



‘C’mon, Turn *Swan Lake* on’: Memories of the 1990s at the Belarusian Protests of 2020

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Abstract: This exploratory study is dedicated to the actualisation of memories of the 1990s during the 2020 protests in Belarus. The public discontent manifested during the latest presidential election campaign in summer 2020 and, following the election day of August 9, became countrywide. Among a multitude of symbols, slogans, and memes that constituted the demonstrators’ protest imaginaries, a noticeable place was occupied by the references to the perestroika and the first post-Soviet decade. Based on poster images and media reports related to the events of summer 2020, this article explores how references to the 1990s were used by participants to produce meanings and evoke affects, as well as offers an analysis of the relevant mnemonic practices exercised at the protests.

Keywords: 1990s, activism, Belarus, Lukashenko, memory, mnemonic practice, protest

The remembrance of the late 1980s and the 1990s – ‘the long 1990s’ – in today’s post-Soviet and post-socialist states is subject to increasing scholarly interest. Three decades after the radical transformations of the USSR and its satellite states began, the topic of ‘transitioning’ from socialist states to liberal democracies remains highly contentious in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). To date, social groups across the region (for example, in Germany, Poland, Russia, and other countries) have differing and at times opposing attitudes to the events of the late 1980s and the 1990s, which results in memories of the decade being perhaps ‘hotter’ (Maier 2002) than ever. Crucially, however, these memories are being further ‘heated up’ by political actors in CEE countries. Politicians – first and foremost, right-

wing populist parties such as the AfD in Germany, Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and others – have been increasingly instrumentalising widespread disenchantment with the transformations that took place. The discourses of ‘unfair transformation’, ‘unfinished revolution’ and ‘the turbulent 1990s’ have been used by populists to discredit their liberal opponents as well as to legitimise and strengthen their own rule, securing the support of those dissatisfied with the outcomes of the transitions (Dujisin 2020; Malinova 2020). As a result, recalling and making sense of this transformative period has become a highly politicised matter, with the space for public dialogue rapidly shrinking (Laczó and Wawrzyniak 2017; Mark et al. 2015) and public spheres increasingly ‘disconnected’ from each other (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018).

This exploratory study is dedicated to the actualisation¹ of memories of the 1990s at the Belarusian protests of 2020 (in the course of the latest presidential election campaign and following the election on 9 August 2020). Among a multitude of symbols, slogans, and memes used by protesters, a noticeable place was occupied by references to the perestroika and the first post-Soviet decade. Based on posters and banners, video recordings, and media reports linked to the protests, we examine and offer a preliminary categorisation of mnemonic practices that invoke the 1990s. Our analysis of the symbols used in the course of the protests includes textual, visual, and performative aspects, and identifies potential meanings and affects (re)produced by referencing cultural practices of the 1990s.

The article builds on the concepts developed within memory studies, including *mediation* and *remediation*² (Erll and Rigney 2009), and touches upon national and transnational aspects. Moreover, references to the 1990s at the 2020 protests are studied in relation to the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’³ memories of the 1990s in Belarus. In addition to contributing to the body of literature on the memories of transition in CEE (e.g., Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Dujisin 2020; Hilmar 2021; Laczó and Wawrzyniak 2017; Malinova 2018, 2020; Sarkisova and Apor 2008; Szostak and Mihelj 2017; Törnquist-Plewa 2021), which has been expanding in recent years, this research also seeks to add to the work on the ‘symbolic dimension of the repertoire of contention’ (Bekus 2021: 7) at the 2020 Belarusian protests, which has only begun (e.g., Bekus 2021; Gabowitsch 2021; Gaufman 2021; Gerasimov 2020; Lewis 2021; Romanova 2020; Tsinkevich 2020; Zelenko 2020⁴).

The remembrance of historical periods and events at the Belarusian protests, and its significance for protesters’ imaginaries, has already attracted scholarly attention. The journal *Ab Imperio* published a forum on the postcolonial dimension of the 2020 Belarusian protests (Gerasimov 2020; Tsinkevich 2020) as well as on their relationship to the official memory

¹ In memory studies, the term ‘actualisation’ denotes the process of (re)invoking and, in a sense, reliving a fragment of the past in the present.

² In memory studies, ‘remediation’ refers to ‘the fact that memorable events are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media: in newspaper articles, photography, diaries, historiography, novels, films, etc.’ (Erll 2008: 392). Research employing this concept focuses on the practices and effects of such repetition, the new meanings and affects it creates, and the ways in which it solidifies certain narratives and turns them into cultural memory.

³ ‘Official memories’ form as a result of the authorities’ memory politics that promotes and imposes a particular interpretation of the past (e.g., Malinova 2021). ‘Unofficial memories’ are those that, in one way or another, contradict the official ones; there are different types of unofficial memories, for example, ‘counter-memories’, which belong to oppositional discourses (Wegner 2020), or vernacular memories, which can be (but not necessarily are) excluded from the official discourse (Mihelj 2013).

⁴ These and other contributions constitute the special issues or forums on the Belarusian protests recently published in *Slavic Review* (Bekus and Gabowitsch 2021), *Ab Imperio* (3/2020) and *Osteuropa* (10–11/2020).

politics (Romanova 2020; Zelenko 2020). In the course of the protests, according to one of the forum’s contributors, Irina Romanova (2020: 281), the country has seen a clash of two prevalent historical narratives: the official (‘pro-Soviet’) one, which is based on the cult of the ‘Great Patriotic War’, and the ‘oppositional’ one, for which Kurapaty (a place on the outskirts of Minsk where the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) had executed and buried thousands of people) has become central. Nelly Bekus (2021), in her contribution to another forum on the topic, recently published in *Slavic Review*, also points to the symbolic linking of the 2020 protests with the political violence of the Soviet era and Stalinist purges. However, when it comes to the relationship between the ‘anti-Soviet’ and ‘pro-Soviet’ narratives, she offers a different interpretation. Assessing the wrapping by protesters of the sculpture *Motherland* [Rodina-Mat’]⁵ in the white-red-white flag, Bekus writes:

[T]wo previously conflicting frames – [the white-red-white flag as] the symbol of the anti-Soviet nationalism and [the sculpture *Motherland* as] the epitome of the ‘glorious Soviet past’ – have been combined in a representation of the new Belarus emerging during the protest. In this powerful act of resignification, the heroic pathos of place – reinforced by the iconic, 45-meter-high Hero City of Minsk obelisk – transferred the sense of Belarusian historical heroism to the protesters, who now stand for victory over the authoritarian regime. (2021: 9)

She thus concludes that both ‘oppositional’ (memory of the victims of Stalinist crimes) and ‘official’ (memory of the Great Patriotic War) references ‘proved to be equally meaningful’ for protesters’ identity (Bekus 2021: 14).

Notably, Bekus’s (2021) analysis of the protest imaginaries and identity dilemmas in Belarus begins with musings on the 2020 protests as a ‘new 1989’. Referencing journalistic accounts that draw parallels between the Belarusian demonstrations and the events of 1989, she explores the possibility of seeing the protests as a ‘symbolic extension’ of this seminal year in European history: ‘There is no doubt that the emancipatory appeal of the Belarusian protest is similar to the one that sustained the 1989 revolutions. But will building democracy—the major aspiration of the Belarusian demonstrators—follow the scripts of liberalization and westernization in evidence in other central and east European countries?’ (Bekus 2021: 4–5).

The current article, which continues this exploration of historical and cultural references to the ‘transitional’ 1990s at the Belarusian protests, does not aim to answer this question, although it does consider the potential role of recalling the perestroika and the early 1990s in the post-Soviet ‘repertoires of contention’ (Tilly 2008). Nor do we seek to determine the significance of referencing the 1990s for protesters’ identities. Rather, our goal is to explore the 1990s-related mnemonic practices in which protesters engaged, and to offer their preliminary typology. It is worth emphasising that even though some of the symbols that we examine (for instance, the white-red-white flag) originated earlier than the 1990s, we include them in our analysis because they were actualised during the period in question and are therefore strongly associated with it.

⁵ The sculpture is located on the Avenue of the Victors [Prospekt Pobeditelei] in Minsk and forms one monumental composition with the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War and the Minsk Hero City Obelisk.

As we observe a variety of performative references to the perestroika and the 1990s during the protests, we ask: 1) Which aspects of this historical period are recalled? How do they reiterate slogans from the 1989–1991 protests⁶ or use forms of protest that were developed or popularised thirty years ago? Do they include cultural references to the 1990s beyond specifically *protest* repertoires? 2) Since every recollection is repetition with a difference (Olick 2008), how did the Belarusian protests reframe or shift the meaning of well-known symbols, slogans, and practices? In order to answer these questions, we look at a multitude of posters and banners, video recordings, and media reports related to the protests, and select those related to the 1990s. Importantly, neither of the authors had been in the field during the Belarusian protests, which means that only mediated content was used in the analysis. This inevitably raises the issue of (media) bias, including that of search engines which tend to offer a partisan representation of the past (Zavadski and Toepfl 2019). However, since this study is limited to *exploring* the references, without evaluating their role in the protest imaginaries, we leave the issue of bias aside.

First, the article outlines how the 1990s are remembered in the Belarusian official discourse, and touches upon some of the unofficial narratives about the period that came to the fore during the 2020 protests. It goes on to analyse invocations of the decade at the protests, with regard to the official narrative and in relation to memories of other historical periods and events (World War II, the Belarusian People's Republic of 1918) that played a prominent role during these protests. Our analysis takes into account the transnational scope of the protest repertoires which tapped into the images, slogans, and practices of the late 1980s and early 1990s that emerged within the disintegrating yet tightly interconnected Soviet space. As we explore the potential meanings and rationales behind protesters' invocations of the 1990s, we tentatively identify and outline three functions of this mnemonic referencing: 1) recalling the 1989–1991 mobilisations as '(un)failed'⁷ attempts at resisting authoritarian regimes; 2) remembering the early 1990s as a time of national revival (through the employment of pre-Soviet national symbols) and of public use of dissident discourse and anti-fascist rhetoric; 3) popular cultural referencing of the decade as a (forgotten) time of freedom and improvisation. We conclude with reflections on the general characteristics of remembering the 1990s across these practices and on the potential of these mnemonic practices to partake in forming a *post-Soviet protest memoryscape*.

1. The 1990s in the Belarusian memory politics

In Belarus, the long 1990s can be divided into two distinct periods: 1) from the late 1980s and until 1994, when the country, first still part of the Soviet Union, partook in the perestroika processes, and then, in 1991, received independence and began a 'national revival';

⁶ Massive demonstrations against the Communist party and its politics during the coup of August 1991, and earlier, against the violent suppression of uprisings for national independence in the Soviet republics (first and foremost, in cities like Tbilisi, Vilnius, Baku, Dushanbe).

⁷ We use the concept of 'unfailure' developed in Jennifer Wentzel's (2009) study of the persistent memory of 19th-century anticolonial prophecy (that led to the failure of the movement at that time) in 20th-century South African literature. In her readings, the concept denotes 'a radical patience that keeps past dreams alive as dynamic inspiration for future movements' (Wentzel 2009: 153). On 'unfailure' and 'weak messianism' in relation to remembering the 1990s in Russian literature, see Robbe (forthcoming 2023).

and 2) from 1994 onwards, when Alexander Lukashenko came to power and began to consolidate his authority. The former period, according to Alexey Bratochkin (2016), saw the formation of a new culture of memory that involved a rethinking of the Soviet past from post-colonial and anti-communist perspectives. Due to an increasing politicisation of public discussions around Soviet history in general and victims of Stalinism in particular, the new memory culture was gradually reduced to the framework of ethno-nationalism. During the latter period, political interpretations of the past became an official business, which ultimately led to the formation of a distinct memory politics, that is, the instrumentalisation of the past by the authorities. A 're-Sovietisation' of the memory culture began, with the narrative of the victory in the 'Great Patriotic War' becoming central to the process. By 2004, when the consolidation of Lukashenko's regime *de facto* ended, the official memory politics had modified as well: while the Soviet past remained an inherent part of the political elites' imaginaries, the regime started to seek historical legitimation in the myth of the president as the nation's protecting father (Bratochkin 2016; Shaputska 2016). While going into details of this change is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that the new narrative affected the official remembrance of the 1990s, too.

Overall, the Belarusian authorities began constructing a negative view of the pre-Lukashenko 1990s shortly after his rise to power in 1994. Part of a standard technique to legitimise the regime, the 1990s became a frequent reference point for the official (memory) politics. As time went on, however, and especially since the mid 2000s, referring to the pre-Lukashenko 1990s as a period of weak statehood and economic downfall became part of the strategy to highlight the current regime's 'achievements'. It is because of the efforts of Lukashenko and his team, it has been argued, that the country got through the early 1990s with minimal costs: for instance, due to the regime's prevention of the privatisation of state property. In line with this approach, critical discussions of the early 1990s 'became taboo within the official memory culture' (Bratochkin 2016). Lukashenko himself has recalled the decade on numerous occasions, most recently during the latest election campaign and afterwards, emphasising – in a manner similar to that of Russia's authorities⁸ – the instability of the 1990s and the contrasting achievements and successes of the decades that followed (Evrorado 2020; Trefilov and Pazhitok 2020).

In her analysis of the political myths in Belarus and their genesis in 1994–2010, Tatsiana Shaputska (2016) demonstrates, among other things, that the narrative about the dissolution of the USSR as (in the words of Vladimir Putin) 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe' is important to the Belarusian memory politics, too. According to Belarusian officials and Lukashenko himself, this event 'resulted in a number of negative consequences for Belarus, including deep economic crisis, strengthening of nationalists' positions, sharp weakening of the executive, and disruption of government ideology' (Shaputska 2016: 18). The other side of this post-1994 national identity is the origin of Belarusian statehood in the Belarusian So-

⁸ The Belarusian political leadership's view of the 1990s is remarkably similar to that of the Russian authorities. In Russia, the official narrative about the 1990s has been consistent in presenting the decade as a time of 'chaos, downfall, mayhem' [razrukha, razval, bespredel], to quote the *Komsomol'skaia pravda* columnist Ul'iana Skobeida (Skobeida and Sazonov 2016) and, as such, a sharp contrast to Vladimir Putin's declared stability (Zavadski forthcoming 2023). The strategy of doing so consisted in revising and simplifying the history of the 1990s, which came to be presented almost solely as a time of political chaos and economic instability (Napreenko 2016). Putin himself, as shown by Olga Malinova (2018, 2020), has contributed to creating a sharp contrast between the 'turbulent 1990s' and the 'stable 2000s' in Russian collective memory.

viet Socialist Republic, which is another myth discussed by Shaputska (2016). Until the ‘Great October Revolution’, the narrative goes, Belarusian statehood had not existed; the Russian revolution of 1917 ‘as well as the Great Patriotic War became key stages in the formation of the Belarusian nation’ (Shaputska 2016: 19). Ultimately, this negates the role of the political processes that took place in Belarus in the period between 1991 and 1994. A telling illustration of this take on the pre-Lukashenko 1990s is *25.by*, a ‘multimedia project’ launched in 2018 by the government-owned newspaper *SB. Belarus’ Segodnia* (formerly *Sovetskaia Belorussia*) and dedicated to the 25th (sic!) anniversary of the Belarusian independence.⁹ The project’s introductory article informed that in 2019, Belarusians were to celebrate 25 years of the institution of presidency and – in an elegant twist – 25 years of Belarusian statehood. ‘The statehood acquired by Belarus back in 1991 had remained [...] quite relative [ostavalas’ ves’ma uslovnoi]’ until Lukashenko came to power in 1994 (Sb.by 2018). This equation emphasises one important fact: within the Belarusian memory politics, the long 1990s are in fact quite short – from the late 1980s (through 1991) to 1994.

This is not to say that everybody in the country shares this negative view of the 1990s. In fact, ‘a certain revisionism of the decade “everybody wanted to forget” (Borenstein 2008: 226) has been growing stronger over the last five years’ (Boele 2019: 203). While the above quotation refers to the Russian context, specifically to projects like *The Museum of the 90s* [Музеи devianostykh] and ‘The Island of the 1990s’ [Ostrov devianostykh] (both published by *Colta.ru*, with the latter including a series of eponymous offline festivals), Belarus saw similar, if more modest, efforts to recall the (‘short’) 1990s in ways that differ from and even resist the official narrative. The project *90s.by*, launched in 2013, argues that

The 90s in Belarus is a forgotten time. Whereas [in fact] it was a period of drive and development: the new statehood was only forming, political struggles were taking place, culture was developing fast, new mass media appeared... A Belarusian nation, [one that was] European and free, was being created. Unfortunately, few witness accounts of that time have been preserved: the 1990s are silenced in school textbooks, dissertations about contemporary Belarus are not defended [...] (Pra praekt 2013).

Focusing on the freedoms and opportunities that the decade brought, the project attempts to construct and/or actualise counter-memories of the period in question. One of the aspects of the 1990s brought forward by the project is the right to peaceful assembly, of which Soviet citizens had been deprived and which was introduced in 1988 (Gel’man 2013). In Belarus, freedoms of speech and assembly have been significantly curbed since the mid-1990s, which is why the recollection of the protests of the late 1980s and early 1990s not only opposes the state’s memory politics, but goes beyond that, questioning the country’s political present more broadly: in a state where any dissent is *de facto* outlawed, remembering protests of the past becomes an act of defiance in itself.

The memories that are of interest to us here belong first and foremost to this first period of the Belarusian long 1990s. These are memories of civic movements that were taking place across the (post-)Soviet space during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the perestroika, civic movements included a range of (sometimes interrelated) initiatives arguing for demo-

⁹ We thank Alexey Bratochkin for drawing our attention to this project and its significance for the Belarusian official narrative about the 1990s.

cratic reform, calling for national independence (in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Georgia, and several other Soviet republics), promoting ecological and cultural-historical agendas and advocating the improvement of workers’ conditions, often by means of strike (Gordon 2014; Sigman 2013). These initiatives manifested themselves publicly in rallies and demonstrations in big cities, sanctioned after 1988, and turned into a wave of mobilisations with political demands in 1989–1991 (Gel’man 2013: 50–51, 249). In Belarus, civic activism of this period included anti-communist demonstrations, notably movements for remembering victims of the Stalinist purges that formed after the discovery of mass graves with human remains dating back to the 1930s (Oushakine 2013: 320–304), as well as massive worker strikes and rallies in their support (Image 1).

Image 1. Photo by Sergey Brushko published by *90s.by*.



Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts a 1991 demonstration of workers in Minsk.

Source: <http://90s.by/> (27.12.2021).

While our primary focus is on the recollection of these civic mobilisations during the 2020 Belarusian protests, it is hardly possible to ignore the multiple mnemonic references to World War II and fascism, the memory of which is central to the politics of Belarusianness both within official and unofficial discourses (Bekus 2013; Oushakine 2013). The emotive power of comparing the politics of the current Belarusian regime (and its unbridled use of violence against the protesters) to fascism, as we discuss below, was invoked during the 2020 demonstrations. Whereas such comparisons have, naturally, received a lot of attention in the media and commentary (Images 2 and 3), the uses of anti-fascist rhetoric and symbols foregrounding the tropes of resistance have been less discussed.

Image 2. Photograph published by *Culture.pl*, 5 February 2021.

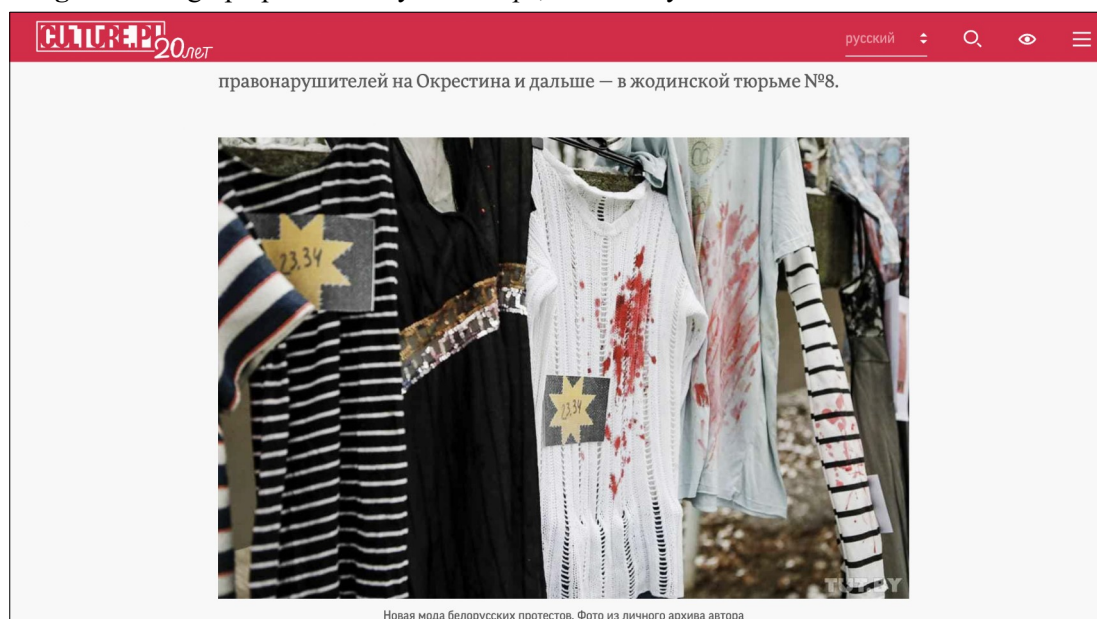


Image description: A screengrab of a photograph that depicts an installation, in Minsk’s Gorky Park, comparing Belarusian state violence to the Holocaust and World War II.

Source: <https://culture.pl/ru/article/beloruskiy-kokteyl-2334> (27.12.2021).

Image 3. Performance by the choir ‘Volny Khor’ on the Genocide Remembrance Day, 9 December 2020.

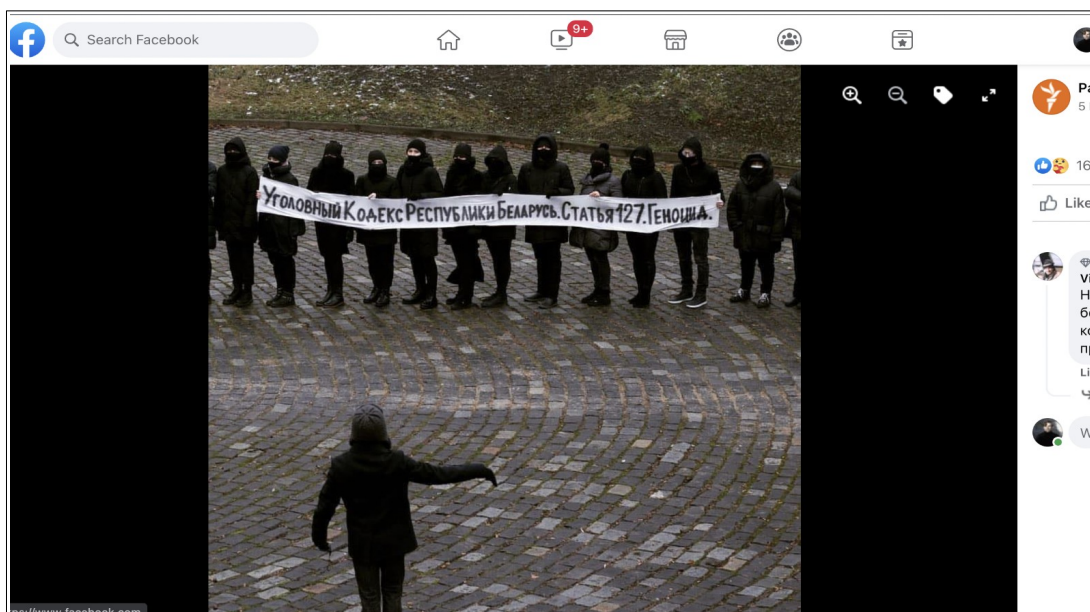


Image description: Screenshot of a video that depicts a performance by the choir ‘Volny Khor’, with performers holding a banner with the text ‘Penal Code of the Republic of Belarus. Article 127. Genocide’.

Source: *Svaboda.org Facebook account*, <https://fb.gy/etnjyv> (27.12.2021).

We focus on the latter as part of the (late Soviet) repertoires of civic activism and discuss their characteristics as part of 'relay' practices. We show how these anti-fascist repertoires, prominent in Soviet state-supported memory as well as in left-wing movements globally during the 1950–80s, were re-invoked to foreground politically motivated collective resistance.

While the following section discusses in more detail the entanglement of memories of the 1990s and of World War II that was manifest at the 2020 protests, we mention this entwining here to indicate that our analysis attended to both direct invocations of the 1990s, through references to activism and culture *of that time*, and indirect ones, in mnemonic references to earlier mobilisations *during that time*. These mnemonic practices, we argue, are a case of what Ann Rigney (2018) theorises as acts of 'remembering hope' in protest movements that may involve 'memories of activism' (recollecting earlier resistance against a repressive regime) and 'memories in activism' (performances of the latter within new movements). Memories of civic engagement and of experiencing social 'newness' during the early 1990s, in fact, represent a peculiar entwining of memories 'of' and 'in' activism. To unravel this interlinking, we discuss the practices and functions of remembering this period.

2. Three functions of recalling the 1990s at the 2020 protests

2.1 *The 1990s as the closest antecedent*

To a great extent, the 1990s, and particularly the civic activism of 1989–1991 across the Soviet Union, have served as a repository of repertoires for the contemporary Belarusian protests. Although protests against Alexander Lukashenko's monopoly on power have taken place over the last two decades, the year 2020 saw by far the largest civic unrest across the country, comparable to the upheavals of thirty years ago. Due to the massive scale of the protests, to associations between Lukashenko's protracted presidency and the rule of the Soviet elites, as well as to the long-time resistance and suppression of the opposition, the late 1980s–early 1990s revolutions and civic unrest in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union could have been perceived as the closest antecedent, resulting in references to the protest events and repertoires of three decades ago. However, the 1990s have a generally ambiguous image in post-socialist societies – as a time of political breakthroughs and attempted or partially realised democratic agendas, but also, particularly in the decades after, as a period of compromised hopes and betrayed opportunities (Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Laczó and Wawrzyniak 2017; Mark 2010) or, in the case of the official memory in Russia, as a tragic mistake and a national trauma (Malinova 2020).

This ambiguity also characterises memories of the 1990s in the reflections on this decade by Belarusian intellectuals and politicians, as published on *90s.by* or, more recently, in the essays and interviews that, together with the photographs taken during the early 1990s by Siarhei Brushko, are part of the publication by his son Zmicer Brushko (2019). The titles of these essays, such as 'The Hopes That Failed Us' (by Mikalai Khalezin, a co-founder of the Belarus Free Theatre) or 'The Era of "Storm and Stress"' (by philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich), are indicative of both fascination and disillusionment with the 1990s. It is this combination of inspiration, partial success, and eventual failure, typical of memories constituting

the imaginaries of protest movements, that has inspired the 2020 mnemonic return to the moment of an earlier resistance. It serves as a break in linear time, a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*, that creates a figure of ‘unfailure’ (Wentzel 2009: 85–86) by “un-do[ing]” the work of time and [...] the course of history’ (Rigney 2018: 375).

Among such recalls of 1989–1991 protests as events of ‘unfailure’, we can see references to their symbols, re-use of their slogans as well as practices of re-enactment that re-perform memories of revolt and civic disobedience. The poster with an address to Lukashenko that reads ‘C’mon, turn *Swan Lake* on’ [Vkliuchai uzhe Lebedinoe ozero] (Image 4), held by a young woman, refers to a key symbol of the 1991 anti-democratic coup (and the successful resistance to it), during which all TV channels of the Soviet Union broadcast a video of Piotr Tchaikovsky’s ballet as thousands were taking to the streets of Moscow. In cultural memory of August 1991, *Swan Lake* has come to stand for the ‘swan song’ of a disintegrating regime and its helpless attempts to hold on to power by resorting to violence.¹⁰

Image 4. A photograph published by *Svaboda.org*, 17 August 2020.



Image description: A screengrab of a photograph that depicts a young woman holding a poster with the slogan ‘C’mon, turn *Swan Lake* on’.

Source: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30788647.html> (27.12.2021).

‘Let’s re-melt rubber truncheons into condoms!’ [Pereplavim rezinovyje dubinki na prezervativy] (Images 5 and 6) is a slogan directly borrowed from perestroika-time demonstrations.

¹⁰ In the 1980s, *Swan Lake* was played on radio and TV on occasions of the Communist Party General Secretaries’ passing away (which happened three times over four years), and thus was associated with official mourning and, for those critical of the regime, with its gradual waning away yet holding on to power. In Vladislav Zubok’s words, ‘the endless repetition of *Swan Lake* remained in the memory of the contemporaries as a semantic dip into the recent past, to which no one wanted to return, at that moment’ (Zubok 2016).

Image 5. Photo by Irina Tumakova for *Novaya gazeta*, published on 24 August 2020.

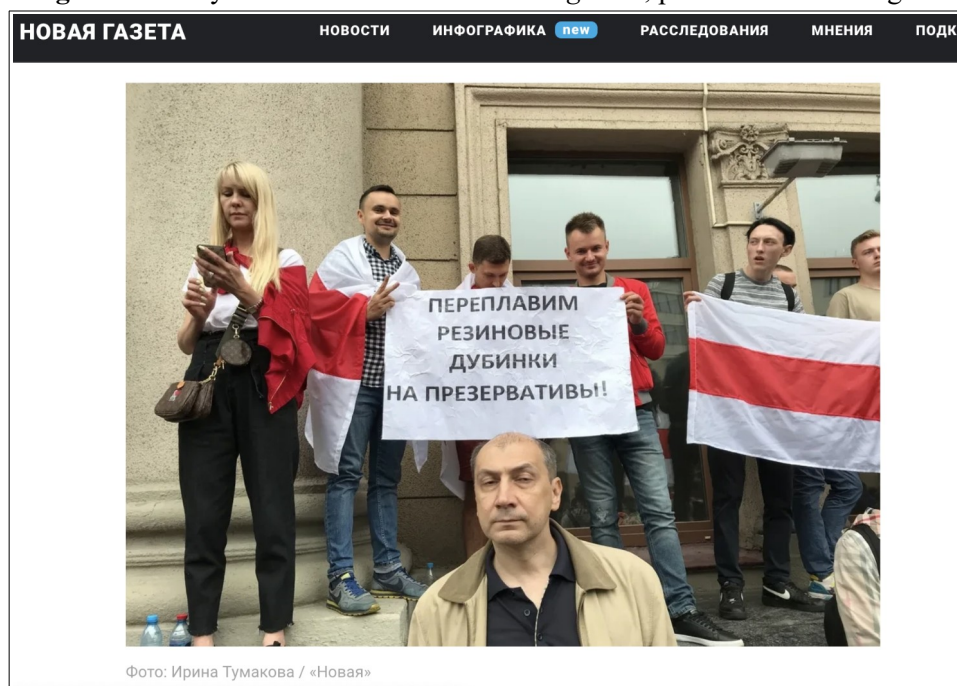


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people holding a poster with the slogan ‘Let’s re-melt rubber truncheons into condoms!’

Source: <https://rb.gy/mpreyc> (27.12.2021).

Image 6. Photo by Dmitry Borko, published by *Colta.ru*, 30 May 2014.



Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people during a late 1980s protest, holding a poster with the slogan ‘Let’s re-melt rubber truncheons into condoms!’.

Source: <https://www.colta.ru/articles/90s/3406-hotelos-fotografirovat-kazhdogo> (27.12.2021).

It similarly deploys humour to ridicule the government's resorting to police violence as an outdated, nonsensical tactic. We can also trace a slight shift in meaning: the re-use of this slogan today not so much refers to a matter of concern (which the scarcity of condoms was during the 1980s) as performs a continuity of ridiculing power as a political act across time and generations.

The re-enactment of signature forms of protest was used in creating, on 21 August 2020, a human chain across Minsk (Global News 2020). This form was first employed in the United States during the 1980s, but its first and most significant (in terms of numbers and effect) use in Europe has been 'the Baltic way' human chain that, in August 1989, stretched across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to advocate national independence and protest against the use of violence by Moscow. On 23 August 2021, 'another spectacular symbolic extension of 1989 to Belarus' took place: 'thousands of Lithuanians created a human chain from Vilnius to the Belarusian border' in order 'to demonstrate solidarity with Belarusian protesters and to celebrate the anniversary of Baltic Way 1989' (Bekus 2021: 4) (Images 7 and 8).

Image 7. Photo by Viktor Tolochko, published by *Sputnik.by*, 23 August 2020.

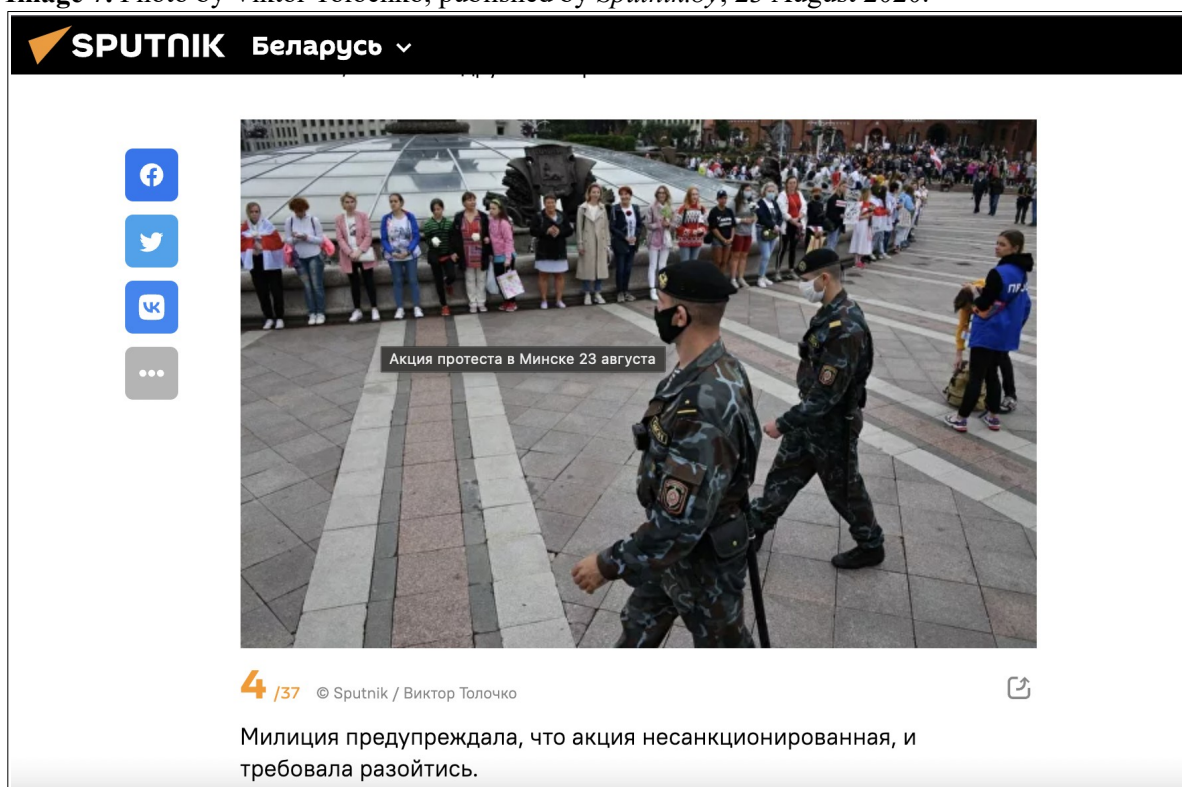


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people standing in a human chain in Minsk.

Source: <https://rb.gy/tt8gto> (27.12.2021).

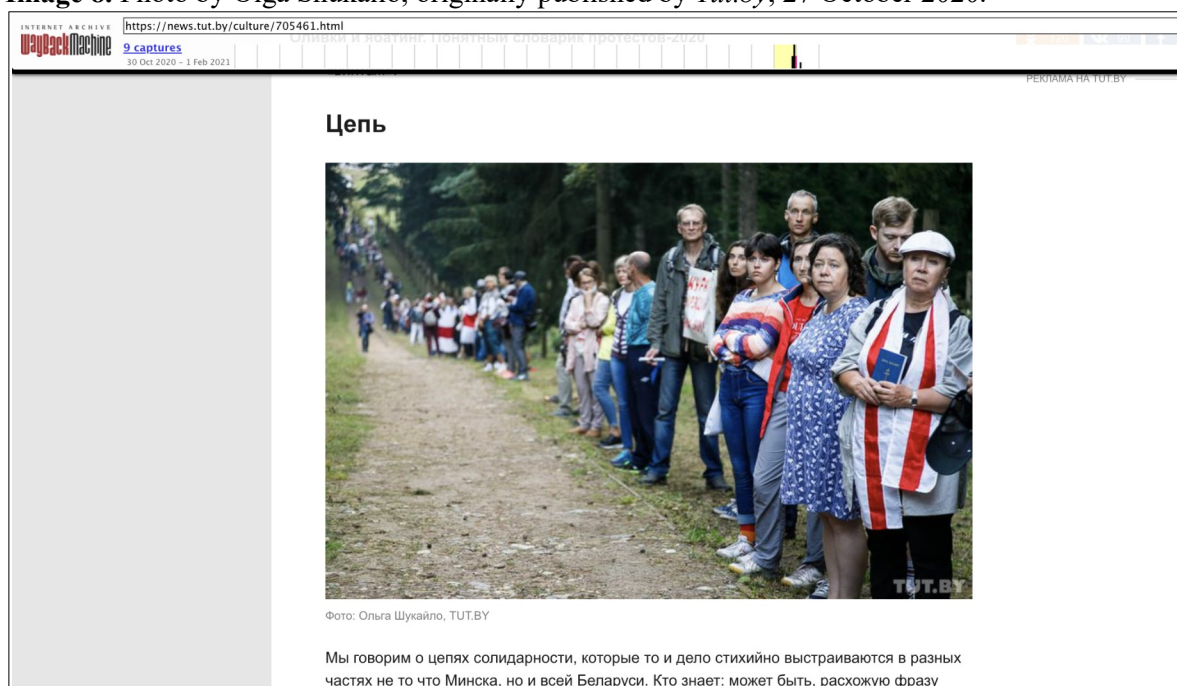
Image 8. Photo by Olga Shukailo, originally published by *Tut.by*, 27 October 2020.

Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people standing in a human chain near Kuropaty, Minsk.

Source: *Wayback Machine*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201230181039/https://news.tut.by/culture/705461.html> (02.01.2022).

2.2. *The 1990s as relay*

In other performances of protest, the 1990s feature as the time of reviving the early 20th-century struggles for national independence¹¹ (Weinmann 2021) as well as using the rhetoric of anti-fascism (thus, implicitly recalling mobilisation during World War II) and of Soviet dissident movements. These instances represent ‘memories of memories’, whereby the 1990s function as a mnemonic relay¹² for re-experiencing and re-engaging past struggles. More specifically, references to these times of revival act as a stage or an experiential space for practicing hope (personally experienced or easily imagined by contemporary protesters).

A sense of national unity and direction was invoked by multiple uses of the white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* coat of arms – symbols of the Belarusian People’s Republic (1918) that were reintroduced as the official flag and coat of arms during the early post-Soviet period (1991–1995), with frequent performances of the song *Pahonia*, written in 1916 and considered for becoming the national anthem in the early 1990s. Both the flag and the coat of arms are thus inherent in the remembrance of the 1990s and in the official narrative about the period. Shaputska’s analysis of the political myths created in Belarus between 1994

¹¹ These struggles culminated in the creation – in 1918, prior to the incorporation of (some of) the Belarusian territories into the Soviet state – of the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic.

¹² Our use of ‘relay’ here is somewhat similar to Rigney’s (2008: 350) discussion of literary works as ‘relay stations’ for earlier memories, which often make them more prominent.

and 2010 shows these national symbols as ‘hostile to the Belarusian state’: ‘The white-red-white flag (Pahonia to a lesser degree) was disgraced during World War II because it was acknowledged by German occupiers. It follows then that the social groups using these symbols support the Nazis and are enemies of the Belarusian people’ (2016: 21). Consequently, the invocation of the flag and coat of arms (Image 9) functions as a way to subvert post-1995 historical myths and re-experience the pre-1995 (the year of the referendum that signified the return to an updated version of the BSSR symbols) political process. Beyond national symbolism, the use of red-on-white in various combinations might have evoked the Solidarność slogans of the 1980s protests in Poland¹³, while the ubiquity of white attire, particularly in women’s protests (Paulovich 2021), resonated with the employment of the same colour during the 2011–2012 protests in Russia (white symbolising non-violence and purity as opposed to state corruption).

Image 9. Photo by Instagram user nadiadrapp (on the right), published by *The Village Belarus*, 17 August 2020.

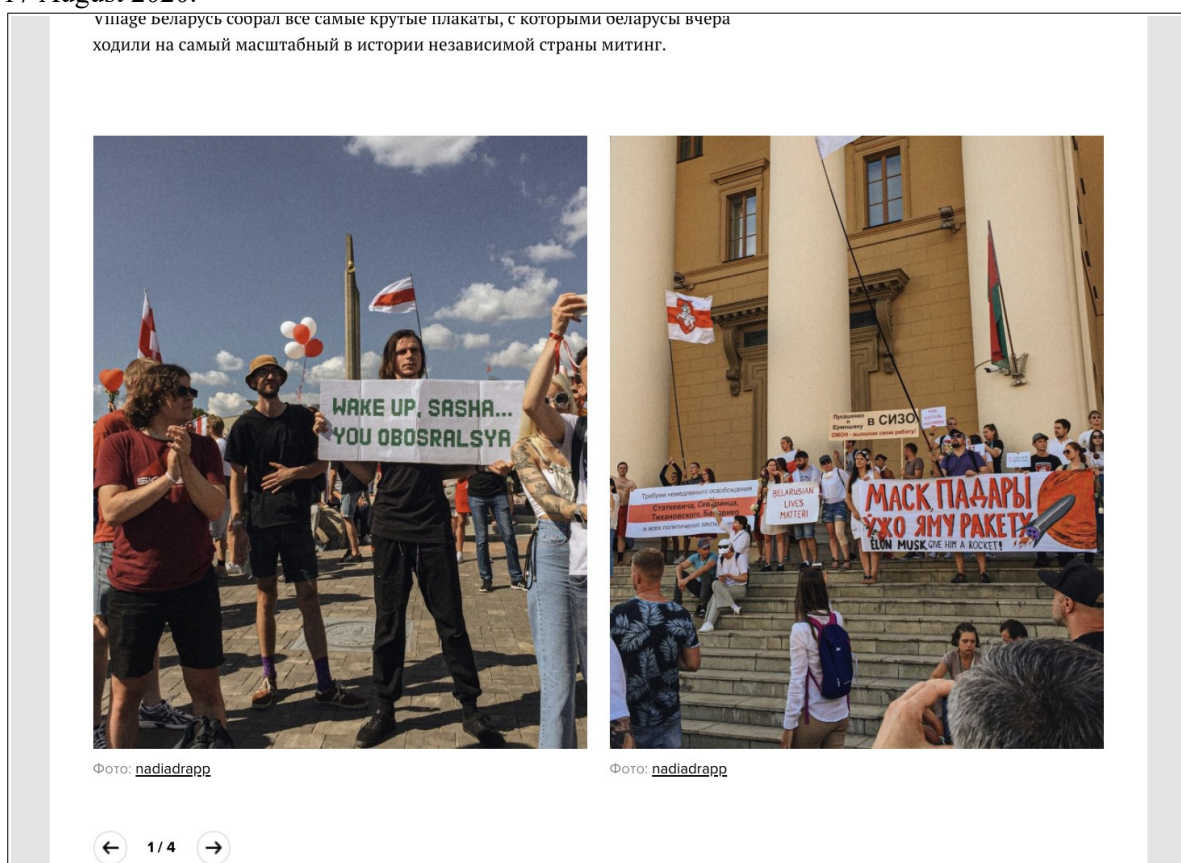


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people holding a *Pahonia* coat of arms and white-red-white posters.

Source: <https://www.the-village.me/village/city/dezhurniy-po-gorodu/284013-plakaty> (27.12.2021).

¹³ See Marcin Wicha’s (2020) reflections on ‘the design of protest’ in Belarus.

References to World War II during the 2020 protests were probably unavoidable, given the ubiquitous presence of (anti)fascist rhetoric in the cultural memory and the framings of conflict across the post-Soviet space today. However, these references differed from the common uses, during the past decade, of fascism rhetoric in discourses of Russian and Belarusian media and the state as the ultimate weapon of (ethno-national) othering, particularly as part of securitisation discourses during the Euromaidan and the war in Ukraine (Fadeeva and Plotnikov 2019; Gaufman 2015; Makhortykh 2018; Zhurzhenko 2015). They seem to have drawn on the earlier, perestroika-era re-deployments of anti-fascist rhetoric against Party elites (in popular slogans of the time such as ‘Fascism won’t pass’ or ‘Fascism no pasaran!’ [Fashizm ne proidet] or ‘Down with the junta’ [Doloi khuntu!]) (Image 10).

Image 10. Photo by Dmitry Borko, published by *Colta.ru*, 30 May 2014.

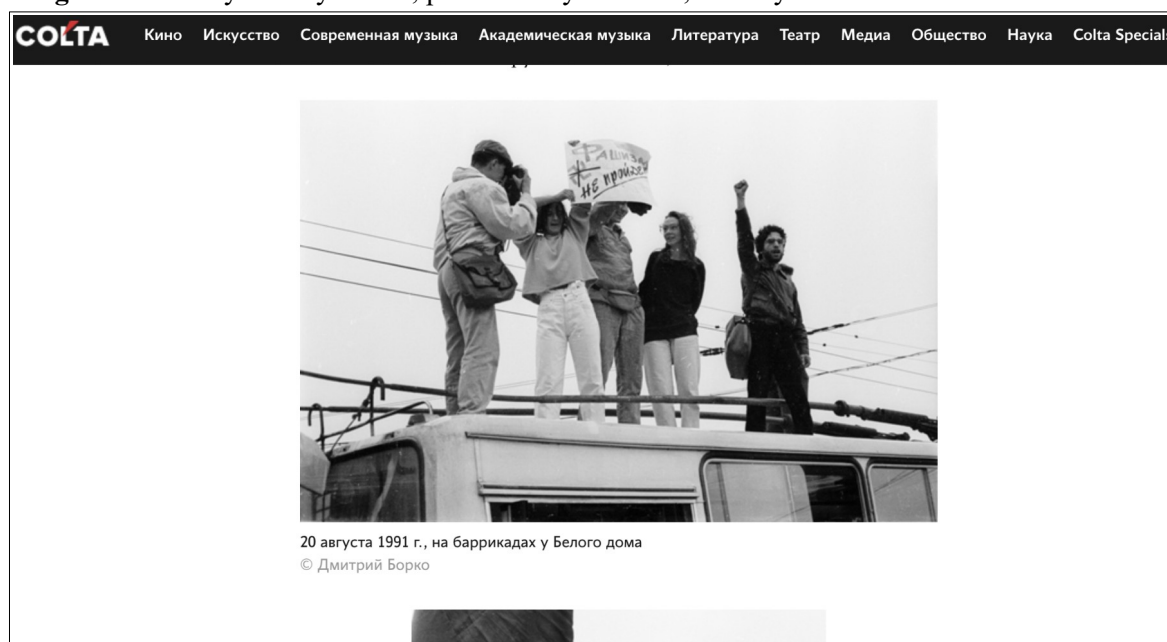


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people at the White House in Moscow on 20 August 1991, during the Soviet coup d’état attempt. The poster they are holding says: ‘Fascism will not pass’.

Source: <https://www.colta.ru/articles/90s/3406-hotelos-fotografirovat-kazhdogo> (27.12.2021).

Mediating the cultural memory of resistance against an autocratic government *within the country*¹⁴, as staged within ‘Stop Lukashism’ and similar slogans (Zelenko 2020) of the 2020 protests in Belarus, evoked a sense of *political unity and agency* beyond ethnicity or nationality (Images 11 and 12).

¹⁴ This aligns with Mark Tsinkovich’s contention that ‘the key characteristic of the postcolonial revolution in Belarus is the fact that the new Belarusian subject emerges not through an articulation of its oppression from external imperialism but through internal struggle’ (2020: 277). Cf. Lewis (2021) for a similar argument regarding the non-nationalist character of the protest and the emergence of a transcultural conviviality (through the uses of the Belarusian and Russian languages) opposing the government.

Image 11. A photograph published by *The Village Belarus*, 17 August 2020.

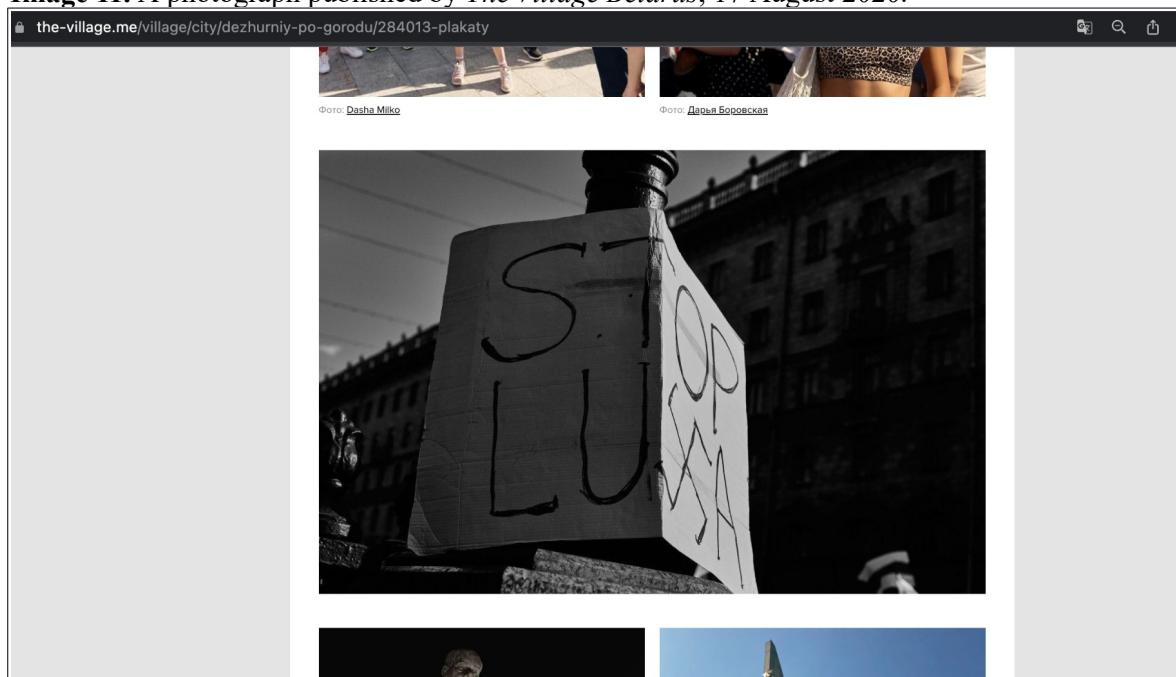


Image description: Screenshot of a photo that depicts a poster with the text ‘Stop Luka’, with the word ‘K’ presented as a Nazi swastika.

Source: <https://www.the-village.me/village/city/dezhurniy-po-gorodu/284013-plakaty> (27.12.2021).

Image 12. Photo by an anonymous author.

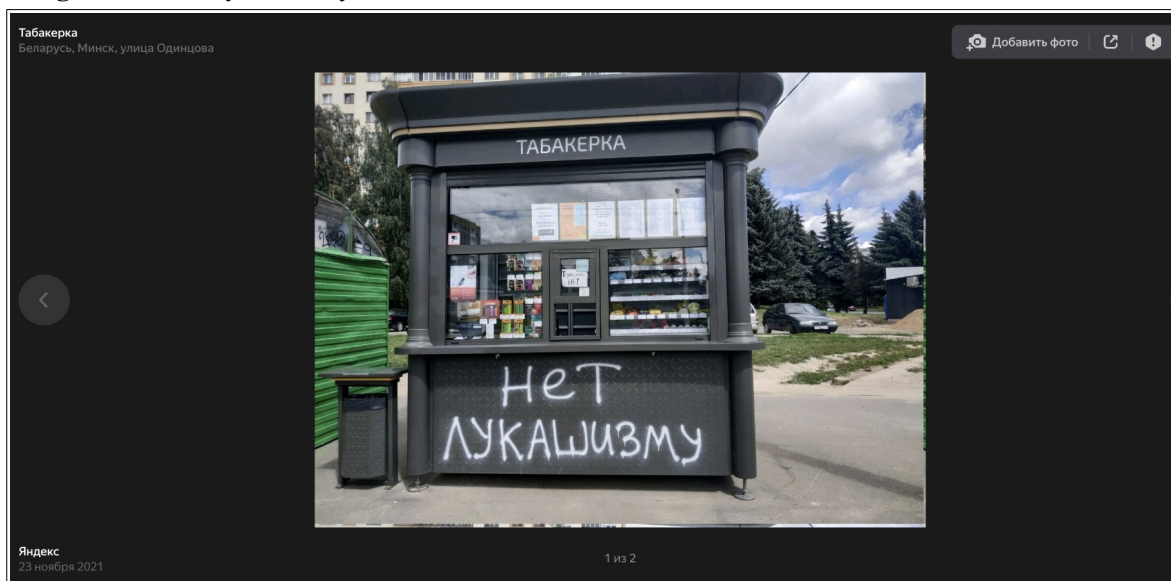


Image description: A photograph of the slogan ‘No to Lukashism’ written on a *Tabakerka* kiosk.

Source: *Yandex Maps*, <https://rb.gy/lzrtsi> (27.12.2021).

In other words, these strategic invocations of anti-fascism via perestroika-era protest repertoires formed an opposition to the implicit uses of anti-fascist rhetoric in pro-Lukashenko posters underpinned by securitisation discourses (Image 13).

Image 13. A photograph published by Drug ZhZh, 21 August 2020.

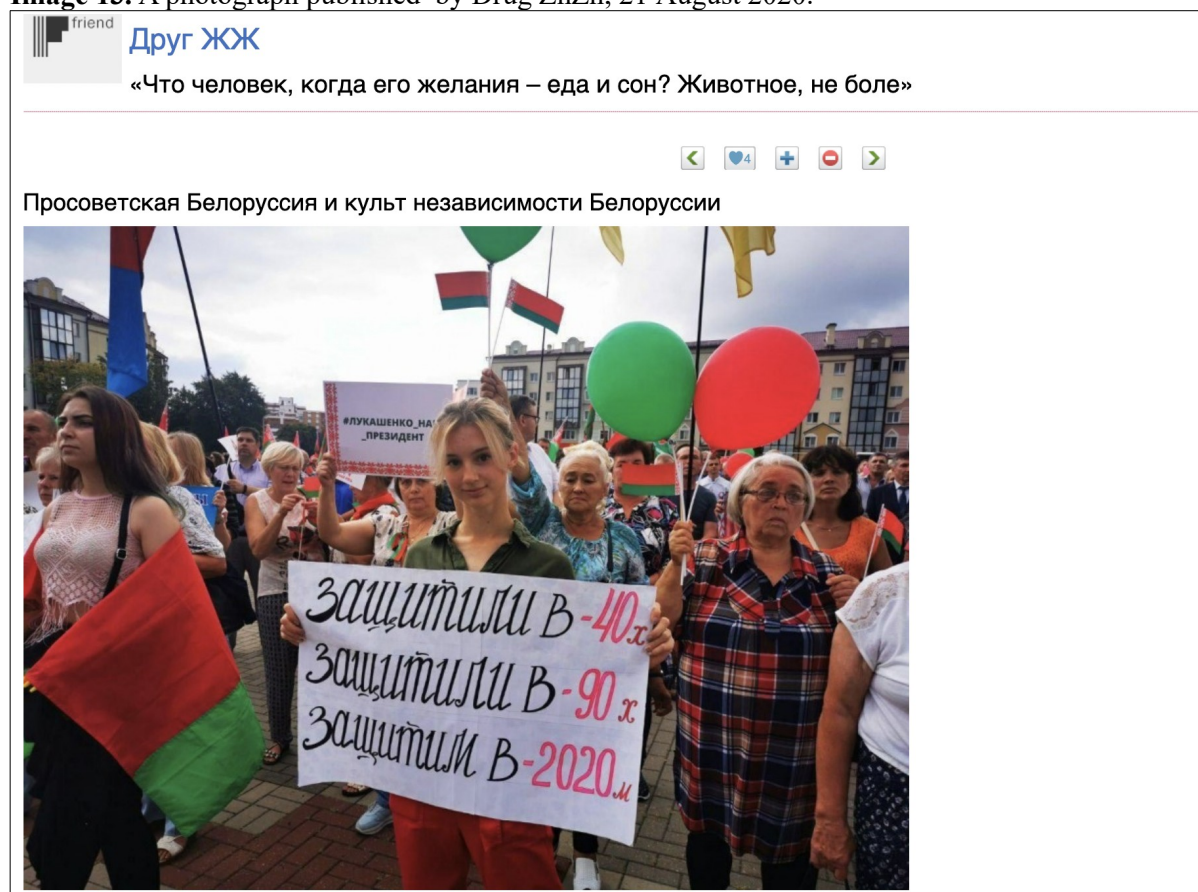


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts a young woman at a pro-government demonstration in Belarus, holding a poster with the slogan ‘Defended in the 40s. Defended in the 90s. Will defend in 2020’.

Source: <https://friend.livejournal.com/2741540.html> (27.12.2021).

Linking back to Bekus’s (2021) observation that the heroic memory of World War II served as an important resource for the protesters, we can say that references to anti-fascism during these protests were even more multifaceted: they combined Soviet-era heroic war memory with memories of using such heroic tropes to fight Party elites during the early 1990s.

‘For your and our freedom!’ [Za vashu i nashu svobodu!] is another popular, broadly resonating Soviet-era slogan that resurfaced in the 2020 protests (Image 14). It was famously used by the seven protesters against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, in particular, by Natalia Gorbanevskaya who translated into Russian the motto of 19th-century Polish patriots, also used at the time by Russian democrats in support of Polish uprisings (Kozlov 2020: 217). The slogan became a symbol of socialist-era human rights (dissident) movements and featured also during solidarity protests against the Soviet suppression of Lithuania’s dec-

laration of independence in March 1991 (Asafyev 2021). Since 2008, re-enactments of the 1968 protest on Red Square in Moscow became a powerful strategy of political expression and claiming public space (Kozlov 2020). In Belarusian protests, the slogan was mainly used to signal solidarity with political prisoners, similar to the 2011–2012 protests in Russia (Kozlov 2020), but it was also employed in transnational expressions of solidarity across the post-Soviet space and particularly in Ukraine (Espresso TV 2020).

Image 14. A photograph (in the centre), published by *Regnum*.

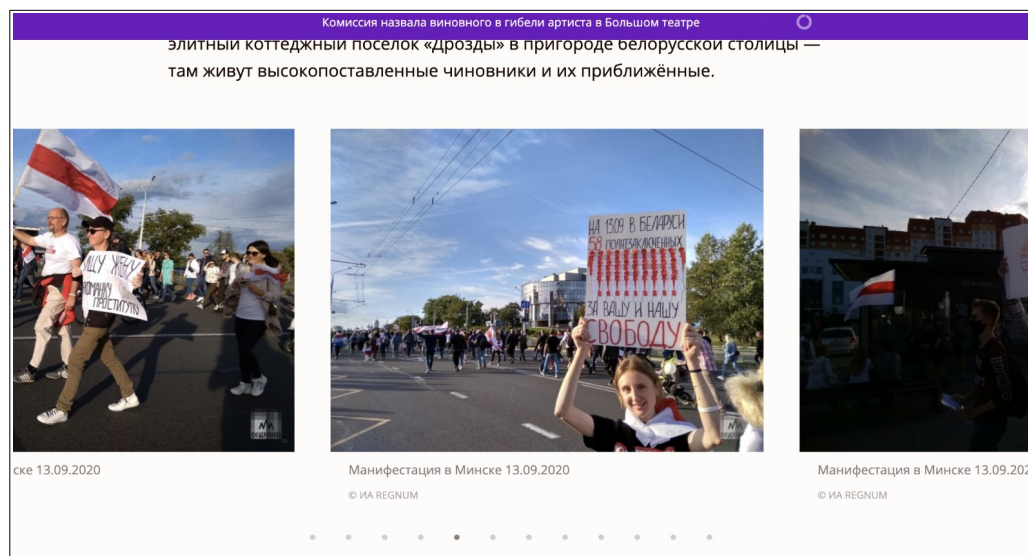


Image description: A screengrab of a photo depicting the rallies on 13 September 2020, stating that ‘by 13.09. there are 58 political prisoners in Belarus. For your and our FREEDOM’.

Source: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3061986.html> (27.12.2021).

2.3 *The 1990s as a rediscovered past*

Apart from drawing on the repertoires of political slogans or symbols from earlier periods, the 2020 Belarusian protests, like the protests of the early-2010s cycle, were an arena for mocking the authorities, exchanging witty comments and generating affect through carnivalesque performances of subversion. In his analysis of the 2011–2012 protest in Russia in terms of ‘regimes of engagement’, Mischa Gabowitsch distinguishes the ‘regime of exploration’ as the predominant mode (2016: 26). This regime is ‘present-oriented, based on excitement by a novel situation and engages with others in a playful manner rather than through critique, strategy or familiarity’ (Gabowitsch 2016: 26). Regarding the Belarusian 2020 protests, he observes that, especially during the first weeks, ‘instead of joining the protests as individuals striving for creative originality and engaging in self-expression, Belarusians were by and large taking to streets as members of a civic community collectively voicing a specific set of ideas about the common good [...]’ (Gabowitsch 2021: 4). While the ‘regime of justification’, as Gabowitsch (2021: 1) calls this type of engagement, might have been prevalent, the exploratory aspect was present during these protests as well and was prominently manifested through references to the 1990s popular culture.

Posters and performances bringing popular culture repertoires of the 1990s into the political present – often invoking memories of that decade’s newness, experimentation and a sense of global openness – were among the major sources of positive references based on shared and mediated experience. Similar to the dynamics of remembering the 1990s in Russia during the 2000–2010s (Zavadski forthcoming 2023), such positive memory and its upbeat tone are in many ways a response to the starkly negative framing of the decade in Lukashenko’s discourse (Evrorado 2020; Shaputska 2016). While some older-generation protesters refer to their direct experiences of everyday life and/or activism during the 1990s (Deutsche Welle 2020), protest posters would employ characters and memes from the 1990s popular culture: Lukashenko as a ghost hunted by the ‘ghost busters’ (Image 15), and ‘Houston, we have a problem. Sania [Lukashenko] has gone cuckoo’ [H’iuston, u nas problemy. Sanya slovil ver-tolëty!] (Image 16), referring to the phrase popularised by *Apollo-13*, a 1995 blockbuster that has since then become a source of multiple memes (Artsyukh 2019).

Popular culture references and uses of mediated memory of the 1990s, particularly among the younger generation, might be a general symptom of curiosity about the 1990s as a recent (yet also already distant enough) past, noticeably different from the 26-year-long Lukashenko rule. Among the signs of this emerging interest has been the publication, in a popular online lifestyle magazine, of photographs of the 1990s Minsk, including several shots of the early 1990s demonstrations, titled ‘Photos You Have Never Seen’ and presenting this recent past as a rediscovered curiosity (Redaktsiia Kuku 2019). Nostalgic appreciation of the popular culture of the 1990s seems to be on the rise, also judging by recent online publications (The Village Belarus 2018) and city tours (CTV 2018).

Image 15. A photograph, originally published by *Tut.by*, 27 October 2020.

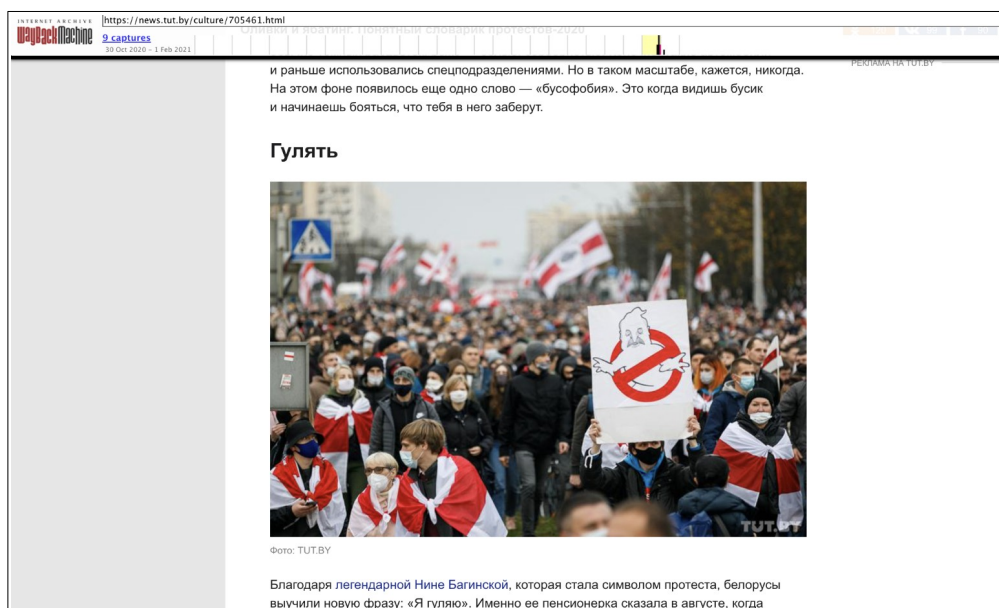


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts a crowd of protesters in Belarus, with a poster presenting Lukashenko as a ghost hunted by the ‘ghost busters’.

Source: *Wayback Machine*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201230181039/https://news.tut.by/culture/705461.html> (02.01.2022).

Image 16. A photograph published by *Gazetaby.com*, 20 August 2020.

Как карнавальный протест десакрализует власть

Андрей Колесников, *carnegie.ru*
20 сентября 2020, 19:08



Фото: *gazetaby.com*

Один философ как-то заметил, что в советское время Михаила Бахтина читали не из-за его анализа творчества Франсуа Рабле и Арона Гуревича. И не потому, что

Image description: A screenshot of a photo that depicts a woman holding a banner with the slogan ‘Houston, we have a problem. Sania has gone cuckoo’.

Source: *Udf.by*, <https://rb.gy/2aq6dj> (27.12.2021).

A very special case of employing symbols of the 1980–1990s regarding its public resonance and mobilising power were the performances of Viktor Tsoi’s song ‘Our Hearts Need Change!’ [Peremen!]. This case combines the force of political symbols of the perestroika, as one of its unofficial ‘anthems’, also played during the 2011–2012 protests in Russia, with the appeal of a popular culture product, familiar to different generations (recently, interest to Tsoi’s life and work was revived by Kirill Serebrennikov’s film *Leto* (2018), which was imbued with a political aura due to the politically motivated arrest and imprisonment of the director). The song and its motto appeared on multiple posters created by protesters (Image 17) and gained particular prominence after two DJs turned it on during a government-organised event in Minsk, after which they were arrested and spent several days in jail. But the performances traveled to one of Minsk’s courtyards, labeled since then the Square of Changes [Ploshchad’ Peremen], where political gatherings and music concerts were taking place for months. A graffiti of the two DJs joining hands in the air that appeared in this yard became an object of fierce contention between the state, which would daily send its employees to paint the image over or even cover it with soot, and its defenders, who would restore the graffiti each time. Eventually, one of the defenders, Roman Bondarenko, paid with his life for pro-

tecting this popular symbol: he was beaten by government supporters and later died in hospital. The strength of affective responses to this song and the (mythologised) figure of its creator testifies to the continuing significance and mnemonic potential of popular cultural symbols of the late 1980s–early 1990s.

Image 17. A photograph published by *Zautra.by*, 29 August 2020.

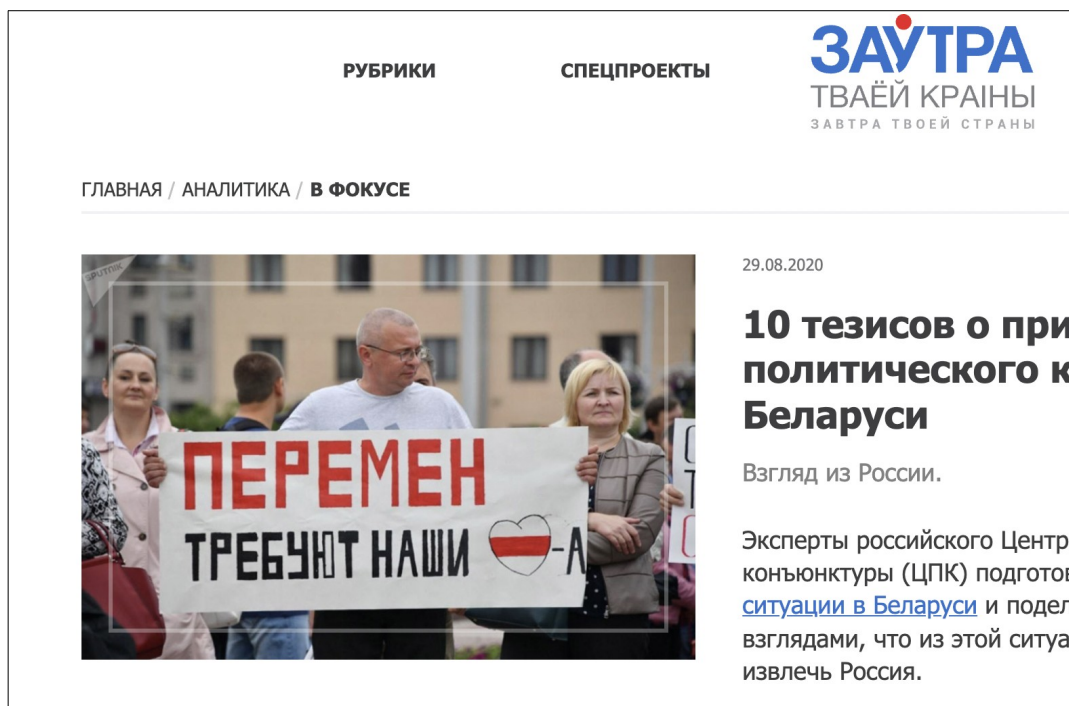


Image description: A screengrab of a photo that depicts people holding a banner with the slogan ‘Our hearts demand change’.

Source: <https://rb.gy/b8szjp> (27.12.2021).

3. The emergence of a post-Soviet protest memoryscape?

As this exploratory study has shown, the Belarusian 2020 protests involved a whole range of references to ‘the 1990s’, not only in terms of specific events or dates, but as a historical period. Invocations of this decade were heterogeneous: remembering political mobilisation and non-violent protests in Belarus and in other countries of the former Soviet Union, re-purposing of both Soviet and anti-Soviet political rhetoric, and recalling everyday experiences and places associated with the 1990s. Therefore, we propose studying cultural and vernacular memories of this period in the broad sense, including mythologies, symbols as well as affective, communicative, and embodied practices, to understand the meanings and resonances involved in referencing this decade. We have identified three functions of remembering the 1990s at the Belarusian protests of 2020. In the mnemonic practices analysed, the decade is used as: 1) the closest antecedent (in other words, as a symbolic return to the most recent significant political upheavals, in the sense of ‘picking up where we left’); 2) relay (a repository of activist memories of the earlier pasts to be tapped, signifying the successes of mobilising

the past to subvert current power structures, such as the case of recalling the revival of national symbols or employing anti-fascist or human rights rhetoric against communist leadership during the early 1990s); and 3) a rediscovered past (in re-performances of popular culture symbols of the 1990, possibly as a manifestation of an alternative cultural past and collective identity by the protesters).

The ‘how’ behind the usage of references to the 1990s at the 2020 Belarusian protests inevitably raises other questions: Why do Belarusian protests reinvolve the 1990s? What do the protesters, many of them young people who have hardly any or no memories of that time, look for in this period? Attempting to answer them requires a sociological survey and/or an in-depth ethnographic study. Without additional sociological and anthropological research, it is hardly possible to determine the significance of memories of the 1990s compared to other mnemonic references in the 2020 Belarusian protest movement. However, our analysis shows that ‘memories of activism’ (recollecting earlier resistance against a repressive regime) and ‘memories in activism’ (performances of the latter within new movements) (Rigney 2018) do play a role. They seem to add to the common ground that unites protesters, generating the feeling of solidarity while invoking the historical precedents of mobilising the past for democratic agendas. In fact, the transnational and transgenerational re-use of protest slogans points to a kind of *mnemonic solidarity* that could potentially contribute to overcoming the ‘disconnected’ nature of today’s public spheres (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018).

Considering the transgenerational (for instance, activism of the (grand)parents’ generation) and transnational (activism of people in other parts of the former Soviet Union, including Russia and the Baltic states) aspects of these mnemonic references, can we speak of an emerging *post-Soviet protest memoryscape*? After all, as we have argued, memories of the 1990s at the 2020 protests combine references to Belarusian national history and memory with the uses of broader (post-)Soviet protest repertoires. The latter include an anti-fascist rhetoric directed against state violence, human rights discourses and symbolism, and popular culture references. Our findings align with the non-nationalist and transcultural tendencies during the Belarusian protests (Lewis 2021) and ‘the refusal of the emancipatory movement in Belarus to consider Soviet legacies as colonial’ (Tsinkevich 2020: 276). These initial findings and observations notwithstanding, a memoryscape of this kind remains only a hypothesis. Further research, from various disciplinary and methodological perspectives, and across contexts, is required to begin answering this question. However, if such a memoryscape could be identified, it would create a significant paradigm for shaping ‘a region of memory’, similar to and intersecting with the one tentatively outlined by Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2017: 8–14) in their discussion of memories of World War II in post-Soviet Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

P.S. Finalising this article in 2022, after the beginning of the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has also involved the use of Belarusian territory, we cannot optimistically project the emergence of such a memoryscape across these countries. If anything, memory of World War II has been abused by the Russian regime as a justification of this war to such an extent that it is unlikely to become a basis for transnational dialogue. However – if we could try to imagine a future after the current war – memories of (some of the) post-Soviet transformations might still prove helpful for re-building connections across the region.

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