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REDEFINING "WHO WE ARE?" BELARUSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN THE 2020 POST-ELECTION PROTESTS

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 protests in Belarus created a unique socio-political situation for the country that has been described as "the last dictatorship of Europe". The civic stance against the authoritarian regime in Belarus has produced a horizontal connection among the participants which, in return, shaped the overall socio-political narratives about national identity and statehood that have dominated the public sphere for almost three decades. Through the eyes of the Belarusian activists and intellectuals living in Poland and Lithuania, this research article explores the bottom-up fusion of ideological contention against the regime and formation of a more politicized society in Belarus.

Key words: social movements, democratization, national identity, post-socialism, Belarus, authoritarianism

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Ravid Taghiyev

I. Introduction

The 2020 elections in Belarus, and protests following the falsification of the results are unprecedented in the history of the country in several respects. The scale of the protests, their peaceful intentions, and creativity have been widely discussed in the media, as well as in academic circles, but the most notable feature was their ideological stance against the state propaganda and oppression.

Through the mass mobilization of different social groups, the protests developed horizontal solidarity among the participants which, in turn, follows attempts for social and cultural identification with the wider society. This identification reflects the fundamental differences between two competing pre-existing narratives over the statehood and national identity in Belarusian society. However, the protests and rallies after the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus demonstrated how the growing tendency of alternative identification utilizes and benefits from the memories, symbols, and discourses on which the pre-existing narratives were based. Therefore, this paper aims to better understand to what extent this alternative approach is present in society and how it impacts identity-building among Belarusians.

The first section of the paper briefly describes the two long-standing narratives about Belarusian statehood, and national identity projects since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The level of support for these narratives and reasons for their unpopularity in society are analyzed here as well. The second part of the paper explains the growing tendency towards building an alternative approach that unites people more and mobilizes them in resistance movements against the authoritarian rule in the country. In this section, an analysis is given about how this approach builds a new way of interpreting history, understanding statehood, and "who are we?" in general. The final section looks more into the 2020 protests themselves, and how this new way of interpreting certain events was reflected through the creative methods and symbolism supplied by the protestors.

II. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

The main aim of this research is to better understand the social importance of the growing bottom-up civic initiatives in Belarusian society. With no clear role of the political parties or established opposition, there are significant signs that these social initiatives produce a new way of interpreting socio-political events and re-shape long-standing narratives.

According to Ilya Gerasimov (2020), the protests in Belarus after the 2020 presidential elections were indicators for an identity-building process in the society through the resistance to the authoritarian regime, which he calls "the post-colonial revolution". In his article, he argues that the protesters tended to acquire new civic collective identities through solidarity demonstrated on the streets. It is clear that the author points to a new way of identification in the society against the ethno-nationalist narrative of the established opposition and the neo-Soviet ideology promoted by the regime.

This "third way" of interpretation of national and linguistic identity was also mentioned by Nelly Bekus (2014) as a pre-existing phenomenon in society even during the early 1990s. As she puts it, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some Belarusian intellectuals developed a "third way" in order "to bridge the gap between the Belarusian identity and the cultural mixture, as well as bilingualism, in the society deriving from the 'destiny' of being a 'nation in between' great powers" (Bekus 2014: 44). Considering this feature of the Belarusian society, I argue that the mobilization of the protesters and perceptions of social movements in Belarus have significant connections to this "third way" of interpreting Belarusian identity and statehood in a more pragmatic way. The presence of a like-minded majority of people in Belarus makes this narrative more attractive than the long-standing hostile debate between the nationalist and official narrative.

Nelly Bekus (2014) explains the "hybridity" of Belarusian identity through, among all other cultural aspects, the linguistic features of the society. According to her work, the development of mixed Russian-Belarusian urban language in the society, called *trasianka,* symbolically indicates the very essence of the identification practice by the majority of Belarusians which "enabled . . . to avoid alienation and polarity in their perception of others and their language" (Bekus 2014: 48). Obviously, the notion of "other" here mainly indicates the Russian-speaking population and the Russophone world in general, "thanks" to the nationalistic way of "othering" the Soviet past as an "oppressor".

The cultural and linguistic "hybridity" of the Belarusian society is the main source for why people hesitate to support the ethno-nationalist narratives. This phenomenon constitutes one of the most important pillars of the newly emerging interpretation of identity. Therefore, these cultural and linguistic features of the society are the main reasons why broader social groups are more likely to support the "third way". The main feature of the emerging interpretation is its civic approach to the national identity issue that fundamentally rejects the ethno-nationalist approach of the established opposition. Therefore, it is more able to unite different social groups in society, compared to the divisive national projects. At the end, it is more likely to get wider support among Belarusians than the existing projects.

The visual observation of the protests in Belarus through social media and news, as well as interviews with the participants, reveal connecting aspects to the existing narratives and counter-narratives in the society, especially from the perspective of historical memories. The protesters regularly referred to the collective memories in the consciousness of the Belarusian people. They implement this symbolism in the contentious repertoire and methods of resistance in order to make parallels between today's notorious political events with the memories that shaped the socio-psychological perceptions of the society. This combination and interconnection present an important mindset which is aware of the mixture and contradictions in the society, yet it tries to reconcile differences. We observed the significant presence of this background throughout the 2020 protests as well. Therefore, this paper argues that the new tendency of interpreting national identity and statehood in Belarus was significantly reflected in the methods and symbolism of the 2020 post-election social movements.

III. Research Objectives and Methodology

The arguments presented earlier require a comprehensive sociological analysis of the identity projects in Belarus, as well as empirical data about the protests. In this context, the research objectives are as follows:

- **More sociological understanding of the events**: The 2020 protests in Belarus are generally explained and described through contentious politics and strategic aspects with the main focus on methods, possible results, and resistance against the regime. Therefore, the research aims at building a more sociological understanding of factors and dynamics that led to a change in Belarusian society, which in return produced massive disagreement and political protest against the regime.

- **Escape the dominant narratives**: Closely related to the previous objective, the paper avoids the dominant top-down narrative explanation of possible opportunities for contentious politics in an authoritarian regime. It does so by focusing more on bottom-up initiatives that made mass mobilizations possible because the opposition in Belarus is highly marginalized and persecuted.

- **Cultural/Socio-Political factors and identification:** Throughout the protests, starting in August 2020, one can easily observe a wide reference to cultural aspects, memory, and other socio-cultural factors by the participants. Especially, the artistic exploitation of historical events and memories in protest methods, slogans, posters, and social media indicate the growing tendency towards a change in perception and identification in Belarusian society. Therefore, it is significant to understand how these new identification attempts are reflected in the day-to-day organization of the protests.

- **More empirical and first-hand data:** It is necessary to collect and incorporate more empirical data, because it is almost impossible to understand the society as an outsider due to the closure of the independent research institutions that used to conduct opinion polls and surveys.

Some of the aforementioned research objectives require the implementation of particular research methods. In the absence of reliable sociological data that would reflect today's tendencies, it was necessary to collect empirical data through qualitative interviews with the Belarusians who participated in the protests and moved to Poland and Lithuania due to persecution in their home country. I conducted the interviews with Belarusian political dissidents and activists between mid-October and early November 2021 in Poland and Lithuania. The number of respondents who are activists and political dissidents were 10, with 6 female and 4 male interviewees. The respondents' duration of stay in Poland and Lithuania varied between 3 months and 7-8 years. The names referred to throughout the paper are pseudonyms to protect the real names of the respondents. Some of them, who have been living in EU for many years, already had settled lives and had integrated into the society, while others had only just arrived after the recent waves of persecution.

The interview questions addressed three main dimensions. I decided to keep the spectrum of the questions wide to give the respondents enough space for expressing their opinions freely. Therefore, I included questions that concern different aspects of their life and experience, as well as their view on the recent events. The interviews were relevant to obtain empirical data

about the social background of the protests and other dynamics of mobilization against the Lukashenko regime.

The first group of questions was intended to familiarize their emigration experiences, and opinions on the desired changes in their home country:

- *Could you please explain the main reason for your move to the EU?*
- *How long have you been living in Poland/Lithuania?*
- *What was your socio-economic background/workplace/profession before moving to the EU?*
- *What kind of difficulties do you experience living in the current society?*
- *What is the general perception of Polish/Lithuanian society towards you and migrants from Belarus?*
- *What changes do you expect the most in Belarus?*
- *If you had a chance, would you like to return to Belarus? What would convince you to return?*

The second group of questions was related to cultural matters and the identification of "Belarusianness":

- *What language do you speak in your daily life (family/friends and public)?*
- *What do you think makes a person Belarusian?*
- *In your opinion, who comprises the Belarusian nation?*
- *What do you consider your national identity?*
- *In your opinion, what is the most important event in the history of Belarus?*
- *How would you evaluate Russian influence in Belarus?*

The main intention via this group of questions was to observe their opinions about their identification and sentiments towards concepts, widely discussed in the existing literature, that are closely related to the identity in the Belarusian society. These questions helped me to learn more about the respondent's way of identifying themselves because most of them were involved in the protests and self-organization of people. This helps in understanding the main tendency of developing ideas in the shadow of the protests. I also included a third group of questions to reveal more about the protests themselves. This group includes the following questions:

- *What is the meaning of the 2020 protests for Belarusians?*
- *What was the expectation of the people who were involved?*
- *How do you understand European values and how are they understood by Belarusians?*

- *Do the protests express the general view of society? What is the meaning of the events?*
- *What age group of people was mainly involved? Were the younger generations leading the events?*
- *What was the importance of women's involvement in the events?*
- *What do you think is the meaning of these symbols (the white-red-white flag) for Belarusians?*
- *What was the main reason for people not being violent? How does this make the protests different from the Ukrainian Maidan?*

In addition, interviews with Belarusian political scientists working on the topic and civil society leaders were conducted in order to get familiar with the general overview of the field from an expert viewpoint. In total, three interviews were conducted, including two political scientists and one civil society leader. To better understand the national and cultural identification narratives in the protests, I included questions related to the meanings of certain symbols and cultural background of the society that shapes the perceptions of the participants:

- *Could you please briefly describe why the events that started in 2020 are important for Belarusian society?*
- *To what extent do you think the events express the general view of society?*
- *Which age groups mainly participate in the movements and try to achieve changes in society?*
- *What is the importance of women's involvement in the social movement for Belarus?*
- *According to your observations, what are people's main aims in joining the protests?*
- *What do you think are the differences between Ukrainian and Belarusian societies and how do these differences affect the results and methods of social movements?*
- *What mobilizes people in Belarus more than anything else?*
- *How do the younger generations identify themselves? Do they embrace the opposition ideas or is there a growing new approach to national identity among them?*
- *What role do the memories of the past play in the social movements?*
- *How do people associate the symbols they use with their historical importance and what is their meaning for people?*

Understanding the official and contentious narratives in the context of the election campaign and protests is significant because they reflect the features of each sides' intentions and ideas about the national project in Belarus. Therefore, analysis of social media and civil society manifestations through the content analysis was undertaken. Along with the content analysis, discourse analysis of official and oppositional language was necessary, because the discourse

and language used by the regime and the contentious groups tell a lot about the existing narratives on statehood and national conception in the society.

IV. National Projects for Belarus

Understanding Belarusian national identity has always been a complicated task for scholars. Interestingly, it is similarly complicated for most Belarusians themselves. You get different answers or explanations, and sometimes quite unpredictable ones, if you ask: "What makes a person Belarusian?" There is no dominant national idea which the majority of Belarusians associate themselves with. That is probably the reason why Belarus is considered as "a country with a weak national identity". Some scholars (Abdelal 2005; Way 2015) view this weakness as the main source of the quick authoritarian consolidation and lack of significant resistance to the consolidation of authoritarian rule in the country. If this is the case, what factors produced a quite well-organized mass mobilization of social groups after the 2020 presidential elections which are seen as "unprecedented" in the history of the country?

Belarus is best remembered for its controversial president, Alexander Lukashenko who has served in this position for 27 years. He was the first president of Belarus in 1994 and continues to be the only one since then. He is known for building the country on the "traditions" of the Soviet regime with a command economy and little privatization. This model of post-Soviet development is quite unique because almost all post-Soviet countries opted to build a state based on alternative national projects, a market economy, modern state structures reminiscent of the western model, and nationalizing sentiments against the Soviet past. However, this does not mean that an alternative political camp against Lukashenko's regime did not exist.

Nationalist sentiments against the Soviet past and "Sovietization" of the country grew in Belarus during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as in other post-Soviet countries, but this was lost in the political life of Belarus after 1994-1995. This was the period when Lukashenko, a populist opposition leader who halted the nationalizing line, was elected president through only "marginally" democratic and fair elections in the country. Since then, there have been two contradicting national projects in Belarus: first, the marginalized ethno-nationalist opposition led by the Belarusian Popular Front; second, the official neo-Soviet ideology built by Alexander Lukashenko (Bekus 2021: 4-5). What were the reasons for the high marginalization of the nationalizing line shortly after its emergence and the rise of Lukashenko's regime with the neo-Soviet project?

IV.1. Nationalism for whom?

After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, there was a social demand to create a post-Soviet agency in all the post-communist countries. This demand was to reshape the social and political structures of the national programs that would replace the irrelevant "Soviet internationalism" or "Soviet people". This process was not different in Belarus either. A nationalizing line developed starting from the late 1980s after the steady liberalization with *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*.

One of the turning points for the start of the wider nationalist debates in the country was the discovery of the Kurapaty area of mass burials by the archeologist, Zianon Pazniak, in 1988. Located in the outskirts of Minsk, Kurapaty was a Stalin-era execution site of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) where, according to early investigations, between 30,000 and 250,000 civilians were executed without trial or imprisonment (Goujon 2008). After the discovery, the area began to be visited by the nationalist opposition in Belarus, making it one of the symbols of "Soviet oppression of Belarusian nation".

Pazniak, who was a leading figure in the discovery, gained popularity with his works and newspaper articles about the history and "meaning" of the area. He became the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, which was created in the same year, and later on became a deputy to the Supreme Council. He actively politicized Kurapaty events and proposed ethno-nationalist socio-cultural programs like "one nation, one language" and "radical othering of the Soviet past" (Bekus 2019: 259). According to the nationalist program, the Belarusian nation was a "victim" of Soviet oppression that halted is development a nation-state, and the experience of the Belarusian National Republic established in 1918. The development of this type of nationalist ideology in post-Soviet societies was a "natural reaction to the failure of the Soviet state and ideology" (Bekus 2014: 27). One of the leading actors of the nationalizing wave in Belarus was the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) with an ethno-nationalist narrative about the Soviet past and Belarusian national identity. The BPF introduced a view of "othering" the Belarusian nation from the Soviet past. This re-imagining the nation through becoming "anti-Soviet, was commonly used in most of the post-Soviet countries" (Bekus 2019: 258).

The nationalist narrative became the relatively more accepted, as Verdery (1996: 85) describes, because it was the only historically organized form present in post-Soviet societies. When it came to deciding on an alternative idea contrary to the Soviet one, the nationalizing experience appeared to be the best option, the experience of which was already embedded in historical memory. But why wasn't it decisive for the post-communist states, especially for Belarus?

According to Rogers Brubaker (2009: 17), nationalism in post-communist states is "not engendered by nations, but it was induced by political fields of a particular kind". The driving forces of this project were governed by the properties of "political fields", not by the properties of collectivities or, in other words, "people". In fact, none of the nationalistic movements (like Popular Fronts [PF]) in most post-Soviet states led to nation-building, although they actively participated in bolstering the national political landscapes (Goujon 1999: 5-6). This basically means that a change in political orientation caused a change in the development of the national idea as well. This was empirically proven by the Belarus case when Lukashenko fundamentally changed the national identity project from a nationalizing one to its complete opposite – the neo-Soviet ideology that received a significant level of popular approval. This shift was possible thanks to the 'fresh' Soviet nostalgia among the Belarusians in the early 1990s, and disapproval of the oppositional ideas in the society. The reason for the latter was explained by Uladzislau Ivanou (2021), during the interview, as below:

> …In Belarus, for more than a century, there was this lack of pro-democratic attempts. Even if there was an attempt, it was brutally destroyed. This historical memory crucially impacts events. All the negative consequences in people's historical memory of people of alternative mobilization attempts affected the political culture in Belarus… Under Shushkevich and Kebich, nothing or very little was done about this or changed attitudes towards the opposition. Parties couldn't reveal themselves and people didn't feel them in politics. When Lukashenko came to power in 1994, he again started to construct this negative image of the opposition…

The declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in Belarus was not the result of people's demand or determination, but the consequence of a political situation that brought the end of the Union. Therefore, the Belarusians were very much "certain" to keep the Union. In March 1991, during the referendum on preserving the USSR, 83% of residents of Belarus supported the continuation of the Union (RIA News 2011). Belarus never conducted a referendum on independence. This alone indicates how the nationalizing line and identity was unpopular in Belarusian society.

IV.2. "Heroism", rather than "Victimhood

For most nationalist-minded people in Belarus, the nationalization of the society started in the 1980s and "successfully" continued during the early years of the post-Soviet era, but it was eventually stopped by Lukashenko's political course. However, as described earlier, the society

in Belarus did not really become nationalized enough to support the ethno-nationalist ideas after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the reasons for this has a long-standing linguistic and cultural background.

Even today, after more than three decades of independence, the significant majority of Belarusians still speak Russian. The institutional and educational "Russification" of society led to the gradual marginalization of the Belarusian language down to only about one quarter of the population who were mainly living in rural areas (Bekus 2014: 29). The main reason for that is the promotion of Russian language since the incorporation of Belarus into the Russian-speaking world. Russian also became the everyday language of the Soviet people, after the Bolshevik Revolution, but most importantly, it became "the language of social promotion in the national republics" (Bekus 2014: 36). Therefore, Belarusian as a language was marginalized and isolated mainly to rural areas.

With the predominance of the Russian language, the majority of the population became more and more connected to the Russian-speaking world in all aspects of everyday life, from the economy to culture. The publication of books and newspapers, the language of interaction in political and work affairs was only in Russian by the 1980s (Marples 1999: 50, 52). That is why the Russian language became an inalienable part of the Belarusian society, co-existing with, yet dominating over, the Belarusian language.

Thus, a radical reference to the "necessity" of using only one language and making mandatory changes to the structural background of society were not understandable for the majority of the population who spoke Russian in their daily life. In fact, in doing so, the ethno-nationalist opposition pushed away potential supporters by promoting a unilingual society, and extreme alienation to the Soviet past. The nationalist program was also criticized for being "Russophobe", and "undemocratic" by other political parties and movements, both right and left, which were created after 1990 (Zaprudski 2002).

While political circles debated over a "proper identity project", the society was gexperieincing a collapse of living standards that created a negative image of the post-Soviet governing elites and their national programs (Bekus 2014: 33). Against this background, a "promising" candidate, Alexander Lukashenko, the director of a state farm, gradually gained people's support by accusing the governing elites of being guilty of inflicting the harsh economic situation and corruption. He gave very passionate and populist speeches about the "incompetence" of the governing elite, which brought him significant approval from the ordinary people who considered him as "one of the people" (Ash 2015: 1035).

After the mid-1990s, Belarus experienced a gradual building of a neo-Soviet ideology under the incumbent president Alexander Lukashenko. Subsequent election results did not change the head of the state in Belarus. The opposition was regularly suppressed and deprived of economic resources. Its candidates and leaders were not allowed to participate in elections by jailing them, oppression or simply because they were killed and disappeared without any proper investigation. According to polls conducted after the 2010 elections, about half of Lukashenko's voters opted to vote for him simply because they "did not see anyone else they could rely on" (Manaev, Manayeva and Yuran 2011).

Starting from 1995, Lukashenko changed the state symbols to the symbols of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and re-introduced the holidays created during the Soviet times. The most important nuance to his neo-Soviet ideology was its "national flavors". As Bekus (2019: 259) describes, Lukashenko launched "a project of nationalizing the Soviet past" with special focus on the "image of Belarusian national triumph" and "heroism" during the Great Patriotic War, as WWII is called in some post-Soviet countries.

Lukahsenko's project was aimed at re-creating the socialist state model similar to the one in the Soviet Union. For that purpose, the privatization of public enterprises was halted and an economic model, somewhat similar to a command economy, was introduced. Most importantly, the new project (re)appropriated the Soviet model of the Belarusian identity and statehood, in contradiction to the ethno-nationalist narrative. With this project, Lukashenko ably exploited the existence of strong criticism to the nationalist opposition. On the one hand, his election campaign promised to make Belarus a "welfare state serving the people", a positive and nostalgic image for the population since the post-war period. On the other hand, there was a deep antipathy towards the post-Soviet elite "who were fighting amongst themselves rather than making life better for the people".

The success of Lukashenko's national project was its ability to exploit the "positive image" of industrialization, the development of Belarus during the Soviet times, as well as the memory of the struggle against Nazi occupation. The post-war period in Belarus, especially the 1960s and 1970s, is characterized by economic development and a significant improvement in living standards which made the country one of "the most prosperous Soviet republics" (Marples 2003: 24-25). That is one of the main reasons why Belarusians, especially the older generations, associated the Soviet period with positive achievements and industrial development (Ioffe 2008: 109). Therefore, during 1994-1995, when it was time to decide which of the two existing national ideas must prevail, the majority of Belarusians supported "the version of the Belarusian

idea with which they were most familiar" (Bekus 2014: 37). However, this was just an imitation or "imagination of the Soviet period with lots of loose ends" that did not allow it to be as tight as the Soviet model (Ivanou 2021).

Over the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, society and its perceptions were transformed with the generational change in Belarus. The new generations, who had not experienced "Soviet life", and had experienced nothing but Lukashenko's rule, became more and more detached from the "Soviet nostalgia". These groups became the main driving force of the transformation in society. They saw and experienced alternatives while traveling, using modern communication tools, especially the internet. Things like "Belarusian heroism" in WWII, and "the golden age" of Belarusian development during the Soviet times had a weak emotional impact on them.

Among other things, the younger generations also seek a freer academic environment independent from state propaganda and control. The younger generations are not happy with the education provided in Belarusian universities. One of the respondents, Dinara (25), who is a student in Vilnius, told how she abandoned her education because of the curriculum that was prepared to serve the official narrative and allowed no academic freedom:

> "I wanted to study International Law and I wanted to study it without governmental narratives. When you study in Belarus, the government narrative about 'what is right and what is wrong' is very strong…"

Academic freedom in Belarus is one of the main concerns for scholars and researchers of social sciences in general. Anatoly (41), who is a researcher in Lithuania, opted to continue his academic career abroad, simply because he needed academic freedom. He is convinced he will return to his home country and "help to build a new governance system of universities and reforms in academia" after needed political changes in future.

The generational change was not the only factor affecting the decrease in support of Lukashenko. He gradually lost sympathy because of his brutal governing methods, oppression, falsification of election results, limited opportunities for youth, deteriorating living standards the result of economic crises, and simply because people were fed up with the stagnant conditions under one-man rule. Scholars refer to this phenomenon of social change in the Belarusian society as "a quiet social revolution" (Manaev, Manayeva and Yuran 2011: 99). The established opposition is not, however, seen as an alternative because it is deprived of economic resources and marginalized due to its unpopularity in society.

Since the opposition was very marginal in society, Lukashenko's neo-Soviet ideology gained the upper hand, but the generational change slowly deteriorated Lukashenko's approval. 55% of respondents in a public opinion polls conducted in 2021 by a Russian organization, had "negative" opinions about Lukashenko (Euroradio 2021). The existing national projects in Belarus do not offer anything new and do not address the fundamental changes in society. Both ethno-nationalist and official discourse mainly focus on "the past". While the former condemns the Soviet past for "oppressing national development" and praises the establishment of Belarusian National Republic (BNR) in 1918, the latter recalls "the national heroism" in WWII and remembers the post-war development of the country. Belarusian youth think in a different way. They do not look back to history and want practical changes. That is why they do not associate themselves with any of the competing ideas of the official narrative or opposition. In this context, both national identity projects have controversial sides that need to be recognized and discussed. The strong focus on "Belarusian national heroism" and "exclusive role" played in the war does not make much sense, after the revelation of Soviet crimes against Belarusians and collaboration activities. On the other hand, the ethno-nationalist idea is too radical and divisive to support.

V. Is there a "third way"?

The socio-political landscape in Belarus reflects an old system that does not work anymore while, at the same time, no new system has emerged. At this very point, social conflict appears between the guardian of the old order – the Lukashenko regime – and the social demands for change.

There are particular reasons why an alternative national narrative is powerful and why broader groups in society support it against Lukashenko rather than the structured opposition. Some of these reasons are the result of the failures of ideas discussed earlier, but others derive from the institutional structure (social and cultural) of the Belarusian society.

The ethno-nationalist opposition is not popular among Belarusians, because society mostly views the national idea and language debates through a civic lens. This civic interpretation avoids alienating other languages, especially Russian, in Belarus. Therefore, in the absence of a power center, especially in an ideological sense, against the regime, there is a tendency to build civic initiatives through educating and politicizing people, because around half of the population in Belarus are apolitical and prefer staying away from anything connected to politics.

This group is also known as "hesitating voters", whose numbers fluctuated between 40% and 60% from the 1990s until the 2010 elections (Manaev, Manayeva and Yuran 2011: 98), and have not changed since, due to small changes and reforms in Belarus. A Polish political activist from Warsaw, Daria (34) who lived in Minsk for four years before the 2020 protests to practice her Russian language shared her experience about the apolitical people in Belarusian society:

> "…People in Belarus don't often show that they disagree with something. If something is wrong and people don't like it, they just accept it, keep silent, and mind their own business or move abroad. I think, two main factors affect why people do not show their disagreement: first, oppression and dictatorship; second, Belarusian society, which is pre-dominantly apolitical…"

Political activists and civil society are aware of the fact that apolitical people in society makes it easy for the regime to falsify elections and consolidate its oppressive rule. Having engaged in civil society activities for almost two decades, Kalina (44) acknowledged the difficulties when addressing people's low interest in civil society. When assessing the public presence in civil society, she describes it as following:

> "… It was rather the interest of a very limited number of people who dealt with issues professionally or in the civil society sector and that was not many. We used to have civil society (in Belarus), but it is still not understood by the citizens as such. They do not know why these organizations exist, what the people's motivation is to be active in civil society, or how ordinary people benefit from such activities. You should understand that in parallel with an independent society, there was a state-imposed civil society. People were forced to be members of these organizations and pay membership fees, getting nothing, but some financial incentives…"

According to the respondents, however, the attitudes of the apolitical have changed and was visible in the 2020 protests. Some groups have become more political and feel more connected to politics and the consequences of political decision-making. As Vera (33) describes, there was a "general disregard" for politics, but this was connected to a general perception of society. She mentions the propaganda of the post-war generation which said "Anything is ok, as long as there is no war". The regime in Belarus still exploits this narrative by describing the aims and potential consequences of the protests as 'devastating' or 'another war', but this has a far less impact on the younger generations today. Vera also describes how this narrative is far from the younger generations understanding of the world:

> "…Many young people *(meaning people younger than 20-25)* live in their own bubbles where they don't hear Lukashenko's speeches. They don't know what is going on, what is happening or who has been detained. They think that the protests stopped, so it stopped being interesting and they could return to TikTok and watch videos. Lukashenko does not have influence on the younger generations at all and the same applies for the nationalistic opposition."

In order to encourage the 'bystanders', especially the younger generations, to participate in the social and political life of the country, Belarusian youth and middle-aged groups are engaged in activities of self-organization, education, and civil society that gradually develop an alternative perception and interpretation of the events happening in the socio-political life of the country, as well as the national idea. During interviews with political activists, the respondents mentioned how educating people and providing alternative channels of information and interpretation is crucial for organizing resistance to authoritarianism. Although self-organization and informing people are effective, activists acknowledged how difficult this is due to persecution and death threats that force them to move to the EU. Therefore, it is necessary to act both inside and from abroad. Only 1 out of the 10 respondents wanted to stay in the EU as her activities were closely connected to international cooperation in the civil society sector. The rest clearly expressed their desire to return once the conditions allow. They see the "awakening" or "revival" of apolitical people as a main driving force for a breakthrough.

As discussed earlier, Belarus is not one of the countries that display extreme poverty, deep social inequality, or radical anti-Russian nationalism. These factors played little to no role in the mobilization of different social groups during the 2020 protests. The issues that played central roles were the brutally of the oppression and the regime's unwillingness to incorporate alternative ideas, Lukashenko's long tenure in the office through election fraud, and, most importantly, the regime's inability to catch or adapt to the intergenerational change.

Mobilization of the masses was successful because ideas did not come from the opposition which divided the social and political space, but from a unifying civic narrative for a "better life" against a "the corrupt and unjust regime". In that sense, the alternative approach somehow combines the features of both existing projects in order to achieve solidarity within the wider society, without alienating any social group. Combining the features of both projects deprives the regime of marginalizing it because they bring the seemingly irreconcilable narratives together. Though not so much popular, this view existed among some intelligentsia who sought

a solution to the "strict political polarization" in society (Bekus 2014: 43-44). This duality has always been at the center of Belarusian perception and identification.

Although they dominantly use Russian in their daily life, during the interviews, the respondents identified Belarusian culture as "bilingual", only about half of them had different levels of Belarusian or mixed Russian-Belarusian language skills. One of the respondents mentioned that he was used to using Russian language mostly in Belarus both in public and private life, but whenever he met with colleagues and friends in Lithuania, they usually spoke Belarusian. This may point to how dissidents and people opposed to Lukashenko care about preserving the Belarusian language.

Speaking the Belarusian language is also connected to the existing tradition among diaspora and nationalist intellectuals in exile who prefer the Belarusian language which they say is the main indicator of 'Belarusian nationhood'. However, when it comes to the younger generations and participants in recent protests, language does not define who or who not Belarusian is. All respondents identified Belarusian citizenship without reference to language or ethnicity as main factors. Contrary to the ethno-nationalist interpretation, the civic stance of the protests does not exclude any group in society. Similarly, the civic nature of the social movements made it easier to bring people together and create solidarity with people from different social background. To the question "Who comprises the Belarusian nation?" all the respondents answer "citizens" or "all the people living in the territory of Belarus". This indicates that the respondents, as most of the protesters, do not interpret the political events via the lens of the established opposition. Therefore, all the respondents, without exception, identified themselves as Belarusians, placing bilingualism, even if they have limited Belarusian skills, in the center of "Belarusianness".

According to leaked results of opinion polls conducted for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the All-Russian Center for Learning Public Opinion, 66% of Belarusians are against unification with Russia, while the majority still view the Union State positively (Euroradio 2021). The cross-border social and economic advantages for the ordinary people brought by the Union State are still important for Belarusians. Respondents also tended to separate the notions of "Russian political regime", especially the administration of Putin, from "Russian society". They interpreted the events not as anti-Russia or pro-European, but simply as a struggle for democratization. As Anton (30) describes the struggle against the regime was aimed for people "to be influential at the decision making level, letting people be the power, not someone else".

Due to the strong economic and social (family, culture, language, etc.) connection to Russia, Belarusians have positive sentiments towards Russian society in general. This feature of

Belarusian cultural and national identity is coined by Nelly Bekus (2014: 26) as "hybridity". According to her, Belarusian society has the unique background of "several co-existing concepts of identity" that prevents the perception of alienation or polarization. This model of unifying the different sides opens up the concept of a "Belarusian nation" to those who speak other languages than Belarusian and does not make sharp preferences over historical events which, only together, constitute Belarusian history. As one of my interviewees responded, "These all are not alien, but a part of us".

VI. Reflection in the social movement: during and after the protests

The so-called "third way" or "alternative approach" in Belarusian society about the national idea is nothing new, but an existing narrative deep in cultural and social life. However, new methods and ways of combining pre-existing narratives were evident in the younger generations who are the most active participants in the protests. The exploitation of various cultural and ideological elements like informal practices of language, memories, beliefs, ceremonies, common suffering, show how the alternative approach combines the two competing narratives to oppose the regime and create solidarity with the wider society. As Swidler (1986: 273) puts it, these existing deep cultural and ideological elements create a "cognitive apparatus" through which the collective actions construct their strategies and methods. Accordingly, "culture influences collective action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or tool kit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action".

Observation of the strategies suggests how participants have combined the "victimhood" of the Soviet past by paying visits to the Kurapaty area but, at the same time, rallying towards and gathering around statues and sites commemorating the heroes and struggles of the Nazi occupation period. In this way, they respect different periods of the Belarusian pre-Soviet and Soviet eras. They integrate the memories (victimhood) of the Soviet and Nazi occupation, as well as popular cultural myths and narratives to appeal to peoples' memories to create solidarity, convincing "bystanders" to identify with the protesters. These activities appeal to people's identification with the society and context where the social movement is taking place (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 81). Williams (2004: 105-108) says in order to appeal to the wider masses, the social movement should resonate with the broader cultural structures, rather than just focusing on their targets. That is what the protests want to achieve in Belarus as well, because Belarusian society is very much connected to these historical and cultural narratives.

Therefore, their presence in the protests is crucial to communication with society. Since the people's socialization into these cultural and historical narratives is quite strong, they receive more impetus to act as a part of the collectivity (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 94,106). Certainly, there might be different motives for taking part in the protests, but the common good and general identification with other participants plays an important role in the decision whether to join the movement or not.

Several historical and cultural references were implemented during the protests. In order to demonstrate the parallels between the Soviet crime and the regime's brutality, a human chain was organized between the Kurapaty area and Okrestino Detention Center in Minsk, where a lot of political activists and protesters were tortured or beaten during the protests. Then protesters covered the statues glorifying the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the victory of the Great Patriotic War with the white-red-white flag of BNR, which is very original and paradoxical at the same time. The Bolshevik Revolution which eventually halted BNR was brought together with the national flag to demonstrate that "victory" is inevitable. There was also a broad reference to the Nazi atrocities and concentration camps. Quite interestingly, the protesters compared the Lukashenko regime with the Nazi occupation and called for people to "stand against the evil as the Belarusian did during the war" and show "how alien the regime is to the Belarusian people" (Bekus 2021: 12). In this way the protesters tried to demonstrate how the methods of the regime reminded them of the same brutality of the Soviet or Nazi forces in Belarus. By doing so, the protesters appealed to the image of heroism in order to convey the messages of victory and righteousness.

The BNR white-red-white flag became the symbol of the protests shortly after people started gathering in the center of Minsk. Contrary to the occasional small protests of the opposition since the 1990s, the flag during the 2020 protests did not carry ethno-nationalist messages used to divide the society, but a civil worldview that aimed to unite different opinions. But how did an ethno-nationalist flag become a unifying symbol when there were people who opposed it? Ivanou (2021) explains that the flag symbolized protest and disagreement with the government. According to him, the people passing by opposition protests saw the

The protestors covering the "Motherland" sculpture in Minsk with the white-red-white flag

white-red-white flag and remembered it as an experience. Although they did not know the origins of the flag or the claims of the protesters, it remained a familiar experience of resistance to the regime in people's mind. The civil society members and political activists I interviewed mentioned how they doubt that the majority of the protesters understood what that flag originally meant. As Bekus (2021: 9) indicates, the flag "did not signify the ideological victory of the opposition", but was eventually re-invented as a symbol of "struggle for Belarus without Lukashenko". So, it rather became a collective and familiar attachment as a symbol of resistance against the regime.

The 2020 protests are significant not only for being the strongest resistance movement, but also because they created solidarity around a general hope for changes. People started to discuss national matters and see other people like themselves standing together. This "togetherness" contributed to the way people perceived the country's social and political realities. Gabowitsch (2021: 1) describes how people were transformed into active participants through self-organization and "acquired new collective identities, such as the pluralist civic identity that has come to supplant the narrower ethno-cultural subjectivity of the earlier Belarusian opposition".

According to the respondents, the experience of marching together and feeling the solidarity was something new and unique for Belarusians. In response to the question "In your opinion, what is the most important event in the history of Belarus?" surprisingly, 4 out of 10 respondents, especially those who participated in the protests, identified the 2020 events as "the most important event" in the history of Belarus. They explained their answers by focusing on the fact that the masses were, for the first time, successful in self-organization without orders from political leaders or elites. On the one hand, these answers reveal why the movement should be considered as a bottom-up civic initiative. On the other hand, it indicates that a significant part of the younger generations, who actively participate in social and political life, do not stick to historical events as the determinants of political life today. Some respondents opted to choose the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania or the declaration of independence in 1918 as the most important historical events. They explained this by mentioning the events as "periods when Belarus was part of the European family, before it was taken by Russia". This narrative is widely used by the established opposition interpretation of Belarusian history as well.

The events in 2020 caused a significant transformation of the general opinion in Belarusian society. Although the transformation started during the preceding years, the massive protests and subsequent brutal suppression has significantly contributed to a change in the opinions of the society. The previous socio-political and economic demands of civil society and the

opposition in Belarus started to be widely expressed by the ordinary people. According to the opinion polls in 2021, the majority of the respondents were in favor of the following changes in Belarus (Euroradio 2021): firm economic reforms (76%); establishing new political parties in Belarus (66%); starting a dialogue between the government and the opposition (65%); overthrowing Lukashenko from the power (59%); shifting from a presidential system to a parliamentary republic (57%). 40% of respondents were in favor of organizing or having new protests. The results indicate the sentiments towards relations with Russia as well. 35% of respondents were in favor of "increasing Russian political and economic support to the current regime", which is, more or less, similar to the number Lukashenko's general approval rating (30%) in society. Approval or sympathy to opposition candidates and political figures in the 2020 elections changed to between 45% and 50%. These numbers indicate the general social demand for change in political leadership, as well as reforms in the political and economic fields.

VII. Conclusion

Some say that Belarus did not struggle for its independence and that Belarusians found themselves in an independent country because of the political circumstances brought on after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the question should be asked if Belarusians are struggling for their independence against Lukashenko's authoritarian regime today? Symbolically, the state ideology under Lukashenko is based on the established statehood under the Soviet Union.

The majority of the respondents during the interviews stressed how independence was stolen from Belarusians and that the country needed to regain its independence. This could play an important role in promoting national solidarity that could mobilize the masses against the authoritarian regime. While this process is diffusing in society, a growing number of people are beginning to identify themselves as a part of this "collective" against injustice, brutality, and inequality, which in return has a strong impact on the process of identity-building. These findings support the presence of a growing tendency towards reshaping oneself in new ways against the existing two ways of thinking. This emerges alongside the resistance to the regime. The majority of the protesters and political activists, promoting this narrative, are Russian-speaking. This indicates how a new identification is based on "civic" narratives that focuses more on "citizenship" than language or ethnic differences.

One respondent mentioned the historical importance of the events for Belarus by saying: "These are events similar to the 1905 events in Russia. So, the revolution (meaning the 1917 Bolshevik victory) is yet to come". It was also visible on the streets of Minsk and other cities in Belarus how the protesters did not hesitate to communicate with the different historical and cultural narratives present in the memory of the people, especially the Soviet memories. This method of communicating with both the Soviet and Nazi memories was a completely unique feature of the 2020 protests in Belarus. Most importantly, protesters combined them with the purpose of conveying messages or discrediting the regime. In this context, the experiences of neighboring countries like Ukraine, Poland, or the Baltic states were completely different. The way symbolism was used reflected an alternative national idea in the protests. This creative way of collective identification, incorporating memories through artistic methods and symbolism, demonstrates a more unifying perception of "who we are?" as a people against divisive national ideas in Belarus.

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