someone anonymous, just someone who does not agree with the state politics, a common member of the public. The most popular content of the channel before the elections of 2020 was the secret documents and files. The editor-in-chief of the channels is Stsiapan Putsila, who turned twenty years old in 2018. He was originally born in Minsk and now studying in Poland as a film director.

The first wave of popularity of ‘Nexta’s telegram channel occurred in May 2019. Channel was the first media that reviewed the death of a Belarusian traffic police officer. As police in Belarus is a closed system this case provoked specific interest from the public. The numbers of subscribers of the channel increased from 39 887 on 15 May of 2018 to 93 600 on 23 May of 2018 (‘Telegram channels. Nexta’ 2020). Exactly on 16 May of 2019 ‘Nexta’ published the first information about the death of a traffic police officer<sup>8</sup> and afterward also had posted audio of the internal police instructions about the car in which the officer was kidnapped<sup>9</sup> and a photo of the dead body<sup>10</sup>. As all these materials were not posted by official Belarusian media but were original ‘inside info’ of ‘Nexta’.

Another big leap in subscribers on ‘Nexta’ telegram channel occurred during the time of the presidential election in Belarus in 2020 and subsequent protests – on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August of 2020 it was 377 654 subscribers and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August already 746 647 subscribers (‘Telegram channels. Nexta’ 2020). ‘Nexta’ now is a cluster of the channels. The main channel is just ‘Nexta’. The channel with more frequent renewability and shorter messages is ‘Nexta-live’. And finally, there’s also a channel with some ‘funny content’ about Lukashenko’s state that is called ‘Luxta’ (in Belarusian means bullshit or nonsense). In the consequent text, I will mostly cite content from ‘Nexta’ and ‘Nexta-live’ without differentiating them because of a constant practice of mutual reposts by editors of channels.

To an extent, these anonymous telegram-channels with ‘insider’s’ information are reminiscent of Wikileaks’ struggle for freedom of previously unavailable governmental information. If Wikileaks is based on some anarchistic ethos (Curran et al. 2012), then ‘Nexta’ and other popular political post-Soviet telegram channels still embody the interests of vague hid-

<sup>6</sup> [https://t.me/pul\\_1](https://t.me/pul_1)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/c/nexta\\_tv/featured](https://www.youtube.com/c/nexta_tv/featured)

<sup>8</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/881](https://t.me/nexta_tv/881)

<sup>9</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/883](https://t.me/nexta_tv/883)

<sup>10</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/891](https://t.me/nexta_tv/891)



den political actors. For example, 'Nexta's editing team is partly funded by the Polish Government as Stsiapan Putsila said it himself in an interview for a big Russian Youtube Blogger (Vdud 2020). At the same time, some researchers present Telegram as the platform that helps people in authoritarian societies communicate in unrestricted ways and even 'bring about new challenges for autocratic regimes' (Akbari et al 2019: 230). Telegram indisputably has become a challenge for Lukashenko's regime both due to the big 'insider' channels such as 'Nexta' or the small district chats.

At the same time, it is difficult to say whether Telegram promotes direct democracy and transparency for its users. For instance, the language of communication in 'Nexta' telegram-channel reminds of the style of the most radical Belarusian nationalistic new media such as an affective style is a resource 'Charter-97' founded in 1997. From the beginning of its activity, this media claimed that the 'regime of Lukashenko is dying in near days' and used this kind of emotionally charged language to describe any official state institution (for example, the police are becoming 'punishers'). Editors of 'Charter-97' are now working outside Belarus and have some (in/direct) influence on the team of 'Nexta'. Such affective style so it is not 'neutral', but politically engaged. As we can see below, 'affect' is always working on the level of immanence. Actually, the content of such 'affective media' as Charter-97 and 'Nexta' is subordinated to the intense style of writing irrespective of the topic. Here we have some oxymorons such as 'affective content' – a form of writing in our 'affective' case is controlling the content, it is 'affect' itself that distributes through different topics. But the popularity of Telegram 'Nexta' is the next level of working with affect, leaving 'Charter-97' well behind.

So, 'Nexta' has become one of the reasons why Belarusian users started to use Telegram. 'Insider's' information about the Belarusian state in an environment where it is not transparent for its citizens is in high demand. Also, we can say that the channel works in 'populistic' territory. 'Nexta' emphasizes different but equivalential demands that emerged in Belarus against Lukashenko and which could not be fulfilled by the contemporary Belarusian state. Besides 'Nexta' there are a lot of different oppositional telegram-channels in Belarus. Some of them are affiliated with big independent media (as tut.by<sup>11</sup>), some of them are self-sufficient telegram channels. But the quantity of the subscribers of tut.by channel in March of 2021 (that hold third-place among the most popular Belarusian telegram channels, just behind 'Nexta live' and 'Nexta') is three times lower than the quantity subscribers of 'Nexta live' ('Telegram Channels. Belarus' 2021).

#### **4. Belarus on August 9–11, 2020: instant 'affective coordination' of protest on Telegram**

How many countries in contemporary Europe could afford to block the internet for a couple of days? On the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> of August of 2020 on the day of the presidential elections the entire country had problems with stationary and mobile internet. Previous most radical case included only the shutdown of several popular news sites and social media during the

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<sup>11</sup> In the May of 2021 tut.by was closed by the Belarusian state, and in the summer of 2021 repressions on the independent media continued (now affecting the oldest Belarusian newspaper "Nasha Niva" and many local Belarusian independent internet-media). The last hideout for all of these media unsurprisingly became telegram as they started to promote their own telegram-channels.

‘silent protests’ in 2011 (Kryvoi 2011). The internet blackout continued until the 12th of August. Although ‘Nexta’ posted ‘insider’ info about the internet unavailability on the 4th of August declaring that the internet will not work just for two days<sup>12</sup>. Netblocks project reported that Deep Packet Inspection was identified in Belarus during these days (‘Internet disruption...’ 2020). At the same time, the Belarusian officials in the National Computer Emergency Response Team reported the ddos-attacks on servers of police and secret services departments (‘Gosudarstvennye resursy...’ 2020). VPN-services on 9-12 of August have been working with varied success. Telegram worked exactly because of its support of proxy-servers. In these days occurred the second enormous growth of Telegram-users in Belarus and subscribers of ‘Nexta’ channel.

As in all previous elections, in the evening it was announced that Lukashenko won with extremely high (and falsified) results. This time the protests were not called in by the ‘traditional opposition’. As early as the 6<sup>th</sup> of August ‘Nexta’ posted its plan on Election Day for ‘peace’ protest – to vote in the evening, to require the open counting of votes on election polls after its closing and a public showing of the voting protocol. The proposed gathering was for 10 p.m. around Monument of Victory in Minsk and on the main streets or squares in other towns<sup>13</sup>. This night is hard to forget for anyone who lives in Minsk not far away from the Monument of Victory – I live approximately 5 kilometers away. Until 3 a.m. I constantly heard either car horns and explosions of flash grenades with lights. ‘Nexta’ was the primary source of the information from the streets that night, but the news was contradictory. For example ‘Nexta’ reported that in Pinsk head of local administration was in negotiation with protesters<sup>14</sup>, that the first death occurred<sup>15</sup>, and that according to some photos of protocols Tikhonovskaya confidently won elections<sup>16</sup>.

But by the next morning state news agency BelTA reported preliminary results – Lukashenko got over 80 percent (‘Preliminary elections results...’ 2020). At the same time, ‘Nexta’ posted videos and photos of fighting<sup>17</sup> and posted a plan for protests on 10th August<sup>18</sup>. There were a few changes to the plan of the previous day. New were the calls for disabling police transport and advice for wearing of special equipment (helmets, gas masks, protective shields). At the same time, the channel emphasized not to fight with the police. The situation resembles the previous day – no internet besides VPN-connections and Telegram; fierce fights on the streets; no news about protests in the state-owned media (TV, newspapers). The one big difference was that police in Minsk attacked people on the streets in different parts of the city before they gathered in a sizable crowd (at the Monument of Victory).

Exactly at this time ‘Nexta’ becomes the dominant media of protests (not any other platform as Twitter, Viber, or Facebook got such popularity). It happened because of the Telegram platform that makes it easy to connect with proxy-servers. Also, the ‘light’ traffic of the application relative to other platforms made it easy to use Telegram. ‘Nexta’ all around the clock posted photos and videos from Minsk and other cities and towns. Besides just vis-

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<sup>12</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3524](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3524).

<sup>13</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3552](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3552).

<sup>14</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3590](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3590).

<sup>15</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3604](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3604).

<sup>16</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3600](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3600).

<sup>17</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3616](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3616).

<sup>18</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/363](https://t.me/nexta_tv/363).

ual content, it also provided ambiguous text messages. For example at 22:46 of 10th August 'NEXTA live' released such messages – 'people have chased the punishers in black at Grushkevka (district of Minsk)'<sup>19</sup> and 'Lida (small Belarusian town) cries for help! Very few people'<sup>20</sup>. So 'Nexta' mixed some objective information (like videos or photos) with affective calls to involve more users in protest. The next day the situation repeated itself – no internet across the country and protests in many cities and towns in the evenings and nights. These days were full of affect as we understand it in that the intensity between people operates beside the level of conscious experience. Surely, some people have got experience being on the streets on these harsh nights – but most have got information about protests from Telegram. Nexta bombarded its subscribers with a representation of protest full of hysterical intensity. It was impossible to find out where is true and where is 'embellishment', but it did not seem to matter. What is important is involvement in protest if not at the physical level, but at least at the level of regularly refreshing your Telegram feed.

Finally, the internet connection was restored on the 12th of August, and Belarusian internet media was flooded with the reports from the protests. Exactly on the 13th of August in the center of Minsk so-called 'women's chains of solidarity' got formed visualizing the 'female dimension of Belarusian protest'. Many women were standing across big streets with bouquets of white flowers. The main agenda of protests those days was calls to stop the police violence, even the results of the election seemed not so important. It seems that such forms of street protest as female 'chains of solidarity' match the 'affective' character of protest, its non-hierarchical basis with no strict center of protest. So, the affective calls for protest are distributed among Telegram users and protesters by themselves. This dimension of protest could hardly be described as rational in the strict sense. Even if protesters have got some agenda they still lack a possible mechanism of realizing it.

Famous peaceful marches on weekends that occurred in Minsk and other big cities from August till the end of 2020 are examples of such 'affective events'. There was no strict plan for these marches, it was just the strolling of thousands of people without strong purposes. During these marches a lot of images were produced by its participants, and it even could be seen as only one goal of it – producing and distributing more of 'affective content'. Such representations helped to connect people via affect and push them to get involved in the protest; it is not rational in tackling the state, but important for emphasizing the intensity of the protest itself. The role of images in creating 'affecting communities' by the process of recognition of subjects by themselves is described by Russian philosopher Elena Petrovskaya (Petrovskaya 2012).

In the period of the lockdown of the internet, Telegram was the only available digital media because of the possibility to connect with proxy-servers. When the internet traffic resumed, the Belarusian users did not abandon Telegram. The platform allows for its users to not just create chats but also to search them in local areas with the help of GPS. A special portal *dze.chat* (in Belarusian it means 'where is chat') appeared in early September with the map of local chats devoted to Belarusian protest. At the end of December of 2020, it included over one thousand chats inside Belarus (541 of them in Minsk). Users of the portal can add new chats on the map. It also includes a gallery of the local flags (many of them you can see on protests) and the possibility to download a leaflet of a chat with QR-code (allow-

<sup>19</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_live/6037](https://t.me/nexta_live/6037).

<sup>20</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_live/6038](https://t.me/nexta_live/6038).

ing users of smartphones to quickly be added to the chat). Chats allow local neighborhoods to coordinate their activity. In the summer and autumn of 2020, it manifested itself in local street parties and common renovation of objects of public infrastructure (mostly it was repainting benches or some outdoor sports objects in colours of the first Belarusian flag). After a brief period of 'street freedom', the Belarusian state in early September started to turn off the internet on Sundays. At the end of weeks, big protests occurred and police started to detain participants of the weekend marches. The level of police brutality was lower than on 9-11 of August, but the number of arrests was greater. Every Sunday from September till the end of 2020 between 100 to 1000 people were detained. Local chats coordinated activity during protests (e.g., people communicated about gatherings in their districts before merging with the columns from other places). At the start of winter and with the tougher repression from the state the street protests have moved to the local neighborhoods. On the 29th of November occurred the 'March of neighborhoods' where people of different places across Belarus (still mostly across many Minsk districts) marched in their districts ('Belarus police...' 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The history of Belarusian politics in times of independence can be seen as waves of 'populist' demands in Laclauan sense. The first is associated with Lukashenko that struggled against the state establishment and nationalistic opposition in 1994. But in 2020 a new movement was raised that embraced different equivalential demands against Lukashenko himself. Telegram was the key tool that voiced this new populism as the platform supported the anonymity of its users and worked during the internet lockdown of 9-11 August 2020. Telegram was subsequently used to organize local protest chats and coordinate political protest. We must not overestimate these virtual places where politics was realized in an 'affective' way. It means that participants still do not have any specific program except for the resignation of Lukashenko, but they constantly dealt with the emotional involvement in the protest.

Telegram as a platform made it possible to affectively involve Belarusian users in the protest. The notion of 'affect' got its popularity in media studies with Zizi Papacharissi's book 'Affective publics' (Papacharissi 2019). She used this concept leaning on the ideas of Benedict Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and Brian Massumi. All these philosophers worked with affect as some possibility of human action that becomes possible because of any immanent reason. It means that it must stay on the transparent level available for whole participants. 'Transcendental systems' with control by a hierarchical center are the theoretical antagonists of this theory. Theory of affect breaks the strong mind/body dualism of Decarte's tradition as the second endures the position of mind on a transcendental level that regulates our action. Affect does not exist in the 'mind' as last is not the primary source for consequent action, but at the same time, it is not synonymous with emotion. Papacharissi claims that 'emotion is subsumed within affect, and perhaps the most intense part of affect. Yet affect itself extends beyond feeling like a general way of sense-making. It informs our general sensibility toward the world surrounding us, which is inclusive of potentialities and 'regimes of expressivity' (Papacharissi 2015, 15). She used the theory of affect to emphasize

the role of digital networks during 'Arab spring'. For her 'the spirit of the movement was also affective; it was about giving voice to an emotion and placing emphasis not on the direction of the emotion itself but on the intensity with which it was felt' (Papacharissi 2015, 93).

In Belarusian protests, we can see the same appellation to emotions on 'Nexta' channel that made it possible for people to be involved in the protest. As with the 'Arab spring' affect 'does not possess an agenda but it does possess intensity, and intensity allows it to feel' (Papacharissi 2015, 93). The Belarusian protests either did not have any strong agenda (except the resignation of Lukashenko and calls for stopping violence after elections). Also, digital media played a big role similarly to the 'Arab spring'. From the works of Linda Herrera (Herrera 2012, 2014) we can see how 'Egyptian insurrection' was shaped by Twitter and Facebook's pages. The role of the Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Said' for promoting protest also was emphasized by Kara Alaimo (Alaimo 2015). In the Belarusian case of 'Nexta', the editor's team of this page was unknown and there were hidden actors circulating the ideas of the resistance and protest in the digital space. So, the affect in our case became 'corrupted' by transcendental positions of some hidden actors. At the same time, it does not mean that all the protests are 'secretly organized', but that with Telegram the protest's affectiveness without strict agenda disseminated widely. And 'affective' dimension of Belarusian protests supports its populist character – without an affective language that circulated in Belarusian Telegram, there were not so many users of it involved in the protest. For Laclau's 'theory of populism' affect is an inevitable source of any populist demand of missing object, as 'there is no populism without affective investment in partial object' (Laclau 2005, 116). This object is partial, because if all objects of demands were fulfilled by institutions of society 'there would be no populism but, for obvious reasons, there would be no politics either' (Laclau 2005, 116).

Another important dimension of 'Telegram protest' is connected with the immanence of its power (and consequent affective influence on its users) and consequences of it. For example, it can be expressed in the popular use of tactics of releasing the personal data. This tactic was realized in providing information (address, phone number, place of working, registered property) in protest's chats and channels about different state officials (police officers; judges who endured decisions on protesters; members of electoral commissions who falsified results). Even Apple noticed that and asked Telegram to block channels with such information ('Apple asks...' 2020). Sometimes it led to bullying of officials and members of their families; at the same time the state-affiliated Telegram-channels started to post data about members of protest. It resembles the actions of members of the 'Anonymous' movement when they provided public information about adult-entertainment actresses on imageboards (Merzlikin 2017). It invites the masses to become a judge who decides what to do with this or that reprehensible person. Mass distrust of the Belarusian law system led to this situation of civic confrontation and unfortunately, in current circumstances, there is no solution to that.

Also, as the mass of Telegram users is hard to control (because there is no strong transcendent position) it can be infiltrated by the secret services. Because Telegram supports the anonymity of its users it is still not transparent who is in the chats. Almost in any protest's chat existed some strange user which stands for the radical idea of fighting with the state and

its officials aggressively. It means inciting the criminal activities as a form of protest potentially affecting the law abiding participants of chats who might be prone to give in to such provocations. This thesis was proved by an officer of police services on Belarusian television in October - 'In every protest chat, we have got our collaborator' ('V kazhdom chate...' 2020).

The concept of 'affect' shows how vague populist demands spread in digital networks. Even though 'populism' in contemporary political thought can be seen as a positive exit from the crisis of representative democracy (Mouffe 2018) we must not forget that Lukashenko could be described as 'left populist' in 1994. So there is ambiguity of 'affectivity' for political programs, although it works for engaging people in politics. The lack of political culture in contemporary Belarus hinders wider democratical self-reflexive movement. 'Affective Telegram-revolution' in Belarus can just become the first step to a long road of understanding politics as a common cause among the Belarusians. It is still far away from it, but local chats besides 'affective involvement' could promote common deliberation and reflection on questions of politics. We must not overestimate the 'horizontal' basis of Belarusian protest due to the low level of political culture in Belarus and lack of strong democratic political institutions (such as parties, movements etc.).

Finally, at the beginning of 2022, we can say that the 'affective telegram protest' in Belarus is history. After the street activity stopped at the end of 2020 the Belarusian government dedicated the next couple of years to stopping production of affect in Telegram. It is embodied in laws that declare all opposition digital media (including Telegram channels and even chats) extremists ('Belarus classifies social...' 2020). There is still a strange distinction between 'extremist material' and 'extremist organization' determining the punishment (administrative or criminal) for the subscriber or participant of a channel or protest chat. This led to a significant decrease of Belarusian subscribers of Telegram-channels (for example in January of 2022 'Nexta' has just 379 794 subscribers (Telegram channels. Nexta 2022)) and chat participants. Instead, the Belarusian opposition (mostly residing abroad) promotes the idea of a specific 'conspiracy internet society' under the title 'Plan Peramoga' (in Belarusian it means 'Plan to win'). It suggested that users leave their data in a specific Telegram-bot and afterward, they will wait for 'mobilization orders'. They will get them when the hidden rulers of this society will be ready for revolution. This method is absolutely opposite to affective uprising in Telegram during 2020. Instead of pure intensity circulated between the immanent mass of users by reposts and sharing we have got a transcendental hidden actor that collects our data and does not share with us any political plans. Sure, this method also could be described as populist, because it does not possess any strict agenda (except against the current state), but it does not work with pure intensity between users.

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