



# Battleground ‘Lukamol’: The Belarusian Republican Youth Union between a Rock and a Hard Place

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*Abstract:* In summer and autumn 2020, Belarus witnessed unprecedented pre-electoral mobilization during the presidential campaign followed by equally unprecedented mass protests against electoral fraud and subsequent disproportionate state violence across the country. This opinion piece studies the activities and narratives promoted by Belarus’ omnipresent pro-presidential mass youth organization, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) from the beginning of the electoral campaign in May 2020 until the end of the year, yielding valuable insights into the protest movement’s dynamics, especially as young people, first and foremost students, were particularly active both in campaigning for alternative electoral candidates and in engaging in protests after the election. This opinion piece finds that the BRYU became a site for protests and negotiations during the unprecedented political crisis. Although the organization has since gone back to ‘business as usual’, it continues to face pressure from both the Lukashenka government and its rank-and-file.

*Keywords:* youth politics, Belarusian Republican Youth Union, Belarus, protests, elections, state-affiliated youth activism, GONGOS, authoritarianism, political crisis, social media

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In summer and autumn 2020, Belarus witnessed unprecedented pre-electoral mobilisation during the presidential campaign, followed by equally unprecedented mass protests against electoral fraud and subsequent disproportionate state violence across the country. The political crisis that followed the 2020 elections demonstrated an urgent need for an analysis of the nature of the resistance, the state of the Belarusian society and the country’s political institutions. At the time I was writing this piece,<sup>1</sup> most of the scholarship and analysis had focused on the more visible protest groups such as street-rally participants, independent union representatives, and artists. By studying the interaction between the state and young Belarusians, this opinion piece considers a more ambiguous – and previously overlooked –

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layer of societal resistance. The focus here is on the pro-presidential youth organisation, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (Belaruski Respublikanski Saiuz Moladzi, abbreviated BRYU or BRSM, sometimes referred to as ‘Lukamol’ – i. e. Lukashenka’s Komsomol) and its activities before and after the fraudulent presidential election of August 9, 2020.

I argue that this perspective yields valuable insight into the protest movement’s dynamics, especially as young people, first and foremost students, have been particularly active both in campaigning for alternative electoral candidates (Krawatzek et al. 2020) and in engaging in protests after the election (Brzozowski 2020). This occurred despite the regime’s long-term strategy of discouraging young people’s involvement in opposition activities and cultivating a generation of politically unengaged supporters through the BRYU (Rudnik 2017). In my previous work, I have explored young Belarusians’ responses to the ‘voluntary-obligatory’ membership in the BRYU<sup>2</sup> and found that young people employ various strategies for engagement and disengagement with the youth league (Silvan 2019a).

This piece asks how the BRYU mobilised youth support for President Lukashenka before and after the elections and how young people, especially students, responded to and challenged these mobilisation efforts. The analysis builds on a dataset compiled of publicly available social media posts accessed in Facebook, VK and Telegram. More specifically, I examined the material published by BRYU committees<sup>3</sup> of various levels (the central committee, oblast’ committees, university committees of Belarusian State University (BSU) and Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno (YKSUG), and faculty cells (of BSU) in Vk.com as well as posts related to the BRYU published on the Telegram channel ‘Otchisleno’ (‘Expelled’, @studentby), popular among students. Qualitative analysis of the data displays the friction between these committees of various levels, suggesting that in 2020, fault lines emerged within the organisation, and the BRYU became a site of the simmering protest and negotiations.

The analysis is presented chronologically. After providing some background information about the BRYU, it discusses the BRYU’s mobilisation in the pre-election period. In addition to mobilising young people to collect signatures for Lukashenka’s nomination, the BRYU’s higher echelons intensified its patronising discourse by reminding young people not only to cast their vote but to support the ‘correct’ candidate. After the fraudulent elections, the BRYU officially pleaded to restore peace and stability in the country, mobilising people for Lukashenka’s support marches. At the same time, however, pressure was mounting from the bottom up: very few BRYU activists participated in the pro-regime rallies, while in some places members were quitting the organisation *en masse*. Some cells explicitly endorsed the protests, others supported the powers that be, while most refrained from any activities for weeks, opting for a ‘wait-and-see’ approach. From September 2020 onwards, the BRYU has attempted to return to normalcy and promote ‘dialogue’. Nonetheless, the data analysed here suggests that bottom-up pressure is still mounting within the organisation. If coupled with

<sup>2</sup> In order to reach mass membership figures that legitimise the organisation in the eyes of (youth) policy makers, the BRYU has resorted to dubious admission practices for the entirety of its existence. As a result, membership has been deemed ‘voluntary in principle but obligatory in practice’, with children joining the BRYU semi-automatically at the age of 14 and remaining in the organisation just in case membership becomes useful one day (‘Children are hoarded...’ 2018).

<sup>3</sup> The BRYU has a strict hierarchical structure (‘Structure’ 2021).

vertical challenges, such as the discreditation of the BRYU by other societal actors, the crisis of the youth league might be difficult to manage without a complete overhaul of its structure.

### **1. Lukashenka's Komsomol: Belarusian Republican Youth Union in Perspective**

The BRYU is a state-funded and pro-presidential administered mass organisation of youth (Kasza 1995) established by Lukashenka's government by 2002 (Silvan 2020). Officially, BRYU boasts a membership of 480,000 fee-paying people between the ages of 14 and 31, many of whom join on a 'voluntary-obligatory' basis at school. The organisation has a rigid hierarchical structure based on the principle of democratic centralism, which implies that lower-level tiers are obliged to comply with higher bodies' orders. Moreover, the BRYU is included in the 'vertical of power' that permeates Belarusian state institutions, for its function is to implement state youth policy (Silvan 2020).

In addition to functioning as a 'transmission belt' of government policy to the youth, the BRYU, paradoxically, also claims to represent the interests of its rank-and-file and is there to promote the development of civil society ('Information' 2021). In practice, however, most of the BRYU's activities are designed by its central committee and implemented in a top-down manner, albeit they are designed in a way that is expected to find resonance among youth. As a result, the BRYU's everyday repertoire is a combination of political and social activities desired by the government, such as volunteering and the celebration of state holidays in the name of patriotic education, and leisure and entertainment activities that are enjoyed by the rank-and-file, such as trivia nights or summer camps (Silvan 2019b).

Those critical of the BRYU refer to it as 'Lukamol' – Lukashenka's Komsomol (Afnahel 2018). Although the BRYU is not, juridically speaking, the Komsomol's official legacy organisation, it strongly identifies with the Soviet-era youth league; the BRYU repeatedly claims to preserve the 'best traditions of the Komsomol' ('Voroniuk: we preserved...', 2020). In Lukashenka's Belarus, its primary tasks are to carry out political education that would ensure young people's acceptance of the current political system as well as mobilise youth to causes defined by the government, whether elections, construction work or state celebrations (Silvan 2020; Nizhnikau and Silvan 2022). In addition, Belarus has also witnessed the emergence of a mass children's organisation constructed according to the Soviet institutional template, the Belarusian Republican Pioneer Organization. The official aim of the association is to help every member become a citizen and to bring benefit to themselves, their family and their motherland. Like in the Soviet Union, 7–10-year-old members are called 'Octobrists' and 10–14-year-old ones 'Pioneers' ('Pioneer team', 2021).

In recent years, the BRYU has functioned well enough despite its structural contradictions. As a result, a significant share of young people join the BRYU and at least some of them become youth league activists, 'breathing new life' into the organisation regardless of the limited space for activism.

## 2. Summer 2020: Campaigning for Lukashenka

On May, 22, BRYU officially announced its decision to assist in the presidential election of August 9, 2020. On Facebook, the BRYU's Central Committee declared its support for President Lukashenka as 'collective desire to be in the epicentre of electoral processes of the country' (BRSM 2020a). This decision was anticipated. The BRYU regularly participates in local, parliamentary and presidential elections by collecting signatures for government-approved candidates, staffing electoral committees and providing compliant electoral observers. Moreover, its leaders openly claim that the BRYU's members back Lukashenka. In October 2019, the BRYU's First Secretary Dmitry Voroniuk explicitly stated in an interview: 'We say it bravely: our organisation supports the president, we are not ashamed of it. We love our country and respect our president. Everyone in our organisation and I personally support him' ('We do not force anybody...', 2019).

What is striking, however, is that the start of the electoral campaign in support of Lukashenka was not publicised in the social media accounts of BRYU's two lowest organisational tiers included in the analysis of this piece. Up to this day, there is no information of the BRYU's electoral involvement on the Belarusian State University (BSU) BRYU organisation's website (instead, articles posted on the newsfeed in June 2020 include articles like 'How to memorise more effectively?' ('Novosti', 2021)), nor is it mentioned under the 'Political activities' page ('Politicheskoe napravlenie', 2021). None of the 19 faculty BRYU cells announced the league's participation in the upcoming election. The lack of information can be explained by the unpopularity of the BRYU's electoral engagement. In fact, the BRYU has been trying to downplay its political activism in recent years due to the stigma of active membership in Lukashenka's pocket organisation. One of the BRYU activists I interviewed back in 2016 described electoral activism as a necessary evil, a job assigned from the top that simply had to be done from time to time (Silvan 2016a).

Although low-level committees kept a low profile on their electoral activities, the BRYU and its campaigning activists did make headlines. On 5 June, BRYU activists mobilised to collect signatures for Lukashenka's candidacy. The following day, two zealous activists accidentally verbally attacked Mikhail Orda, Lukashenka's campaign chief, presumably mistaking him for an opposition representative, asking him 'How much did you get paid for the broadcast?' The identity of the activists, students at the Institute of Culture, was quickly discovered and shared on the popular Telegram channel Nexta, after which most of them closed their social media accounts because they were flooded with hateful comments ('Aktivisty BRSM...', 2020). The incident demonstrated the increasingly strained and complicated political situation in the country. Voroniuk responded to the incident by condemning the 'cyberbullying' incited by 'Telegram marionettes' and the 'kitchen analysts scribbling snotty messages with their fat fingers' (Voroniuk 2020).

After the electoral candidates were confirmed and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia's campaign was in full swing, the BRYU's higher level committees focused on mobilising youth to the ballot with a patronising note. Up until the day of election, young people were not only reminded that voting was their 'civic duty', but that it was important to vote for the 'right' candidate. For example, the BRYU committee of Hrodna State University released a long appeal. It read:

By participating in the election, we, the students, demonstrate to ourselves and society that we are ready to make a choice and bear responsibility for our country. A secure future comes only when one is able to make a correct choice [...]. We call on everyone to demonstrate their active civic stance and vote for a strong and independent Belarus [...]. We also ask everyone to refrain from participating in unsanctioned rallies and apply criticism to appeals circulating in social media. (BRSM of the Hrodna State University 2020)

The BRYU's Central Committee, for its part, engaged in a mass educative undertaking by releasing electoral ads about the importance of every vote (BRSMby 2.0 2020b) and the necessity to 'think with your brain and not with your phone' (BRSMby 2.0 2020a). In the meantime, faculty level primary cells of the BSU were silent on election-related matters.

### 3. After the Election: Bottom-Up Challenges Emerge

The mass protests that followed the fraudulent election of August 9 and the violent repression of peaceful protests exposed the pre-existing divisions within the BRYU and brought enormous pressure on the organisation. Officially, the youth league aligned with Lukashenka and the current powers that be. The central committee and the *oblast*' organisations spoke about the importance of peace and stability, pleading with protesters to 'stop' and 'control their emotions, not follow the masses' (BRSM Hrodna 2020). The major problem apparently identified by the BRYU leadership was young people's media consumption. On August 13, leader of the BSU BRYU committee, Mikhail Degtiarenko, told the state news agency BelTA: 'I think the current situation must make people think about the kind of information they receive, from where and how objective it is' (Degtiarenko, quoted in 'We need to create...', 2020). The link to the interview was widely circulated in the BRYU's social media accounts, while Degtiarenko himself closed his profiles for comments and direct messages. The day before, the BRYU's Central Committee had compiled a list of Telegram channels providing an 'objective assessment of the ongoing political and social events in Belarus' (BRSM 2020b).

Meanwhile, some low-level organisations did their own assessment on the ongoing events. While most primary cells 'hibernated', some publicly endorsed the protests. On August 15, the BRYU Law Faculty committee published a post that in a remarkable way reproduced the official BRYU narrative on peace and stability while taking a stance against the regime:

We are the BRYU of the Faculty of Law. We are for peace! We are against violence! [...] Being both members of the BRYU and students of the Faculty of Law, our team calls for no innocent person to be unlawfully punished, and for each person deemed guilty to bear adequate responsibility for their actions! We call for the law to work for the benefit of the people, not against it! (BRSM of the Faculty of Law 2020d)

Before descending into two weeks of total silence, the BRYU committee of the History Faculty published a powerful appeal to sign an open letter in support of the protests. Unlike the appeal of the Law Faculty, it made no reference to the BRYU or the official narrative about

peace and stability, instead explicitly condemning the official historiography of the Lukashenka regime: ‘There have been many attempts to prove that Belarus is not a country, and Belarusians are not a nation. But in recent days, nobody can deny that we are a people. A strong people. A proud people. A people united as never before’ (BRSM of the History Faculty 2020).

What makes these posts, shared on the official BRYU social media accounts and visible at least until February 2021 when this piece was written, so remarkable is that the BRYU’s organisational culture dictates that higher level committees closely monitor the activity of the lower level ones and even individual BRYU activists are confronted and punished for undesirable social media content (Silvan 2016b). The data that is analysed in the framework of this piece is limited and can thus only provide a glimpse of the relations between BRYU committees at various levels. Yet these statements as well as the deafening silence of the overwhelming majority of primary cells suggests that BRYU activists are hardly staunch supporters of the current regime. Another observation that supports this argument is that in early autumn of 2020, the BRYU was able to mobilise only dozens of young people to the counter-rallies organised in support of Lukashenka.

The major challenge for analysing the interactions within the BRYU since the eruption of the crisis in 2020 is the lack of available research material. However, the deterioration of the BRYU’s relations with its primary constituency, its rank-and-file, is well represented in the data. In the beginning of the academic year in September, student protests were gaining momentum. The BRYU became one of the targets of protest activities, not least because Nexta explicitly pleaded with everyone to quit the organisation, labelling it ‘a structure of occupation’. Other Telegram channels, such as Otchisleno, repeated the call.

For the most part of the BRYU’s history, its members, often brought in on the ‘obligatory-voluntary’ basis (see Footnote 2), had not taken action to remove themselves from the organisation’s lists. However, as the political crisis of 2020 deepened, many passive BRYU members decided that membership in the youth league had more harm than benefit.

To resist a mass exodus from its ranks, local cells of the BRYU did everything in their power to complicate its members’ exit procedure. To leave the organisation, a member was now required to file an official resignation letter that had to be submitted in person to a primary cell’s representative. In principle, members ought to be automatically discharged from the organisation upon the non-payment of membership fees, but in practice BRYU committees prefer to collect any remaining dues at a later stage (‘I tried to leave...’ 2018).

The only way the BRYU’s primary cells could stymie its members’ mass exit was by resorting to the ‘weapons of the weak’. Some committees refused to provide forms for those wishing to exit, sometimes claiming that such forms did not exist. Alternatively, some secretaries insisted that exit forms were filled out ‘incorrectly’ and could therefore not be processed – in one case, reported in Otchisleno, such a form was provided by the BRYU representatives themselves. The most prevalent practice employed by BRYU activists, however, was simply not turning up at the office to receive resignation letters.

While pictures of students queuing to leave the BRYU were all over independent media space, BRYU’s leadership claimed that it had lost only a fraction of its members. On September 9, the Press Service of the BRYU reported that just 1,190 students had left after August 20, ironically noting that ‘not only are people leaving the BRYU, but they are joining, too,

but the joiners do not turn it into a performance for an internet audience' ('BRYU told how many...' 2020).

In September, when students were actively protesting at universities around the country, posts on the VK page of the BRYU Committee of the Faculty of Law provided rare insight on negotiations between BRYU activists and other students. On August 22, the committee's activists wrote a post lamenting the 'negative comments' about the BRYU and claimed that the criticism reflects the prevalence of negative stereotypes about the youth league (BRSM of the Faculty of Law 2020b). The committee published a series of posts to bust 'myths' about the BRYU, which received some negative comments. Curiously enough, the activist secretary of the committee sought to engage with the critics. When confronted about comments that had been deleted by the activists, the committee's secretary responded: 'Yes, they [the deleted comments] were not published. Because they sounded like insults. Please remember that the Law Faculty BRYU cell has real people who are activists. For us, it's unpleasant to read such things. It's unpleasant that we are all expected to be the same' (BRSM of the Faculty of Law 2020c). By seeking to distance themselves from 'bad' BRYU activists, the committee's members were, in fact, reacting to the organisation's stigma (Silvan 2019).

In another instance, the same committee members – first and foremost its first secretary – were arguing with critics about the role of the BRYU's public order volunteer squads (MOOP). The committee underlined that the faculty's squad would neither be dispersing peaceful protests, nor would their members be authorised to use violence (BRSM of the Faculty of Law 2020d). It is unlikely that these reassurances convinced critics; after all, by now the BRYU was firmly perceived by protesters as being, if not a part of the oppressive regime machinery, at least unsupportive of protesting students. In fact, one of the most watched videos about the BRYU on YouTube features an incident in which activists of the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics (BSUIR) BRYU committee try to drown out the voices of singing protesters by playing their own music from loudspeakers, failing miserably.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. A Clumsy Attempt to Return to Business as Usual

Despite the ongoing political turmoil, the BRYU – and its individual committees – were quick to attempt a return to business as usual.<sup>5</sup> For the primary cells, it meant reposting content from the higher level BRYU committees, while for the central committee, it was about resuming the flow of regular events, whether in leisure or volunteering. On the political front, the BRYU's leadership voiced its eagerness to participate in 'dialogue' and contribute to Lukashenka's constitutional reform.

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<sup>4</sup> The video (available at <https://youtu.be/1O3WEEhEz-g>) was made private and thus inaccessible before this article was published. At the time of final editing, in March 2023, the most popular video of the BRYU on YouTube is an exposé by Nexta (2021) titled 'BRYU: Child slavery in Belarusian'.

<sup>5</sup> As a sidenote to the 'business as usual', it is worth mentioning that monetary transactions are an integral element of the BRYU's activities. Not only does the BRYU receive from the state budget considerable funding, the use of which is opaque, but public corruption scandals have regularly been connected to BRYU employees (Rudnik 2017; 'The Prosecutor General's Office revealed violations...', 2018).



In the end, the BRYU was able to uphold the façade of a loyalist organisation, as none of its salaried employees, some of whom are students working in the university committees, explicitly endorsed the protests. Nevertheless, bottom-up support for the BRYU suffered a severe blow. As I have argued elsewhere (Silvan 2019a), activism in the BRYU was stigmatised already before 2020, but now the organisation – dubbed in Nexta not just as Lukamol but as Hitlerjugend – has been thoroughly discredited. Moreover, sporadic signs of discontent are to be found in the data analysed in this piece from late autumn as well: on October 16, the BRYU of the Faculty of Geography of BSU reposted an appeal to support the faculty's detained students (BRSM of the Faculty of Geography 2020).

In addition to explicit or implicit pressure from the bottom, the BRYU is also likely to continue being subject to pressure from above, if the powers that be interpret its falling membership figures, protesting youth, and marginal information outreach<sup>6</sup> as a sign that the organisation is 'failing' in its task of implementing youth policy. Furthermore, the BRYU can also face horizontal pressure from other societal actors. Even long before the 2020 elections, in November 2018, the official internet portal of the Belarusian Catholic Church, *Catholic.by*, published an article titled 'Can a Christian join the BRYU? The priest replies'. In the article, priest Andrei Radzevich argues that believers should opt out of the BRYU because of its Komsomol heritage because 'on the foundation of the Komsomol, it is impossible to build a good youth organisation' (Radzevich 2018).

Summer and autumn of 2020 demonstrated that despite its monolithic and strictly hierarchical structure, there are divisions within the BRYU. Although the BRYU officially positioned itself as a staunch supporter of the Lukashenka government, there were signs of BRYU activists' implicit or explicit support of the protest movement. Moreover, the crisis reinvigorated (online) public discussions of the BRYU's regime-supporting activities, thus reinforcing the stigma of youth-league activism. As representatives of a hugely unpopular pro-presidential youth organisation, many BRYU activists have now learned to live their social media lives behind closed profiles.

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing in February 2021, the most viewed of the 17 videos posted on the BRYU's official YouTube channel since the beginning of September had only 152 views.



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