



# Ugly Repressions, Protest's Beauty and Emotional Community on Belarusian Political Instagram<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* Drawing on ethnographic notes and interviews about Instagram use among Belarusians, this article explores social meanings of the platform in relation to Belarusian protests 2020-2021. First, the context is outlined, in which political news proliferated on Belarusian Instagram and got affected by the platform's interface. After brief mapping of what I call Belarusian Political Instagram (BPI), the article describes how the platform contributes to formation of the protest's visual imagery. Instagram posts highlight the contrast between the establishment's violence and the peaceful nature of the mass protests, which are also aesthetically via the platform. The concluding part proceeds to emotional landscape of BPI and Belarusian experiences of solidarity on Instagram. In particular, it focuses on ethical dilemmas that emerge in relation to posting, sharing, and following on BPI.

*Keywords:* emotional landscape, new media, protest art, management of emotions, Belarus

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On February 4, 2021, RadioSvaboda posted on their Instagram page a drawing that 21-year-old Kseniya Syramalot, an imprisoned activist from Belarusian Students' Association, had made in jail (Radio Svaboda 2021). The drawing is made with felt-pens on a square-ruled paper sheet. It imitates Instagram mobile app's interface: a picture is framed and surrounded by a panel with a date – 17 November – and a heart-shaped 'like' icon. Inside the frame, there is a plate and a cup on a table, endorsed with: 'The first breakfast after a parcel [arrived into prison]. Looks and tastes much better'. The post explicates the nature

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<sup>1</sup>The first version of the text was finalised in early 2021, when the active street protests still were taking place in Belarus. Belarusian segment of Instagram has changed significantly since then: some location-related pages were discontinued, but many more appeared – ones that explicitly relate to resistance and to the diasporic communities that formed abroad as a result of mass exodus from Belarus. The beginning of full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine additionally changed this landscape – by bringing in a new wave of anti-war and Belarusophone content. Moreover, Ukrainian Instagram has undergone quite similar transformation from leisure-driven to a politicised media-environment.

of the ongoing Belarusian repressions: their persistence; absence of mercy for the young; poor jail conditions. At the same time, the very interplay between the image's Instagram stylisation and the place of its publication indicates the present entwinement of new media and experiences of repressions in Belarusian society.

Over the year 2020, Instagram in Belarus, used by approximately one third of the country's population (Statista 2022), acquired a different meaning and form in comparison to what it used to be in the past. In the autumn 2020 and winter 2020-2021, Instagram's content feed constituted an uneasy mix of selfies, sunsets, family images, 'foodstagram' with the imagery of the riot (or protest, or revolution, or whatever terminology one chooses to stick to). The content related to Belarusian protest is very diverse: photos, collages, infographics, news, videos from hidden cameras, live-streams, protest art etc. It is published and shared by individuals, news outlets, organisations, businesses, celebrities and so on. In this text I'll call this heterogeneous variety in the Belarusian segment of Instagram *Belarusian Political Instagram* (BPI) – an environment where a particular emotional climate is created and maintained. This constellation of practices and media artefacts sustain political solidarity in a number of ways; at the same time, it transforms the functionality of the app among Belarusians. To define 'political' in Belarusian context is especially difficult given that in 2020 various phenomena, actions, and spheres of life were reconceptualised as politically charged, both by protesters (who used them to solidarise for change) and authorities (who oppressed the protesters). Examples include crowdfunding for medical workers during the first months of Covid-19 pandemic, music concerts and lectures in history organised by neighbours in the backyard, or simply sticking an A4 list of paper to the window (as a reference to the rigged elections). Here, the *political* in Belarusian Instagram refers not only to direct statements about police violence, mass repressions, election process, and exercise of power but also any messages in which attitudes towards the current authoritarian regime are expressed and can be identified by audiences.

In a broader context, we may see how dichotomous construction of political emotions and Instagram deliverables occurs. In other words, it's not only that social media frames the perception of political events: in Belarus, the protest also changes what Instagram is. In order to ground this idea, this text, based on ethnographic notes and interviews about Instagram use among Belarusians, explores the social function of this medium since spring 2020 and poses several questions. How is Belarusian uprising being represented through the lens of an image-based social platform? Which effects are produced by co-existence of the 'new' political content on Instagram with an older, 'entertaining' one? What kind of emotional community is maintained on 'political Instagram' in Belarus?

First in the text I'll describe the context in which political news proliferated in Belarusian Instagram and the framing that the media imposes on them. After a brief mapping of BPI, I'll proceed to the visual imagery of the protest and its connection to the (politics-driven) emotions evoked by the media. The concluding part explores the ways in which Belarusians experience the mediatisation of the protest; in particular, it focuses on ethical dilemmas that emerge in relation to posting on Instagram. Relying on interviews with Belarusian users of the platform, I'll explore how BPI is placed within everyday order reinforcing the sense of community.

## **1. Context: Instagram and political emotions**

Instagram was seldom considered as a platform for political mobilisation, ceding that title to Facebook or Twitter which played a crucial role, for instance, in Arab Spring (Arafa et al. 2016) and Euromaidan (Onuch 2015). Emotional landscape of Instagram was generally approached in the context of entertainment. This is predictable, since leisure and private life dominate in most national segments of the platform, with politically related hashtags not being close to the top 10 (in fact being absent in top 100 (Top 100 2021)). Instagram is considered a place where emotions are produced en masse, but these are mostly emotions without evident connection to the political process.

Politics was in focus on Instagram mostly in the context of political leaders and election campaigns, less frequently – during mass protests. Manovich in his seminal study of Ukrainian-Instagram during the Euromaidan (Manovich et al. 2014) demonstrates how some people were dancing in clubs and taking selfies in front of the mirror while others engaged with the revolution in close physical proximity. In other words, there are some media spaces where politics was marginal, and Instagram until recently occupied this niche.

To understand the relations between Belarusian Instagram and political mobilisation also requires that emotions are included into analysis. As Holmes notes, 'emotions are not inevitably subversive of the rational ordering of power' (Holmes 2012: 115). Rational political logic also falls short to explain the process of emergence, expansion, and circulation of the protest text, as well as its social impact; more than that, directionality of political emotions cannot be easily managed. Affective turn in the studies of political processes provides new perspectives on various cases, from peacemaking and struggle against terrorism to feminist movements (see Hoggett and Thompson 2012).

Affective turn lens seems essential for the study of new media and particularly of political news that create a specific emotional landscape. The politics of platforms 'intervene into and structure the way we communicate' (Gillespie 2010); these politics are affective in nature (Boler and Davis 2020). Political emotions in new media are part of 'emotional public sphere' (Rosas Serrano-Puche 2018), inhabited by multiple, and overlapping, but in some cases strongly consolidated 'emotional communities' (Rosenwein 2011) that practise diverse styles of feeling about the world. Media, however, are not just a container for a given emotional style, they 'can both represent emotions and provoke emotions, which can play an important role in the escalation or de-escalation of conflict' (Duncombe 2019).

At the same time, on Instagram a piece of news inevitably bears an imprint of the interface's aesthetics – it is framed as an image, processed, placed among other images, and consumed together with them on the app. Aesthetics, in its turn, can and does convey political meanings within protests (Doerr et al. 2013). Instagram, once intended for aestheticised content, acts as a carrier of those meanings as well – perhaps more than other, less image-centred social platforms. Dauce (2020) in her study of Russian news media in the 2010s shows that design and form of the new media have political meaning. Particularly, they can be 'designed jointly by editorial staff, marketing departments and web designers, looking for consistency between a site's design and its editorial line' (Badouard 2014).

Belarusian Instagram, I believe, can be studied with similar assumptions in mind: its toolkit is used by news outlets and persons to transmit particular ideas about the ongoing protest.

Although Instagram is prefabricated from the viewpoint of audiences (in a sense that they cannot substantially redesign it), its toolkit is wide enough to reflect particular political, ethical, and aesthetic orientation through the very choice of tools.

BPI is not only interesting in the context of the media's own evolution, it also gives an example of how media platforms effectively place political struggle into the everyday imagery as well as transform its affective capacity and ethical status via routine practices of visualisation. In other words, it is not only that Instagram contributes to the visual vocabulary of Belarusian protest. It also impacts the ability of the protest to cause and reproduce emotions through pictures. Finally, the protest practice reshapes the way Instagram is used or expected to be used in Belarus during repressions.

As I will try to show below, the functioning of BPI both reflects decentralised political structure of Belarusian protest, its embeddedness into everyday structure, and its diffusion between the ethical and aesthetically beautiful. The ways in which Belarusian audiences selectively utilise Instagram's toolkit, gradually change the platform's function in the society. Belarusian political Instagram both reflects characteristics of the country's protest culture and reproduces them. To go further, I suggest that this reproduction is a factor contributing to the resilience of the protest.

## 2. Mapping Belarusian political Instagram

Belarusian political Instagram embraces a large rhizome of content and media artefacts related to protests in Belarus in 2020–2021. It cannot be sharply circumscribed and/or isolated from other parts of Instagram – however, we may relate it to the Belarusian-speaking cluster plus a larger one that is Russophone but specialises in Belarus (where Russian is prevalent). Conceptually, BPI is a regional assemblage of technology, content, and emotions, where new social practices of Belarusian society become visible, widely accepted, and reproduced through collective experience of non-violent political action.

In terms of size, Belarusian political Instagram far exceeds what we could call a social bubble. Study by #DB3 company showed an increase in use of Instagram from 29 to 44 percent of Belarus's population aged between 15 and 74 in 2020 (Infopolicy 2021). Out of approximately 3.3 mln Belarusian Instagram users (Tankovska 2021) almost 10 percent (more than 300k) were following non-state Belarusian-speaking media outlets such as Belsat and RadioSvoboda in September 2020. The figure was even higher for TUT.BY – the page of this Russophone Belarusian news outlet boasts more than 800k subscribers, which makes it the most popular Instagram account of Belarus. Furthermore, in terms of subscribers' number, the top of the feed in BPI is formed by most read news outlets of Belarus, boasting subscribers in hundreds of thousands. In comparison, Russian non-state media (e.g. Rain TV-channel, Meduza, Radio Svoboda) have less following, despite significantly wider 'potential' audiences of the former, whether counted by country of residence or by main language of news consumption.

Remarkably, this explosive growth happened during 2020: for instance, Radio Svoboda had about 32k followers as of early March, which grew to 305k by the end of the year. Gradual politicisation connected to the Covid-19 crisis in Belarus, tense pre-election campaign

and subsequent violence after August 9 coinciding with the exodus of independent media from off-line format to online platforms, such as Instagram and Telegram. Administrative blockages of particular websites in Bynet (Belarusian Internet) were common since the 2000s, but in 2020 they became especially frequent. For instance, since September 2020 more than 70 websites of non-state news media and organisations have been blocked on the territory of Republic of Belarus (Reform.by 2020). Resources outside domain .by, including Instagram and Telegram, were not affected by Belarusian authorities, except when they blocked the Internet in the country completely for three days following the election.

This makes Belarusian non-state news outlets on Instagram comparable, in terms of audience's size, with the most popular bloggers or online celebrities. As a consequence, in Belarus Instagram became a remarkably newsdriven space. From the user's point of view, this means that content about repressions and police violence, including highly sensitive, controversial, ideologically loaded images and sounds, inundated the space that formerly used to be depoliticised and, at the same time, highly emotional. Shoots of nature, family time, leisure, and consumption in Belarusian Instagram coexist and mix with private and public political news.

In May 2020 BPI also saw politicians creating their personal pages and attracting large audiences. While new outlets were looking for a less constraining environment in Instagram, Belarusian politicians came to the platform in order to oppose the detachment of officials from the electorate. On May 12, 2020 Viktor Babaryka announced he would be a candidate for presidency and launched his Instagram page, which was met by many with appraisal and associated with hope for change. For a Belarusian politician to be on Instagram was quite untypical. Babaryka's first live Q&A session on Instagram was watched by more than 5,000 users.

The very fact of a Belarusian politician's coming to new media was resonant. Instagram accounts by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (one of the presidential candidates), Marya Kalesnikava (political activist, who headed Viktor Babariko's electoral campaign during presidential elections of 2020 in Belarus) and other 'alternative leaders' appeared, gaining audiences of dozens or hundreds thousands. Differently from state TV, the platform suggested a more interactive way of communication – with possibility to comment, pose questions, and express emotional reactions.

In August 2020, capital's districts (mikrorayons) and locations of symbolic significance for the protest, such as Square of Changes (*Ploščča Peramien*), started to create and develop their own pages. Particular neighbourhoods followed this trend.

In parallel, there are several pages dedicated exclusively to activist, protest, and street art (e.g. *chrysalismagazine*, *artistswithbelarus*, *pratest\_vulic*). Pieces of art became significant element in imagery of the protest when the regime expropriated art collection from Belgazprambank, previously headed by Viktor Babaryka, a strong candidate for presidency, now political prisoner (see more in Borisionok 2020).

The above-mentioned 'knots' in the rhizome of BPI are complemented by multiple representations of the protest via personal pages. From celebrities to 'ordinary people', users who had never posted 'political' content before, related themselves to it in 2020. This trend is difficult to assess quantitatively even with the help of tags, given that the use of any form of opposition-associated symbolics is being punished, and people deleted much of that content or

removed tags from it in autumn 2020. Nevertheless, digital traces such as likes and views of publications on public pages of BPI, indicate the scale of politicisation on the platform.

It must be noted that pro-Lukashenko pages and profiles also exist on Instagram. They generally have less subscribers than anti-regime pages (up to 10k). Most of these pages are characterised by harsh propagandist style and hate speech; often they are perceived by protesters as ‘paid’ – that is, created and maintained for money. Some of the pages with pro-regime content have been blocked, allegedly after mass complaints by other Belarusian users (iSANS 2021). In general, pro-regime pages on Instagram failed to attract even dozens of thousands of Belarusians; moreover, the audience of some of the most popular pro-Lukashenko pages predominantly lives outside Belarus judging by their pages and stories.

These notes do not pretend to provide a comprehensive guide to ‘Belarusian political Instagram’ – rather, they are intended to show a polycentric, heterogeneous, and dynamic media environment, where political debate gets merged with creativity and emotionality. Furthermore, since the beginning of the 2020 protests in Belarus, Instagram has played a role in the formation of their visual vocabulary.

### 3. Instagram and visual vocabulary of Belarusian riot

The visual code of Belarusian 2020 riot is inheriting previous protests that occurred in the country during previous presidential elections but also has notable differences from them. Similarly to smaller-scale protests in 2010, 2017, 2019, the protesters widely use white-red-white flag and Pahonia coat of arms (both symbols were official in the country from 1991 to 1995). However, in 2020, the scale of use, diversification, and repertoire of ‘white-red-white’ colour scheme and associated protest symbols was striking. Moreover, this visual imagery was actively proliferating online, spurred with the rise in Instagram use.

BPI’s impact on the visual imagery of the Belarusian revolution is manifold. It both highlights visual marks of the movement and the role of aesthetics in it. On one hand, it helps to keep the protest ‘beautiful’ by establishing and reproducing its aesthetical language. Visual representations of Belarus and its people in 2020 differ radically from the previous journalistic (or, more broadly, iconographic) tradition that had even been mocked in a comic guide by 34mag (2017). So, previous iconography of mass event included Victory ‘parade’ peppered with the images of Lukashenko and his son Kolya wearing this bizarre military uniform; ‘the statue of Lenin, women ‘wearing pretentious makeup and miniskirts, and (optional) Soviet mosaic on the wall’; ‘pictures of grey, cloudy sky’; ‘monochrome sepia filter’; Victory Square with its eternal flame.

In contrast, Belarusian political Instagram of 2020 is characterised by images of a holiday/celebration as well as atmosphere of hedonism (common trend for the protest – see Markevich 2020) and humour. These images feature young, smiling people, wearing ‘European-like’ casual clothes with small but clear details expressing their solidarity – be that white bracelet on the hand, white-red-white stripe on the backpack, or a print of *Eva* by Chaim Sutin on a T-shirt (the painting expropriated with the rest of Belgazprambank’s art collection). The white-red-white protest fashion has spread well beyond street marches being reflected in makeup, street art, design, everyday ‘looks’ – especially during the first weeks of

the protest, before the new wave of repressions. Protest actions then displayed some features of a happening, performance, carnival; while the most evident iconographic reference in solidarity chains, where people sang with flowers in hands, was the Baltic Way 1989.

Protest photos and videos seem to already have their own traditions and canons, which deserve an independent study. Some of them are directly influenced by tactics and conditions of the protest: videos are cut in a way that crowd seems larger (not showing the first and the last person in the column); anonymity excludes close-ups of the protesters; drone filming and filming from a balcony are safer to make than filming from inside the crowd; and so on. However, with all constraints given, generally, protest visualisations are characterised by resilient creativity: they use different techniques, locations, compositions, styles, and artistic forms; they are also absorbed by pop-culture and urban folklore. My colleague Andrei Karpeka has aptly called the Belarusian protest 'Gesamtkunstwerk', referring to its dispersed, decentralised and peace-loving character. The aesthetic pleasure and (perceived) beauty of the protest movement became a form of self-care and a way to oppose the regime in a non-violent way (Vozyanov 2021).

Returning back to Instagram affordances: here traditionally politicised news outlets are affected by the format and the rhythm imposed by the platform. The length of news messages is reduced, and the proportion between text and video or photo is changing. On their Instagram page, news outlets occasionally share art content, related to the protest, as well as photos of Belarusian nature. For instance, RadioSvaboda regularly posts pictures of landscapes of Belarus (forests, moors, lakes, and so on), accompanying them with quotes from Belarusian fiction. Such type of content is absent on the websites of these outlets, but became common on their Instagram pages.

Next, BPI becomes a chronicle and an archive of the regime's violence and the protest. Bodies with bruises, blood, and hematomas from tortures; prison cameras and backyards, prison camp fences and watchtowers; police offices and court rooms; slogans, judiciary documents, petitions, letters to political prisoners – this imagery used to be definitely beyond expected on Instagram. Shocking and 'ugly' documents of cruelty do not replace but stand next to typically 'beautiful' content. While news media adapt to this situation in spontaneous mode, there are Insta-pages that intentionally experiment with the mixture of hardcore political content and Instagram's playful emotional style. An example is Politzek.me – a page dedicated to Belarusian political prisoners, where each post presents a person with elements of humour, as well as 'cute' pictures featuring kittens, fancy tea-cups, and flowers. The aim of the project is to encourage Belarusians and people from abroad to write letters to political prisoners; its imagery is emblematic of the context, where illegal detention for peaceful expression became part of routine – not less than kittens, teacups, and flowers.

Thus, Instagram represents Belarusian protesters in positive light and repressions in negative one (or, in other words, protests as aesthetically beautiful, and repressions as ugly). The visual focus of the platform corresponds to the protest's demand for aesthetically approved representations and diversity. Instagram content also reveals that Belarusian protest and repressions against it are very well documented, although the importance of this circumstance is yet unknown. Instagram might even indirectly impose the expectation of video/photo fixation – in order to document events. Partisan 'backyard marches' in Belarusian cities now fea-

ture a person filming the process. In fact, under conditions of mass arrests, marches in the neighbourhoods are short, but certainly documented.

Instagram is not unique in seeing the wave of politics-related content: for instance, after poisoning of Alexey Navalny Russophone TikTok served as a political satire and memes' haven (Zaborona 2020), whereas VKontakte hosted events dedicated to Russian protests in January 2021. However, while Instagram drifts from entertainment towards news media, the focus on visuality remains. Political agenda, thus, infiltrates into everyday life via pictures, which makes protest a part of visual routine even for those who are not going out onto streets.

#### **4. Solidarity and management of emotions on Belarusian political Instagram**

The emergence of political Instagram transforms its everyday use and mediates different forms of solidarisation. In December 2020 – January 2021, the platform helped draw attention to the hunger strike of Ihar Losik, an imprisoned journalist and administrator of a popular Telegram channel. His wife Darya uses her Instagram page to spread the word about inhuman conditions of imprisonment in Belarus. In January 2021 users en masse wrote comments on pages of sponsors of World Ice Hockey Championship pleading them not to support the dictatorship and cancel the events in Minsk (later the Championship was indeed withdrawn from Belarus). Also, during Sunday marches Instagram Stories are used by the media to inform the protesters about siloviki's movements in the city. These and many other diverse cases of (sometimes) successful social mobilisation show the changing character of Instagram in collective experience of the protest: it is not only aestheticising; the platform is used in new ways, serving for civic activism and political engagement. Thus, we can observe the social (re-)construction of Instagram in Belarus from an archive of entertaining visual content into an interactive chronicle of life under and resistance to extreme political repressions.

Along with becoming a politicised media space, BPI is also a space where emotions are produced, disseminated, and managed. Initially I came to this assumption through my personal experience: during 2020 my own Instagram experience changed completely. Unlike Facebook, which I used primarily for discussions and less as a display of my aesthetic life, Instagram used to be reserved for private and beautiful: architecture, design, landscapes, and nature. By the end of 2020, news outlets were always the first stories and posts I saw, although previously mentioned categories of content did not disappear completely. Also, my range of feelings connected to Instagram changed substantially. Now I pressed on the Instagram icon on my smartphone's screen with a mixture of fear and hope since I opened it to learn the news.

My friends reported similar changes in their experiences. To understand this change better, I interviewed a couple of people I know. Six focused interviews, coding of emotions in comments in BPI, and ethnographic notes form an empirical basis for my argument: BPI encompasses ideas of solidarity and civic participation, aesthetic pleasure, and collective maintenance of political emotions in Belarusian protest culture.

My interlocutors, aged between 22 and 32, had different backgrounds in using Instagram – some of them started to use it for their working needs, others – in order to consume visual



content they liked. For all of them installing the app (which they did in 2013–2017) was motivated by leisure, hobby, and opportunity to present self and own life, as well as to be informed about mates' lives. Interestingly, female users recalled that a few years ago their male peers considered Instagram feminine and improper for themselves. In all cases, the users did not post or read about politics on Instagram before 2020. Also, topics related to politics were either absent or marginal in their feed earlier – with posts about ecology or Alexey Navalny being rare exceptions. In their recollections, personal story of Instagram use was interwoven with evolution of the app's interface. They pointed to the initial exclusive visuality of the platform: before it started to propose such functions as Direct (text messaging) or Stories (where one can easily add text, or make up an entry of text only). Penetration of text into a once purely visual environment can be traced in both individual stories and Instagram's back-track. As of December 2020–January 2021, my informants subscribed to many BPI pages or could well navigate it; they also spent significant time on the app watching and writing stories as well as text messaging with friends (a shift away from silent scrolling posts).

Emotional assemblage of BPI is heterogeneous and complex: akin to imagery, it indicates both novelties compared to earlier Belarusian protests and contingencies with them. For instance, in 2017 'marches of angry Belarusians' against 'tax on unemployment' gave a hint of transformation of fear into anger (that Andrei Vardomatsky observed in its entirety in 2020 (Spasiuk 2020)). However, the 2020 protest brought around a much wider palette of emotions directed towards people and not only towards the regime. Pride, solidarity, euphoria, surprise, and awe were pronounced in the interviews and user comments equally to shock, pain, despair, and compassion; whereas the latter set is increasingly accentuated with the time. Euphoria of the first protest weeks, hope and outrage of following months, and sedation from partisan marches in winter – this emotional trajectory was traceable in the interviews. Nevertheless, some emotions were notably absent in these accounts. Particularly this was so for personal guilt and regret about mass protests or own participation in them. Looking through comments I never encountered a stance like 'we did it in vain'; on the contrary, the protest was a significant resource of positive emotions and optimistic conclusions.

Images played a crucial role in production of these emotions: for some, watching at marches was a substitute for attending them; and for attendants, repeated watching of the video and photos again was a pleasure in itself. Posting selfies featuring flags and other protest symbols, marches, and other actions was common during the first weeks of the protest, before Belarusian authorities started to identify and fine protesters. Instagram became a medium where political emotions are visualised, articulated, and circulated.

Belarusian users do not simply share or consume emotions on Instagram; these emotions are subject to moderation with the help of BPI. My interlocutors mentioned the therapeutic modality of Instagram use. It is used to reassure that 'we are many' – a belief that the regime is thoroughly trying to erase from analogue urban space. The community of like-minded persons is encouraged not only by content itself, but also by number of likes, shares, and views. Even if news is recognised as bad by protesters, the volume of attention to it might cause a sense of empowerment in them. Along with that, my interlocutors explain their preference for Instagram instead of Vkontakte or Facebook by easier possibility to 'switch moods'. Facebook was described as full of 'negative' messages and as a platform where 'opinions are sounded more radically than on Instagram'.

Instagram mediates solidarity in different ways and serves as an infrastructure of an emotional community: with ability to frequently exchange with quick reactions – emoticons, likes, shares etc. Many set black avatars to commemorate Raman Bandarenka (who died in Minsk after reportedly being beaten by security forces in November 2020), or removed their own faces from their avatars to give space for protest-associated symbols. ‘When Bandarenka was killed, my feed was black’ – recalled one of the interviewees.

During the summer 2020, feelings of solidarity and involvement, virtual co-presence on the protest site were also created by live streams (e.g. by RadioSvaboda, TutByLive, Belsat) from the protest actions. Interestingly, Belarusian authorities, if intuitively, recognised this capacity of streams and initiated several trials against journalists that led them, qualifying the broadcast as ‘organisation of non-sanctioned mass gatherings’ (Reporters Without Borders, 2020; Kravtsova, 2020).

Even after repressions became more systemic and severe late in 2020, for many, virtual space still indicates relative freedom compared to the street, despite repeated Internet black-outs on Sundays and dozens of blocked websites. Instagram as a space of political mobilisation is also shadowed by Telegram, which was officially declared an enemy by the regime. Also, detecting content with white-red-white colour scheme on Instagram becomes less doable, especially since Stories are public for 24 hours only.

Belarusian users reacted to targeted repressions by adopting some measures of precaution on their Instagram: creating lists of ‘close friends’ or turning accounts into private for some periods of time. However, most of the people I talked to abstained from ‘cleaning out’ their account from white-red-white symbols (as of December 2020 and January 2021). Speaking about security concerns, K., 32, expressed an opinion that ‘the siloviki made it unimportant [by their violence] – what you dare and what you don’t dare to post’. In the last days of January General Procuracy of Belarus declared that white-red-white might be declared an extremist symbol and discussions about the risks of being charged ‘for a like’ on Instagram revived.

## 5. Sense of collective and ethical collisions

Sense of collectivity and solidarity invoked by Instagram is most often empowering, but it can also result in the idea of responsibility behind one’s ‘posting behaviour’. First months of the protest were marked by mass re-assessment of Instagram as a communal space of interaction rather than simple ‘identity show-off’. Such approach towards Instagram was not entirely new, but in BPI it received additional impulse: ‘Earlier it felt like what I post is no one else’s business, now there’s feeling of collectivity, so I have to think in advance [about my actions in Instagram]’ (N, 31, on Instagram since 2013).

C., 22, on Instagram since 2014, mentioned she sought not only to receive but also to share emotional support on Instagram when she felt she had one: posting something encouraging and inspiring for friends. Apart from that, Belarusian users, making statements with an eye on the feelings of others, will rather abstain from vocal pessimism. Altogether, the future rarely figures in posts and stories given the reactive character of BPI that processes pieces of the current moment much more than visions and forecasts.

The other side of collectivity on BPI is a feeling of constraint and even discipline imposed by the medium of Instagram as a source of political news. My interlocutors felt affected by stories and posts from friends (that is, not being in control of my own feed). Two of them reported that they were not subscribed to news outlets but were well informed simply because the news regularly appeared in stories of their friends: 'Although I tend to preserve Instagram as a space for the beautiful, it does not quite depend on me only: because my friends are politicised as well.'

Specific ethical concern on BPI is related to the vicinity of political news and leisure-related content. On November 12, 2020 Alexandra Zvereva, the partner of Eduard Babaryka, political prisoner and son of Viktor Babaryka, reproached those who dismissed the protest agenda and kept posting their life 'as usual': '*even after all August events: arrests, tortures and killings, friends' profiles were just as full of yoga and Bulbash [vodka brand]. I started to unsubscribe*' (Zvereva 2020).

My interviewees encountered similar situations: there was a period when for them to post some photos from vacation in Turkey felt awkward and out-of-time. As one of my interlocutors referred to a reaction to her story: '*The question was whether we dare to post a cappuccino when people are tortured?*' Others mentioned that at some point they unfollowed several people who ignored repressions. Indeed, Instagram as the place of most frequent posting, 'gave away' those detached from the protest's emotional regime.

Particular interlocutors also mentioned that they felt obliged to maintain focus on the protest – either by posting or by sharing others' posts – also perceiving this as their form of solidarity or own contribution. Apparently, after the first wave of marches, admiring spectators started to outnumber the immediate participants of the outdoor actions; for many, watching, commenting, liking, and sharing posts becomes important for being part of the same community with those taking to the street.

In a few months, the mixture of 'protest' and 'usual life' became much more widely accepted and practised on BPI. 'In August and September it seemed like we have refused from our life and now only have protests. But if we want to persist in a long-term struggle, we just have to make pauses and have rest' C. concluded. Still, the idea persists that political news have a reserved space among published content: 'Everyone's feed is full now, and I try not to post what does not seem important to me, and I post less about my hanging out – so that if sometimes political happens it could get more attention' (K., 31, on Instagram since 2013).

While other platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram seem to maintain a relatively stable consensus on the legitimacy of political debate, in Instagram it was debatable until recently. More than that, a situation when entertaining content is declared out of place on Belarusian Instagram was not common a year earlier but nowadays it happens on a regular basis.

Instagram is also used as a way to express solidarity by those physically absent in Belarus. From within the country, this content is also perceived as empowering; it maintains the idea that 'the world is watching' events in Belarus. English-speaking pages, such as Highlight Belarus or Voices from Belarus use Instagram as their first, or the only platform, as well as pages of Belarusian communities in single countries that disseminate news aiming at international audiences. Members of diaspora actively repost such content – and also express their belonging in such a way.

Unfollowing might be an ethical issue too, since they might be understood as surrender and disappointment – the feelings my interlocutors did not want to show. Instagram indicates how protest becomes a realm of Belarusian everyday life but might also serve an early indication of demobilisation – or emotional fatigue of Belarusian protesters and their sympathisers. However, in interviews it was mentioned that unfollowing a political page is not always related to disinterest – rather it is a means of controlling one’s own experience. A friend of mine recalled how after several months of following political Insta-pages he unfollowed them all at once – and followed again after some three days: the new emotional regime after August 9 became his new normal that he did not want to reject. In this new normal, to follow is more than just to be informed: the media helps to articulate trauma and dread of ongoing repressions as well as to locate repressions within one shared social reality with leisure and entertainment, neither same nor isolated but right next to each other. Establishing this close connection, BPI also discourages escape from the protest environment. It does so via reminding about politics daily – through news, recollections of events, and appeals to write to political prisoners coupled with their photos or portraits, etc.; at the same time, it locates various forms of assistance, support, and participation amongst everyday activities. For instance, people demonstrate drawings that they created for political prisoners uploading photos with related tags before sending them per post; for some, this is their first ever engagement in civic activism.

At the background of these Instagrammed becomings, the emotional reward so far might be the main one from Belarusian protest. As of early February 2021, the protest did not result in power transit, but it produced new knowledge, new toponymics, for many – even a new identity, as well as new iconography of Belarus, and new emotional community. This community shares significant emotional background reproduced in the visual culture; in a way, the vibrance of this community is more directly connected to the media environment rather than power structures of the Belarusian regime. Remaining on BPI means continuing the civic resistance, at least in the form of knowing and seeing the truth together. Localisation of the community might mean particular vulnerabilities for it in case the regime tries to restrict access to this or that messenger. However, multiplied via BPI, the visual imagery of Belarusian protest has already spread across other media and offline spaces from where it is hard to eradicate.

## 6. Conclusions

Politically themed content on Belarusian Instagram is contributing to formation of the aesthetic code of the protest and its emotional landscape. Users here enjoy relatively high agency in terms of documenting repressions, as well as expressing own opinions and (emotional) responses to information; this is also true for artistic self-expression and aesthetic choice. On BPI the protesters produce the imagery of a beautiful protest, while Lukashenko’s regime is portrayed not only as outdated and illegitimate, but also as ugly, dowdy, and ridiculous. Here, the sense of moral superiority is coupled with aesthetic one.

Also, BPI sustains the feeling of mass solidarity among Belarusian users and maintains a large emotional community. With the high rate of Internet access in Belarus (ca 75 percent

according to the International Telecommunication Union) and de facto dominance of non-state media in Bynet (among ten most read online news outlets, only one or two are owned by state and publish pro-regime propaganda), protesting Belarusians find themselves in a hybrid situation. On one hand, their awareness of the occurring violence is, apparently, unprecedented for the country; on the other hand, their emotional response belongs to a political culture with a far lower acceptance of violence than amongst Lukashenko's regime supporters. This might also be a reminder of how understudied and alien are media worlds in which Lukashenko's supporters live – after all, it is them in whose hands the power is still concentrated.

In the situation of ethical split between parts of Belarusian society after August 9 – mirrored by aesthetic and media split – emotional communities might be crucially significant for sustainability and legitimacy of the protest. As the regime uses conservative methods of violence resembling repressions of the 1930s, the unprecedented degree of knowledge about the regime's deeds results in a radically different emotional experience for protesters. In new media, the feelings of powerlessness and despair come together with joy of solidarity and civic pride. This new emotional and epistemic condition (or result, or *atmosphere*) of Belarusian protest is reflected in its tropes of 'awakening' and 'getting to know each other'. The ongoing reproduction of BPI, both informational and atmospheric, presents the current movement as attractive far beyond the narrowly conceived political rivalry.

Kirschbaum (2021) comments that by the end of 2020 'temptations of selfie-Revolution' disappeared from Belarusian life and selfies are, indeed, rare on BPI. However, the case of BPI allows to question a statement that 'the Revolution will not be instagrammable' since the medium does not lead people to 'the goals behind raising awareness' (Jean 2020). For Belarusian society, repressed and protesting in the age of new media, Revolution has changed what Instagram is – a medium knitting together the notions of ethical and beauty, as well as communitarian aspiration of the protest.

In 2021 Belarusian segment of Instagram has become a much less safe space for expressing opinions and sharing news. New legislation allowed to classify particular pages 'extremist' and imprison people for up to seven years for liking, commenting, reposting, and following them. This has radically reduced the possibilities not only to view news from non-state media in Instagram feeds but also to maintain solidarity and the feeling of community online. However, as of February 2022, non-state media still outnumber pro-regime propaganda pages in BPI, counted by number of publication views and subscriptions (consider 785K followers of Zerkalo's (ex-Tut.by) page versus 4.5K followers of Insta-page of BelarusOne, the most popular TV-channel of Belarus, or 10K in the case of PulPervogo, arguably the most popular pro-Lukashenko blog). In parallel, many new pages appear that unite their audiences around subjects that are not explicitly political but are widely associated with the protest's habitus and aesthetics: be that photos of Belarus in the 1990s, as well as the country's history, art, literature, language, nature, architecture, and folklore. The kind of content that initially constituted BPI is now being decentralised and diversified to the extent that occasionally the line is blurred between solidarisation and de-politicisation. Still, as many migrate from newspapers to the less protest-focused, but identifiably dissident content, the mere presence on Instagram in Belarus turns out to be political; access to the platform from the territory of the country thus becomes especially important.

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## Interview guide

*For how long have you been using Instagram?*

*For which kinds of communication do you do or do not use Instagram? Any rules?*

*What’s a priority — to post or to watch posts?*

*How do you decide to follow a page?*

*Where do you read the news? Where did you follow news before Instagram?*

*Do you remember how you started following news via Instagram?*

*Before the elections in 2020, did you follow any politicians or news outlets on Instagram?*

*Do you remember the Internet blackout after elections — what did you feel then?*

*Have you been outraged or disappointed by an image or post on Instagram?*

*Do you ‘mute’ pages?*

*Do you report? In which situations do you do that?*

*Were there any situations when you felt like you were ought to post something about politics?*

*Do you watch stories by news outlets?*

*Do you add their news to your stories? How do you decide whether to add or not?*

*Did you think what to post and what not to post on Instagram in 2020? Does the moment matter for posting (for instance, with regard to particular days of the week)?*

*Do you feel safe posting to your Instagram in Belarus?*

*Blitz question: what would you post to your Instagram when the regime falls?*

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