The Unintended Female Revolution?

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Abstract: Women have been at the forefront of the presidential campaign in 2020 in Belarus, galvanising a nationwide protest movement against the long-standing autocratic ruler Alexander Lukashenko whose regime seemed unshakeable until then. While some observers praised the power of the female revolution, contrasting the beauty of the 'women in white' with the brutality of the riot police, others lamented the lack of a feminist agenda of the uprising and criticised the movement for reinforcing the existing patriarchal structures of Belarusian society (Solomatina 2020: 43), which deserves a closer look. This essay will provide insights into the roots of the uprising and the role played by women in these protests. This discussion continues the reflection initiated in the 2018 special issue of *Digital Icons* on 'Women and Tech in the Post-Socialist Context: Intelligence, Creativity, Transgression'.

Keywords: women, power, resistance, society, Belarus

In 2020, Belarus witnessed the birth of the largest civil disobedience movement in its history as an independent state, which took by surprise not only foreign observers but also Belarusians themselves. Women have been at the forefront of the presidential campaign in 2020 in Belarus, galvanising a nationwide protest movement against the long-standing autocratic ruler Alexander Lukashenko whose regime seemed unshakeable until then. While some observers praised the power of the female revolution, contrasting the beauty of the 'women in white' with the brutality of the riot police, others lamented the lack of a feminist agenda of the uprising and criticised the movement for reinforcing the existing patriarchal structures of Belarusian society (Solomatina 2020: 43), which deserves a closer look. This essay will provide insights into the roots of the uprising and the role played by women in these protests. This discussion continues the reflection initiated in the 2018 special issue of *Digital Icons* on 'Women and Tech in the Post-Socialist Context: Intelligence, Creativity, Transgression'.

1. Politicisation of Belarusian society and the end of the 'social contract'

Over the course of Belarus's independent history, Alexander Lukashenko has built one of the most resilient and stable autocratic regimes in the region, consolidated around his personal power (Shraibman 2018). His support was based on a 'social contract' with the population, providing modest prosperity in exchange for political freedoms. The presidential elections of 2020 did not promise any change, and the re-election of Lukashenko seemed the only possible scenario. However, with the deteriorating relationship with Russia and continuous conflicts over energy prices in early 2020 and, most importantly, the inadequate response of the state authorities to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of discontent with the state policy and personally Lukashenko's rule began to rise in considerable parts of the Belarusian population spilling over to the public domain.

The pandemic denial and refusal of the state to provide protective gear and medical equipment forced citizens to respond to the crisis and manage the pandemic themselves. The Bycovid19 crowdfunding campaign raised over 200,000 US Dollar, mobilising hundreds of volunteers, individual donors, local initiatives, and civil society organisations, businesses, medical staff, and hospitals across the country to fight the pandemic (Savinich 2020). This was an expression of an unprecedented self-organisation, previously unknown in the traditionally paternalistic Belarusian society, heralding a wave of political mobilisation and reflecting societal change. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst, bringing the social contract that once cemented the stability of Lukashenko's regime and compensated for the lack of political activity to an end.

2. Women and the 'Burden' of Power

The presidential campaign announced on May 9, 2020, has inspired unforeseen levels of mobilisation and participation. The civil disobedience campaign did not remain restricted to the capital city of Minsk but spilled over to other parts of the country, including 'provincial towns and villages, places previously thought to be Lukashenka's heartlands' (Petz 2020). While the Belarusian uprising knows many faces and ages, the role women played in the presidential campaign and the protest movement was remarkable, even if unintended.

When male opposition figures were imprisoned or had to flee abroad ahead of the 2020 presidential elections, women were thrown into the spotlight of the political mobilisation. The presidential trio – English language teacher and presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, culture manager and flute player Maryia Kalesnikava, and business manager Veranika Tsapkala – became the faces of this movement, paving the way for nationwide peaceful demonstrations and inspiring other women to play an active role in the protests, among them Lidziia Vlasava, Volha Kavalkova, Sviatlana Aleksievich, Nina Bahinskaia, Alena Leuchanka, Volha Khizhinkova, Natalia Hersche, and many more.

While the reasons for female activism are many, one of its major catalysts was Lukashenko himself. 'Our Constitution is not suitable for a woman. Our society is not ready to vote for a woman. Because the Constitution gives strong authority to the president', he once said at the beginning of the presidential campaign, seeking to discredit women running

for president and unaware of what response this rhetoric would provoke in the months to come (Lukashenko 2020a). Even when faced with growing societal criticism, he did not change his position, only emphasising 'the burden of power' that was difficult to carry for a man, let alone a woman. 'If we were to give this burden to a woman', he emphasised, 'the poor thing would collapse' (Lukashenko 2020b).

3. 'Strong society' instead of 'strong leaders'

Lukashenko's rhetoric was unequivocally directed at the presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, whom he refused to even consider a serious opponent. While Lukashenko sought to emphasise his strength, infallibility and the country's need for a strong leader, Tsikhanouskaia openly admitted her vulnerabilities and the lack of political ambitions, reversing the established understanding of power and authority. However, her refusal to seek power did not weaken her standing in the eyes of the population but, quite on the contrary, earned her respect and encouraged others to support her struggle. As Belarusian philosopher Volha Shparaga aptly described, Belarus does not need 'strong leaders' but a 'strong society' (Shparaga, in Amel'kovich 2020) – a sentiment widely shared by the protest movement that was organised horizontally rather than around a certain leader.

The presidential trio was a response to Lukashenko's rhetoric. Technologically savvy, fashionable, and authentic, Tsikhanouskaia, Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala became the icons of the new Belarus's struggle for freedom, prompting novel forms of civil activism and patriotism detached from the Soviet past and mentality. Three political novices who, for the first time in the country's history, managed to mobilise a mass movement and to unite the opposition, represented what Lukashenko did not: solidarity, unity, and compassion. Until 2020, the Belarusian opposition was led by men and was prone to internal fights, unable to find a common ground and unite. Its impact on the population was negligible. The women-led 2020 presidential campaign focused on mobilising people not *against* Lukashenko but rather *in support of* free and fair elections and the release of political prisoners. Hundreds of thousands attended the campaign across the country, challenging the preconception that only the capital and big cities opposed Lukashenko's politics.

At the same time, the campaign and the subsequent protest movement perpetuated existing societal norms, which continue to define women's role as wives and mothers. In more critical words of Iryna Salamatsina, chair of the Council of the Belarusian Organisation of Working Women, the presidential campaign and female protests were merely a 'media effect' (Solomatina 2020: 44) and failed to address any women-specific issues such as domestic violence, discrimination at work, or gender equality (Solomatina 2020: 43). Thus, according to the survey results from 2014, women are paid 24% less than men on average in Belarus (UN Women 2019: 36). Though women make up half of the overall labour force, they are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions – in particular, in men-dominated domains such as real estate, renting, and business. More importantly, women are hindered by the challenges of unpaid homework, spending twice as much time as men on household and childcare. Furthermore, women are legally prohibited to work in 181 professions that are consid-

ered inappropriate for women, further perpetuating the idea of the necessity to protect women and to focus on their role as mothers and caregivers (UN Women 2019: 10).

   None of these issues were addressed in the public domain. Media concentrated on the beauty of the female protests in Belarus, reinforcing some of the existing societal stereotypes and traditional cultural norms. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1961: '[…] to be a woman is, if not a defect, at least a peculiarity' (de Beauvoir 2011: 833). This peculiarity of the political upheaval in Belarus attracted much of the international media's attention. Thus, the Guardian published a stylised female protester dressed in white and holding a rose in her hand on the cover of its weekly issue in August titled 'Flower Power: The Women Driving Belarus's Movement for Change' (Walker 2020). While the article itself by Shaun Walker appears rather balanced, the cover puts an emphasis on the beauty and femininity of the protest demonstrations in Belarus.

4. Feminist not in demands but in actions

While the presidential trio's campaign and the protest movement were not feminist in their demands, one could conclude that they were feminist in actions. The protesters did not openly address the issue of women's oppression or gender imbalance, but they facilitated female agency and political representation. Women became the driving force of the protest movement due to this rediscovered agency. The whole campaign was built around the topic of empowerment and agency. Even Tsikhanouskaia, who in the eyes of many represented traditional family values and did not consider herself a true political opponent, acted as an independent, empowered citizen who wanted to 'reinstall justice' in her country, as she emphasised in her first TV address as presidential candidate (Tikhanovskaia 2020).

   Even more encouraging was her own political struggle. Tsikhanouskaia, who repeatedly shared her fears with the public and questioned her abilities to run for office willing to step down for a 'strong leader', appeared to have an opposite effect on the voters. A housewife and a mother, she provided her own definition of feminism, understood broadly as political empowerment, giving voice to and mobilising those who did not display any interest in politics and never took part in any demonstrations and protest rallies. As political scientist Olga Dryndova observed, '[u]ntil summer 2020, feminism and political participation seemed incompatible with femininity – now women's political participation is becoming fashionable' (Dryndova 2020). On August 29, 2020, some 10,000 women gathered at a protest rally in Minsk demanding respect for their citizens' rights and free, fair elections (Avseiushkin 2020).

   The spiral of violence against peaceful demonstrators prompted not only Saturday's women marches and solidarity chains that caught the attention of international media but also the myriad of female voices that began to emerge across the country – voices of doctors and journalists, of singers and athletes, of activists and teachers. The voice of Volha Brytsikava, then head of the sales department of the major Belarusian oil refinery Naftan, was one of them. She was able to unite the workers and eloquently formulate their demands for political change, including the resignation of Alexander Lukashenko and Lidziia Iarmoshyna, the head of the Central Election Committee ('Na Naftane' 2020). Her daring video address published

by Tut.by on YouTube attracted over 330,000 views and was shared on Telegram and social media platforms.

5. Narrative change

The topic of empowerment is also reflected in Maryia Kalesnikava's slogan 'Belarusians, you are incredible' that was developed already as part of Viktar Babaryka's campaign and gained popularity with the outbreak of mass protests. What seems to be populist and even banal, has a deeper meaning. Instead of focusing on criticising state authorities and reinforcing people's inability to change things, this narrative encouraged Belarusians to become active and demonstrate their civil discontent using peaceful forms of protests. In the interview with the Radio Free Belarus, Maryia Kalesnikava emphasised: 'All these 26 years we have had an inferiority complex, that nothing depended on us. This all originates from the Soviet Union, and there was not enough time so that the nation realises that we are a nation, that we are one nation, that we can have an influence on our common life' (Kalesnikava, in Sous' 2020).

This is key to understanding the awakening and unification of the Belarusian society paralysed by Lukashenko's tight control. At the same time, it is thanks to Lukashenko that this movement emerged and with it, the recently discovered sense of belonging and national identity, which was unimaginable some twenty years ago. In contrast to the Baltic States and Ukraine, Belarus did not fight for its independence but was rather confronted with its sovereignty as a fait accompli. There was a ruler and a territory, but no citizens. A state without a nation. In *Code of Absence: The Foundations of Belarusian Mentality* (2007), Belarusian writer Valiantsin Akudovich analysed the formation of the Belarusian national idea and what prevented the Belarusians from becoming a true nation. With the outbreak of the protest movement and the formation of civil society initiatives and local communities, the era of national non-existence and absence has come to an end. Belarusians started to fill the contours of their national identity, and women who entered the scene in 2020 and started a revolution, albeit unintentionally, are there to stay.

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