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DRAMATURGY OF POPULISM: POST-ELECTORAL PROTEST IDEOLOGIES IN BELARUS

Abstract

This paper analyzes the ideologies accompanying the political crisis that occurred in Belarus between August 2020 and late December 2020. In that year, Belarus saw the largest wave of mass protest mobilization that happened in this country since it proclaimed independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This protest wave was in many ways exceptional in comparison with other countries in the post-Soviet area. Scholars are still struggling to explain the reasons for this exceptional mobilization, and this paper contributes to this effort by looking at the ideational factors behind the pre- and post-electoral protests in Belarus. According to the central hypothesis of this paper, the 2020 protests were triggered by the breakdown of the protesters' identification with the image of 'the people' as projected by the dominant populist discourse, and the development of the protests was accompanied by a struggle over redefinition of who 'the people' are. More broadly, by turning to the discursive theory of populism, this paper assesses an ambiguous democratization potential of populist mobilizations in an authoritarian polity.

Keywords: Belarus, populism, electoral politics, discourse analysis, social movements

1. Introduction

The political protests that occurred in Belarus between August and late December 2020 were the largest wave of mass protest mobilization in this country since it proclaimed independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Scholars and experts compare them to electoral protests in Russia and the so-called colored revolutions in post-Soviet countries, notably the Maidan protests in Ukraine (2013-2014) (Ishchenko 2020; Bildt 2020). However, as I demonstrate in this article, this protest wave was exceptional in its scale, diversity of the participants and ideological orientation with

regard to previous mass mobilizations in Belarus and in other post-Soviet societies. Scholars are still struggling to explain the unexpected scale of the 2020 protests, and this paper aims at contributing to this effort by looking at the ideational factors behind the pre- and post-electoral mobilizations that happened in Belarusian throughout 2020. The central hypothesis of this paper claims that the 2020 protests in Belarus were triggered by the breakdown of the protesters' identification with the image of 'the people' as projected by the dominant populist discourse, and the development of the protests was accompanied by a struggle over redefinition of who 'the people' are. More broadly, by turning to the discursive theory of populism, this paper assesses a democratization potential of populist mobilizations in an authoritarian polity.

Based on the discursive approach in populism studies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), I construct a dynamic theory of populist discourse as a 'thin ideology,' that comprises the notions of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and 'the other' (Artiukh 2020a). I claim that the social and political imagination of both the ruling elite and the protesters in Belarus have been dominated by these categories. Thus, the political crisis of 2020 can be described as a struggle for the redefinition of the mentioned populist vocabulary. In exploring this hypothesis, I have collected a database of documents attributed to the incumbent leadership, the opposition leadership, and the rank-and-file protesters active throughout the 2020 political crisis. I have performed a discourse analysis of these three sets of documents with an aim of tracing changes in the meaning of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and 'the other' as well as relationships among these terms in the dominant and the opposition discourses involved in the electoral crisis.

This paper is structured as follows: in the second section I identify distinguishing features of the 2020 protests as compared to previous political mobilizations in Belarus. Thus, I arrive at the conclusion that they exhibit more similarities with the social protests of the last decade than with the 'regime change' attempts characteristic of the opposition political mobilizations since Lukashenka came to power in Belarus in 1994. The third section is dedicated to developing the theoretical framework for a dynamic analysis of populist discourses and the discussion of its application for the case of Belarusian political protests. The last two sections present an analysis of the empirical findings: mutations in the content of the categories of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and 'the other' as they appear in the documents of the acting Belarusian authorities, the opposition leadership, and the rank-and-file participants of the protests.

In the Conclusions, I offer a discussion of the implications of my findings for the studies of social movements and authoritarian polities.

2. The 2020 Protests in a Comparative Perspective

As the year 2020 started, a hydrocarbon dispute with Russia and the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to absorb everyone's energy in Belarus. Therefore, the results of the elections planned for August looked predictable: a secure victory of Aliaksandr Lukashenka who has been in power in Belarus since 1994. However, the incumbent president's initial challengers were unexpected: provincial video blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, former top manager at Belgazprombank Viktar Babaryka, and an ex-diplomat and head of an IT park, Valeri Tsepkala. The last two were renegades from Belarus' top elite circles, a revolt not seen for 20 years. In a succession of quick pre-emptive moves, Tsikhanouski and Babaryka were arrested and Tsepkala fled the country, while the partners of the three candidates - Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika Tsepkala and Maryia Kalesnikava - now stood in for them as a united team, leading their supporters under the slogan "I/We are 97%". They gathered large crowds of supporters all over the country, and their largest rally in Minsk on July 30 gathered over 60 000 people (*Radio Svoboda* 2020), which was already larger than any political mobilization over the previous two decades.

On the election day of August 9 observers reported numerous irregularities at polling stations; pro-government exit polls gave Lukashenka 80% of the vote, while Tsikhanovskaya was awarded short of 7%. The data drawn from the opposition count and the survey of Chatham House suggested that Tsikhanouskaia won with 48-55% (Wilson 2021, 284–86). This unleashed a week of large-scale street protests in large and small towns and an unprecedentedly violent police response with scores of injured and thousands detained. The first post-election week already surpassed any political mobilization that happened in the country since Lukashenka took power in 1994 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Political protests during Lukashenka's presidency[1]

Year	1996	2000	2006	2010	2015	2020
Event	Against the union with Russia	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud and police violence
Highest number of participants[2]	30,000	15,000	20,000	60,000	200	200,000

Active street mobilization in protest against the official results of the August elections lasted until December, gradually subsiding due to state repressions. This mobilization wave can be divided into several stages (see Figure 2). First, the post-election three days of large-scale spontaneous protests that were met with police violence (including fatalities among the protesters) and mass detentions with alleged torture (over 6,700 detainees). In the second stage, August 12 to August 25, workers from large industrial enterprises and employees of state-owned establishments voiced their protest in local gatherings, marches, and attempts at wild-cat strikes. This came as a response to the preceding police violence and caused some disorientation among the authorities. At this time the opposition leaders established an organizational infrastructure centered around the Coordination Council (established on August 14), while the labor unrest gave birth to strike committees (Artiukh 2021). In parallel, street protests have been coordinated through various social networks and messengers, the most prominent being the Polish-based NEXTA Telegram-channel. The fourth stage gained traction in mid-August and lasted until November; it was marked by more orderly 'scheduled' demonstrations, regularly held on weekends. They were met with less police violence, although city center access and mobile/internet connection were routinely blocked. The incumbent authorities tried to mobilize their supporters for counter-rallies, and the police resorted to targeted detentions. After the "People's Ultimatum", which Tsikhanouskaia announced on October 25 to force the Belarusian president to resign, failed to rally enough supporters for a nation-wide strike, the protest wave started subsiding. At this last stage, the state ramped up repressions; by this time the opposition leaders have either been arrested or fled the country.

Figure 2. Development of the post-election protests in August-December 2020

Stage	Character of the protests	Level of coordination	State response
August 9-12	Mass street protests	Social networks	Police violence
August 12-24	Street and workplace demonstrations	Social networks, strike committees	Sporadic detentions
August-November	'Scheduled' demonstrations	Social networks, local groups, Coordination council	Targeted detentions
November-December	'Scheduled' demonstrations	Social networks, local groups, Coordination council	Targeted detentions, dismissals

For the purpose of this research, I limit myself to the period between June and late December 2020 and draw only occasionally on the data before July and from January 2021 onwards. The time after the petering out of the protests in the beginning of 2021 can be described as systematic and increasingly repressive reaction of the state authorities against the opposition and its supporters. No significant street protests have been possible in 2021, and even expressions of dissatisfaction in social media have increasingly been met with detentions and long jail sentences.

In addition to the sheer numbers of the protesters on the streets, the August-December events exhibited a series of significant features that allow me to set them apart from previous political protests in Belarus. I will briefly review these distinguishing features below and highlight possible causal mobilization factors.

In term of their geography, the 2020 political protest mobilization wave was exceptionally diverse as compared to the previous protest episodes. As opposed to the political mobilizations of 1991-2010, the 2020 protest wave was unprecedentedly geographically dispersed. Large demonstrations happened not only in Minsk, but also in large and small towns and even in the countryside, in all provinces of Belarus. This is significant as it shows the breakdown of the traditional rural support base of the ruling elite and the formation of country-wide mobilization and communication networks.

The geographical diversity already suggests an accompanying social diversity, since the previous capital-city centered protest events tended to be limited to a small number of politicized groups, primarily the youth and intelligentsia. Indeed, scholars have noted that the protest was attended not only by the core of highly skilled urban professionals, primarily IT-specialists, but also by pensioners, employees of the state-funded service sectors such as healthcare and education, as well as entrepreneurs, and industrial workers, a large/significant part among them being women (Artiukh 2021; Gapova 2021, 47–49; Paulovich 2021).

A notable feature of the 2020 protest wave was a significant participation of industrial workers in the first month of the protests. The labor mobilization component of the general protest wave constituted in itself an episode of labor unrest in the country that can only be compared to the workers' strikes and protests in April 1991 (Artiukh 2021). This fact is significant, since Belarusian labor has been a part of the 'social contract' with the authorities (Gaiduk and Chubrik 2009), which was supposed to make them docile and dependent on the government and the management of state-owned companies (the main employer in the country) (Danilovich 2016).

The 2020 protests have been dispersed and spontaneous, significantly less linked to the established political parties or non-government organizations than the mass mobilizations of 1991-2010. The so-called 'old opposition' appeared to be disoriented and unable to lead the people willing to go to the streets. NGOs also played a minor role in providing organizational resources to the masses of protesters, possibly because of being corrupted by the history of enforced and encouraged marginalization (Minchenia 2020). The protests, instead, have been coordinated by local groups and through social networks (Gabowitsch 2021).

Finally, the lack or at least a comparatively weak geopolitical or ethnic dimension of the protest movement distinguished what happened in Belarus in 2020 from the pattern of 'color revolutions' in other post-Soviet countries. Diverse political and cultural symbols that were used in culture wars of the previous opposition campaigns (Bekus 2010) have been mixed and cross-fertilized during the protest rallies (Bekus 2021).

To sum up, the 2020 post-electoral mobilization demonstrated an ensemble of features that set them apart from the political protests that Belarus saw throughout its post-Soviet history and that resembled 'color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan: geographical and social diversity as opposed to capital-city based minority mobilization;

participation of industrial workers who were passive before; absence of traditional political opposition groups and NGOs as coordinators, lack of ethnic or geopolitical claims and symbols. The specificity of the 2020 electoral protests as a political mobilization, however, does not mean that they did not have precursors in other types of protests. Indeed, the 2020 political protests share all the above features except the attendance numbers with the wave of social protests that swept Belarus since the currency crisis of 2011.

While studying labor organizations in Belarus for my previous project, I stumbled upon an unexpected challenge to Belarusian authoritarianism. In the course of my research in 2015-2017, I encountered participants of the largest social upheavals that have shaken Belarus since the crisis of 2011: the wave of labor unrest in 2012-2013 and the protests of February and March 2017 against the tax on unemployment. As I demonstrated in one of my previous articles (Artiukh 2020a), the winter and spring social protests of 2017 were the first wave of spontaneous mass demonstrations with social demands since the early 1990s. They exhibit characteristics that set them apart from any protests that had been happening under Lukashenka's presidency (i.e. since 1994): geographic and social diversity, spontaneity and dispersed coordination, participation of trade unions and the lack of geopolitical or ethnic claims. This similarity prompts me to categorize the 2020 post-electoral protests together with post-2011 social protests rather than with the previous political protest mobilizations.

Figure 3. Changing character of mass protests in Belarus

Periods	1991-2003	2004-2016	2017-2021
Geography	Diverse	Capital city	Diverse +
Composition	Political parties Labor organizations Some spontaneous	Political parties	Spontaneous Citizens Workers Politicians
Agenda	Social Political Cultural	Political Cultural	Political Social

This similarity of the social and political protests in Belarus between 2017 and 2020 suggests similar factors behind popular mobilization. I analyzed these factors in my previous article (Artiukh 2020a), where I concluded that the protesters rejected the government's measures using the very populist framing utilized by the government itself. This forced the government to retreat on its policies and enter a dialogue with the disgruntled population. Thus, social protests without any explicit anti-authoritarian agenda resulted in more democratization than explicitly political protests. In this article I propose and explore a hypothesis that stems from my previous research in Belarusian social movements: what lead to the 2020 protest mobilization was the breakdown of the hitherto dominant populist mode of legitimation and the rise of populism from below.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Dramaturgy of Populism

In order to explore this hypothesis, I will resort to a discursive-rhetorical approach to populism (Brubaker 2017) that has only scarcely been applied to Belarusian politics (Artiukh 2020a; 2020c; 2021). I claim that this approach expands the explanatory and predictive power of the alternative approaches that have been prevalent in discussions of post-Soviet protests, specifically in Belarus.

Neither the 2017 social anti-tax protest, nor the 2020 electoral protests were anticipated by scholars who specialize in the region. These developments came as a surprise for the dominant scholarship and expertise on Belarusian society, framed as 'the last European dictatorship' (Wilson 2011). In this tradition Lukashenka's authoritarian populism has been described as relying primarily on coercion (Goujon 2002; Eke and Kuzio 2000; Rouda 2019), and Belarusian society has been diagnosed as lacking national consciousness (Marples 1999), acquiescent to the terms of a 'social contract' with the ruling elite (Gaiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009). Additionally, Belarusian opposition has been characterized as corrupted and lacking support among the broad population (Minchenia 2020; Pikulik and Bedford 2019). The explanations of recent social and political protests stemming from this approach (Merzlou 2019; Mudrov 2021; Ishchenko 2020) do not account for their timing, their mobilization and coordination outcomes, or their capacity to impact the decisions of the authorities.

Conversely, focusing on 'populism' rather than 'authoritarianism' in Lukashenka's regime illuminates its vulnerability to protests. Lacking a substantial dominant ideology (as opposed to the formally declared 'ideology of the state'), Belarusian populism is not contaminated by an ethnically exclusive discourse and is not in competition with serious challengers from the right or the left. Relying on the core populist opposition between 'the corrupt elite' and 'the pure people' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6), Belarusian political leadership has successfully marginalized its liberal and nationalist opposition, but had to take into account the social and economic interests of the population (Balmaceda 2014). Thus, the most threatening challenges to the government in Belarus came from popular protests with social and populist demands rather than from 'regime change' attempts with a substantial liberal-nationalist ideology, from the labor protests of 1991 through the union-led mobilization of the early 2000s, to the social protests of 2012-2017.

In order to understand the dynamics of populism and its contestation, I construct the 'dramaturgy of populism' as a dynamic model of the populist ideology building on a discursive approach to populism (Brubaker 2017, 360). According to this model, populism constructs a certain moral image of 'the people,' which is not immediately identifiable with the empirically given population (Müller 2014, 485). Morally pure, the image of 'the people' is then rhetorically opposed to the negatively charged trope of 'the elite' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 5–6). This opposition has an implicit vertical dimension that sets 'the people' against its 'other,' a parasitical remainder (Brubaker 2017, 362).

A populist leader acquires legitimacy by 'extracting the people from within the people' (Lefort 1988, 88) and presenting the extracted image to the actual people. This procedure may either succeed and lead to a stable period of populist governance or fail and lead to protests. The success or failure depends on whether the target audience identifies with the projected image of 'the people.' This 'extraction' is a dynamic process contingent on the extra-rhetorical context. A regime that uses a populist rhetorical repertoire does not have to be static and rely rigidly on one ideology. My working hypothesis is that the protest mobilizations in Belarus since 2011 and the 2020 protests specifically were motivated by the demise of Lukashenka's populism and the rise of populism from below.

The evidence from Belarus allows me to intervene in broader debates on populism and their ambivalence towards democracy. Margaret Canovan famously wrote that when the 'two faces' of democracy, the pragmatic and

the redemptive, fail to work together, it opens an opportunity for a populist movement (Canovan 1999). The crack between these 'faces' widened after the crisis of 2008 and opened the door for various forms of populism. Scholars have variously identified the origins of Eastern-European populism in the grievances of those left behind by the post-socialist transformation (Kalb 2019), or in the failures of democratic political representation (Ost 2005), and warned of the populist forces' anti-democratic potential (Müller 2014). Like democracy itself, populist rhetoric is Janus-faced, as it serves both to demand the return of the redemptive face of democracy, and to justify the dismantling of its pragmatic liberal form. Most of the debate, however, turns around the cases of populism constituted as a protest movement in response to the failure of the pragmatic liberal democracy or an outright 'illiberal' government (Kalb 2018). The recent examples of anti-authoritarian populist movements, from Russian protests of 2011-12 (Magun 2014) to Alexei Navalnyi's mediatized populism (Glazunova 2020; Pain and Fediunin 2019), point to the democratizing potential of populist movements.

In light of this theoretical approach, I can reformulate the above hypothesis as follows. The ruling power's failure to impose a new image of the people as normative, the population's refusal to identify with it and its willingness to identify with the 'other,' motivated the protest mobilization in the post-crisis period. The ideological dynamics of the protest consists in asserting an alternative populist discourse that entails a redefinition of the category of 'the people.'

Methodology

To address these questions, I have compiled a database of protest events and documents related to them. I gauge the ruling elite's and the protesters' interpretations of the core concepts of the aforementioned 'dramaturgy of populism', focusing on their dissonances. This analysis informs the coding of the protest documents in the database. While analyzing the database, I aimed to assess the efficiency of these interpretations by discerning those idioms of the dominant discourse that face popular resistance and those idioms of the resistance discourse that lead to the increase of street or virtual mobilization.

The database includes 60 speeches, social media posts, images and videos that have programmatic or mobilizing functions. Most of the evidence stems from the period between July and December 2020,

although some of the programmatic statements of the leaders and participants of the protests appeared earlier or later. I have included evidence from outside this timeframe if they concern the motivations and framing of the August-December protests. The documents are subdivided into three categories defined by authorship. The first set of documents come from the Belarusian authorities and are mostly attributed to the Belarusian president Lukashenka. This set of evidence forms a coherent whole due to the close ideological alignment of all state agencies that are supposed to adhere to the official 'ideology of the Belarusian state.' The second set of evidence is attributed to the leadership of the political opposition: the presidential candidate team (Tsinkhanouskaia, Kalesnikava, Tsepkalo) of the united opposition and the Coordination council. The third set of evidence belongs to rank-and-file protesters, opposition cultural agents and situational leaders. This evidence is drawn from social media, videos from the protests, and media publications.

The database has been analyzed with NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. Coding was performed manually. Consistent with the theoretical framework, coding aimed at identifying the context of and relations among the three main categories of the dramaturgy of populism: 'the people,' 'the corrupt elite,' and 'the other.'

4. The Struggle to Redefine 'the People'

Ever since Lukashenka was elected president of Belarus in 1994, he grounded his legitimacy in a claim for an unmediated connection between his personality and the body of 'the people,' thus turning Belarus into an 'island of populism' among the surrounding nominally democratic states (Matsuzato 2004). The nature of this unmediated relation has gone through a substantial mutation with the development of the global economic and political conjuncture: having started as an unreformed 'command economy without planning' (Nuti 2000), Belarus had to adjust to the more pragmatic market-based approach of the Russian Federation (Balmaceda 2014), its main economic partners, and Eastern Europe, its second-largest export market. Some scholars noted a concomitant evolution of the 'social contract' between the Belarusian state and various social strata (Gaiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009). The notion of 'the people,' projected by the populist rhetoric of Belarusian authorities centered around the presidential

administration shifted from the stress on unconditional social rights of citizens to an emphasis on the need to deserve certain social privileges.

Since the crisis of 2011, Belarusian official ideology has fashioned 'the people' as self-responsible and entrepreneurial subjects rather than having unconditional social rights in exchange of political docility (Artiukh 2020a). This change in the dominant populist discourse followed the pro-business shift of the Belarus state policies, and the new image of 'the people' as entrepreneurial subjects was summed up in a famous injunction by president Lukashenka to 'get undressed and work' instead of waiting for the state's mercy like the undeserving 'social parasites.' Essentially, the 2017 protests were a mobilization against a neoliberal inflection of state populism (similar to the cases analysed by Kurt Weyland (1999)). The populist response of the protesters in 2017 implied a more inclusive concept of 'the people' who deserve respect and social rights by the very fact of their citizenship, as if holding the state responsible for it previous promises.

The neoliberal inflection of the dominant state populism persisted in the following years and has been aggravated by the new coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The country's statistics of Covid-related deaths is almost certainly manipulated, but Belarus seems to have coped relatively well with the first wave of the pandemic due to a fast rollout of its medical resources. It has not been so much the epidemiological situation, as its economic and ideological consequences that have fuelled the current popular discontent. Although the authorities avoided a lockdown, economic support measures were introduced late into the pandemic, which put the main burden of the economic hardships onto workers (Artiukh 2020b). While businesses were offered deferrals on interest payments and other mitigating measures, not only were there no additional payments to supplement falling wages of the workers, but employers were given the right to temporarily transfer them to other jobs or to another employer on short notice. People's incomes also suffered from forced part-time work and forced vacations.

Throughout this pandemic conjuncture, which coincided with the presidential campaign, the discourse of the incumbent authorities sounded dismissive of the constituency. President Lukashenka followed the rhetoric of his right-wing populist colleague Bolsonaro in downplaying the dangers of the novel coronavirus, trivializing the work of the healthcare services and even blaming the victims of the Covid-19 (Schipani et al. 2020). The incumbent president's trusted representative dismissed the economic fallout of the pandemic aggravated by the insufficient economic support

measures: 'A man (*muzhyk*) must earn money. If one job is not enough, take one and a half, if this is not enough take two or three jobs' (*Vechernii Bobruisk* 2020).

By mid-June, after extremely successful campaigns of the opposition candidates, the incumbent president's rhetoric shifted. During a briefing on current political issues,[3] he used the phrase 'these bourgeois need to be brought to their senses,' allegedly referring to private employers threatening to fire their workers if they don't sign up in support of an opposition leader. This sounded as if the president was speaking a long-forgotten language – the language of his first presidential term, when he was still treating 'the people' as unconditionally deserving social rights. Prime minister Halouchanka visited one of the largest car factories, MAZ, and promised to support industrial production. An idea of the affordable rental housing has been revitalized after 7 years of talks. The president started touring the country together with Kachanava, a former head of the presidential administration and the current speaker of the parliament, and meeting local officials, workers' collectives, and even selected opposition-minded activists.[4]

This was a start of the electoral race under the theme of the 'socialist' mid-90s. However, this nostalgic coalition-building did not guarantee a secure victory if the votes were to be counted fairly: state-owned enterprises and farms could provide 30% of the votes at best, while those employed in trade and services as well as the half a million 'social parasites', who were the most affected by the pandemic, were not expected to be so easily mobilized to vote for the incumbent. President Lukashenka's actual election program, which appeared too late into the campaign and seemed to be written carelessly, was the ultimate signal that he lost his original populist skills. The only welfare innovation was an initiative to speed up rental housing construction, although this idea had first been launched in 2013. Most of the program consisted in what the president would not do: no shock therapy, no medical reform, keep affordable (but not free) education.

As the positive ideological content of the president's populist discourse dissipated, the content of who counted as 'the people' started shrinking. After the first weeks of the protests the president started to increasingly appeal to the special police forces and the army as the most deserving elements of 'the people'. After his failed visit to MZKT vehicle factory,[5] where he was booed by the workers, he started appearing more often accompanied by the special police forces. The culmination of this

securitization of 'the people' was his arrival on a helicopter to his palace during one of the protests. He appeared in military uniform carrying a rifle and, instead of addressing the protesting crowd that gathered outside his residence, whom he called 'rats.' he greeted and thanked the riot police.[6]

Meanwhile, if Belarus' traditional opposition failed to appropriate the populist demands of the 2017 protests, the newly emergent candidates' electoral campaign of the summer 2020 had a clear imprint of that 'people's populism' from 2017. The presidential candidate and a former blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, whose wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia became the face of the opposition after he had been imprisoned, continued the activity of his fellow social media activist Maksim Filipovich,[7] who gave voice to the protesters against the 'social parasitism' tax in 2017. Tsikhanouski's Youtube channel '*Strana dl'a zhizni*'[8] ('A country to live in') featured videos of himself touring Belarus and meeting the 'simple people' from all walks of life: individual entrepreneurs, opposition politicians, pensioners, and workers. Himself a small entrepreneur who started in the 'wild capitalist' 1990s, he articulated the popular grievances in a characteristically rude and macho language that was supposed to convey how average Belarusians would express their discontent with the policies of the powers that be.[9] Importantly, he avoided the divisive rhetoric of the traditional nationalist opposition that led to their political marginalization: he spoke Russian and had business ties in the Russian Federation, which led to conspiracy theories accusing him of promoting foreign interests.

The main themes of the 2017 protests, the demands of dignity and economic inclusion, thus entered the narratives of the opposition during the electoral campaign. These narratives picked up on Lukashenka's disdain for his voters, his derogatory phrases about 'a lazy, spoiled people' (Govsha 2019), and asserted an inter-class popular unity under the banner of the 'I/We are the 97%' slogan.[10] Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia's talk on the national TV[11] re-enacted these themes: she said her husband listened to 'simple people' who live in dire conditions while their bosses drive expensive cars, and that's why he was put in jail. In this address Tsikhanouskaia portrayed the Belarusian authorities as an abusive husband who 'spent all your money while you were working, and then demands praise for it.' After complaints about the closure of enterprises and contracting economy, she presented an image of a better country with higher wages, better jobs, and decent pensions.

It sounded as if the challenger had returned to the incumbent's electoral programme from 1994 and pledged to deliver on his promises.

Similarly to Navalnyi, who has been challenging Putin's authority by a populist reordering of the dominant stability discourse (Lassila 2016), Tsikhanouskaia challenged the Belarusian leader on his terrain of the 'social contract.' A week after Tsikhanouskaia's televised address, the rally in support of the joint opposition team gathered a record-breaking audience of 25,000 to 63,000 people according to different estimates. This was the largest opposition event since the late nineties and the largest electoral rally ever, given that the incumbent president abstained from organizing rallies in his support up until a week after the election day – and even then he managed to gather only 7,000-15,000 supporters.[12] Opposition rallies have been happening in various regional locations, surpassing the geographic scale of the 'non-parasite' protests of 2017. The crowd seems to be diverse ideologically and socially, united by the sheer protest mood, also reminding of the protests of three year ago. And this was despite the recent detention of the Russian mercenaries allegedly on their way to destabilize the country. Opposition supporters held banners in solidarity with the anti-governmental protesters in Khabarovsk, Russia. There was a certain similarity between these two protests, as both of them were ideologically fluid, motivated by the rejection of the central authorities, and united around former members of the ruling elite with a clear populist appeal. Official and unofficial flags of Belarus were held together, a rare sight in the opposition rallies before 2017.

Commentators sympathetic to the opposition cause have noted this rhetorical symmetry. An exiled politician and former Belarusian MP sensed the same popular enthusiasm for Tsikhanouskaia as he witnessed during Lukashenka's first victorious electoral campaign in 1994: "The last time such activity was present in 1994: […] people marched and marched, wearing festive clothes, [chanting] 'For our Sasha![13]'" Another opposition member from the old generation, chief editor of *Salidarnasts'* online newspaper, compared Tsikhanouskaia to Lukashenka in the context of post-electoral protests, noting that both of them 'live in worlds of their own': Lukashenka believes he has 80% support and Tsikhanouskaia believes she only 'voiced what Belarusian people were asking for' (Starikevich 2020). Echoing this assessment, Ihar Liashchenia, the first Belarusian diplomat to support the electoral protests, said in an interview that Tsikhanouskaia's team was exaggerating the popular support, which reminded him of Lukashenka's administration's alleged detachment from reality (Nasha Niva and Lishchenia 2020). Finally, philosopher Viacheslav Bobrovich, summing up the year 2020, defined the political gist of it as

'appropriation of the people': 'In general, if in the past the authorities tried to appropriate the people, this year both parts of Belarusian society are increasingly doing this.'[14]

After the contested election results were announced on August 9, Tsikhanouskaia positioned herself as a place-holder that condensed the will of the people before they make a substantial decision in free and fair elections. She denied being a politician on numerous occasions, as if shunning this role out of fear of being associated with the discredited 'political class,' which is typical of the populist discourse (Müller 2014, 43). She, similarly to Lukashenka, represented herself as a reluctant leader chosen by the fate to lead 'the people' in exceptional times. In an interview to the New Yorker, she summarized her populist message succinctly:

> I write [describing myself] 'leader of democratic Belarus.' I've decided not to identify myself as the President-elect, because I feel that I don't have the moral authority to do so. […] My role is no more and no less important than that of any Belarusian today—it's just that the Belarusian people have given me the right to speak for them on the world stage and to make certain decisions. We keep in constant touch with people in Belarus—students, teachers, factory workers, doctors and nurses—to ensure that we know what they are feeling and what they want.[15]

Thus, Tsikhanouskaia appeared simultaneously as one of the average Belarusians ('I would like to fry meatballs') and a provisional leader not needing any mediation, representing 'the people' both to themselves and outside the country. Indeed, Tsikhaouskaia was perceived as an interim leader by the population: an online-based poll conducted in January 2021 showed that only 4% of the surveyed thought she would make the best president, far behind Lukashenka or a number of other opposition candidates, although over half of the surveyed voted for her in the elections.[16] Although the opposition committed to restoring legitimacy of the government and introducing rules-based order in the country, this liberal-democratic agenda was indefinitely postponed to the times after the victory over the 'regime.'

This underdog populist appeal of the united opposition's leader had a broad resonance among the disgruntled population. Researchers have noted that the 2020 mobilizations, rather than following the established division between the official and the alternative memory cultures, have combined idioms and visual references from both, thereby re-appropriating

selected official symbolism (Bekus 2021). In doing this, the protest culture has mirrored a post-2014 trend in the official cultural policies that appropriated elements of the nationalist narrative (Kazharski 2021, 4–5).

Examples of these are the re-appropriation of the white-red-white flag and borrowing the elements of the Great Patriotic War narrative in support of the protest cause. Since the first protest demos took place around the Stella monument in Minsk, which is dedicated to the memory of the Great Patriotic War, the opposition movement started using WWII-related imagery to signify themselves as 'the people'. The Great Patriotic War as the 'People's War' has been a central pillar of the official populism since 1995. This is the most evident case where 'the people' have been contested on the terrain of the official memory politics. Thus, one of the leaders of the protest, Maryia Kalesnikava, has been portrayed as 'the Motherland' from the famous WWII banner. Protesters referred to themselves as 'partisans' even before the elections, but this metaphor gained a broad currency during the post-electoral demonstrations. '*Belaruskiy kiberpartisan*' (Belarusian cyber-partisan) was the name of a telegram channel involved in the hacking of the websites of Belarusian authorities.

An illustration to this populist moment was the lyrics of the song titled "We are not the 'little people,'" that appeared on the peak of the protests and encapsulated this popular-populist re-appropriation:

> We are not cattle, herd, and cowards,
> We are living people, Belarusians,
> With faith in our hearts, we keep our ranks closed,
> The flag of freedom is over our heads.[17]

However, the song that became emblematic of the 2020 protests was '*Peremen'* ('Changes') by the Soviet-era rock-star Viktor Tsoi. It was an excellent soundtrack for a populist 'thin ideology,' without a clear political message and references to divisive cultural or nationalist symbolism and with a truly popular appeal: it has been adored for decades in poor provincial neighborhoods as well as among metropolitan intellectuals. Tsoi himself refused to interpret this composition as a protest anthem: it was, he said, rather about psychological internal transformation. In the 1980s, however, it was perceived as a clear political message. Gorbachev even mentioned Tsoi's song in a positive manner in one of his interviews in 1985. People remember hearing it during the putsch attempt in 1991, and since 2008 the song has become an unofficial anthem of several

Russian opposition groups. 'Changes, that's what our hearts demand' was heard during the opposition protests of 2011-2012; it quickly spread to Belarus in 2011, where it was performed during the 'silent protests' of 2011. It was even heard in Ukraine's Maidan in 2014, although the song was more popular among anti-Maidan and pro-Russian protesters. It is reported that the song was appropriated both by the pro-government and various anti-government groups, including communists. It was also performed by various pop-artists along with becoming a staple song for self-taught working class youth.

5. In Search of 'The Other'

Authoritarian populism that has secured legitimacy to president Lukashenka since he was first elected in 1994 depended on the designation of the political and social 'other,' from whom 'the people' needed to be protected. In a classical case of populist electoral campaign, Lukashenka gained an overwhelming majority of the votes in 1994 due to his strong anti-corruption rhetoric. Since then, the populist slot of the 'corrupt elites' has expanded to include supposedly foreign-funded opposition politicians, disloyal bureaucrats and businesspeople who have been put in jail on corruption charges. Besides, as shown above, the president's rhetoric has been successfully 'othering' the elements of the very 'pure people,' starting with the 'lazybones' and the 'social parasites' in 2011-2017 and sizably expanding in 2020.

In parallel, if the opposition rhetoric imitated the core elements of the dominant authoritarian populism in a struggle to reappropriate 'the people,' this opposition populism could not have avoided their own othering move. Even though the protest movement and its aspiring political leaders may have talked about representing the totality of the people, their self-identification also depends on appointing 'the other' at the bottom, not only the corrupt politicians at the top. Throughout the political crisis of 2020, the struggle for who 'the pure people' are hinged on the procedures of purification amply demonstrated by both the Belarusian authorities and the opposition.

The incumbent president stressed his purification procedure shortly before the election day. In an interview with a Ukrainian journalist, Lukashenka revealed his own version of the sociology of the protests against him. According to him, 20-21% of the population or

300,000 – 500,000 people never voted for him. The pandemic-related measures have exacerbated the situation. He mentioned separate categories: 6,000-7,000 entrepreneurs in Brest who "live in luxurious houses […] travel to Poland to sell something, and now with coronavirus they can't." Individual entrepreneurs who cannot bring stuff from Russia and now don't want to get jobs. 60,000 guest workers who have returned and now "they sit and wait for something".[18']

This designation of several categories of the country's population as 'internal others' continue the previous trend of looking for 'social parasites' that started in Belarus in 2015. Around this time, the president tossed the number 300,000 as the quantity of those who are not willing to work officially and pay taxes. This category accrued a moral dimension in addition to the purely economic one, as the 'social parasites' were thrown out from the social contract as undeserving citizens. It is precisely the moral dimension that persisted throughout the 2020 protests as new categories were added to people who could not be accused of not working or paying taxes.

In the first weeks of August the authorities referred to the protesters as alcoholics, hooligans, drug addicts, prostitutes, and loafers. One of the first casualties of the police violence, Taraikovsky, was described by a high-ranking police officer as "a drunkard and an idiot."[19] However, as new social groups became visible in street demonstrations – among them those who were deemed 'the deserving ones' by the dominant populist ideology: medical workers, pensioners, athletes, teachers – the official discourse turned from moral condemnation to securitization. Not only were the participants being represented as marginals, but also as pawns guided by the West, primarily from Lithuania and Poland.

The ideologized historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War was mobilized to characterize the protesters as both morally corrupt and politically alien. The red-white-red flag, which was the official flag of Belarus between 1991 and 1995, was designated as a fascist symbol, first ideologically and later legally. In the latest stage of the protests, in November-December 2021, the political leadership of the protests was labelled a criminal organization and many protesters were charged with terrorism.

The process of 'othering' was also going on among those dissatisfied with the authorities. As it was shown in an analysis of the Ukrainian Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014, the self-description of Maidan protesters as representatives of an inclusive civil nation without regional

or ethnic divisions nevertheless implied a series of discursive procedures to exclude the passive, Soviet-nostalgic, uneducated and regionally defined Others (Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020, 235–39). However, if this 'thin' civic-nationalist ideology was 'thickened' by the ethnic-nationalist symbols and narratives (Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020, 234), Belarusian protest movement exhibited a different vector of othering.

In response to the official narrative that equated the protesters with Nazi collaborationists, the 2020 protesters turned the accusation against the authorities. Security agencies involved in the dispersal and detention of the protesters were called 'punishers' (*karateli, karniki*) in reference to anti-partisan fascist reprisals during WWII. Administrators of the NEXTA Telegram channel admitted to consciously introducing this language in their coverage of the protest activities. This usage spread to most other widely used opposition Telegram channels (Kazharski 2021, 8).

The main designations of 'the other' among the protesters are not of ethnic or regional character, but can be identified at the intersection between the 'corrupt political' figure and the realm of civic society. The main figures of 'the other' acquired the labels of '*prykorytniki*' and '*iabat'ki*'. The trope of '*prykorytniki*' (those close to the trough) gained traction during the vote counting procedure. Members of the electoral commissions who were suspected of committing fraud were called like this. Further on, this category expanded to cover civil servants loyal to the authorities in power.

A separate subtype of '*prykorytniki*' was '*siloviki*' (security officers). They reportedly received bonuses and were totally loyal to those in power. Their personal details have been disclosed on opposition telegram channels, which led to campaigns of harassment against the law enforcement officers and sometimes their relatives. The rhetoric on '*siloviki*' draws heavily on the appropriation of the Great Patriotic War narrative, where Belarusian present-day riot police is equated with the Nazi punishers (*karateli, karniki*) active in Belarus during the WWII (see previous chapter).

'*Iabat'ki*' joined the protest lexicon after the alleged Russian PR specialists arrived in Minsk to help boost the president's authority. Several large gatherings in support of the president happened under the slogan '*Ia/My Bat'ka*' ('I/We are Daddy'). The awkward design of the campaign logo made the slogan appear similar to a popular swearword. This connotation was inscribed in the slur '*iabat'ki*' that designated rather more a willful supporter of the Belarusian president than someone who participates in

the distribution of benefits from the patron-client channels. The moral connotations of '*iabat'ki*' were not dissimilar to those used by the official discourse to characterize the participants of the protests: lazy, backward, corrupt.

Thus, as the protests petered out and the authorities launched a powerful counter-offensive, Belarusian society emerged as deeply split. I have observed an asymmetry in the populist-ideological directionality of the authorities and the protesters. If in the initial stages of the political crisis it was the Belarusian authorities who started with the discourse of othering while the protesters stressed unity in an attempt to appropriate the signifier of 'the people,' during the months of the political reaction the populism of the opposition lost its unifying drive and gave way to the divisive 'othering.' This coincided with the objective and subjective demobilization of the protest activity, including in the social media. In addition to the immense repressive apparatus of the state, the fading of the initial unifying populist idioms of the opposition movement contributed to its demise.

Conclusions

The six-month mass protest mobilization sparked by the dissatisfaction with the results of the Belarusian presidential elections in August 2020 was the largest wave of political protests that the country saw since it gained independence in 1991. Despite its resemblance to similar electoral political protests in other post-Soviet countries (often referred to as 'color revolutions'), the 2020 Belarusian protests exhibited a series of distinguishing features that set them apart. The protests were not concentrated in one geographical/historical area or restricted to one social group, they were not sponsored by particular political or business interests groups, and lacked a coherent leadership, they did not ground themselves in a particular ethnic or linguistic identity.

These distinguishing features suggest that the 2020 political protests bear similarities with those social protests that happened in Belarus during the period of economic stagnation in 2011-2017. The largest of the latter, the mass mobilization in protest against the law of social parasitism, happened in 2017 and was motivated by the dissatisfaction of the population with the social policies of the government. The ideological framing of this social protest could be characterized as grassroots populism

that challenges the official populist ideology. I have argued in this article that the 2020 political protests were similarly motivated, and carried by grassroot populist protest against the official authoritarian populism in its neoliberal inflexion. This, as I have argued, accounts for the record numbers and social diversity of the protest, as opposed to the previous three decades of political protest activity.

It is true that the 2020 protests started with a legal claim regarding the integrity of the voter count and was initially framed in liberal-democratic terms. Thus, one may object to the populist nature of the protest movement. However, the analysis of the documents issued by the opposition leaders and the rank-and-file participants in the protests attest to the primary importance of the struggle over the redefinition of the categories of 'the people,' 'the corrupt elite,' and the internal 'other.' The liberal-democratic and legalistic goals of the 2020 protest movement are indefinitely postponed until after the victory of 'the pure people' over the 'corrupt elite' and the purging of 'the other,' who are defined as the morally corrupt '*prykorytniki*,' the criminal '*karateli*,' and the marginal '*iabat'ki*.'

The dominant theories of democratization in the post-Soviet countries that focus on the patron-client networks of the ruling elites and set their hopes in the liberal-democratic strivings of the civil society may benefit from a closer look at the ambivalent nature of populism as a 'thin ideology.' The struggle for the redefinition of the people is a powerful impetus behind the movements in favour of substantive democracy, but it is fraught with dangerous potentialities of a prolonged civil conflict.

NOTES

1.   The most numerous political protests are included; data for 1996-2006 are taken from (Bulhakaŭ 2011), data for 2010-2020 are author's calculations based on media reports.

2.   Upper estimate of participants in a single event in the capital city

3.   Reported by the Belarusian state information agency Belta, June 10, 2020, https://www.belta.by/president/view/nikomu-ne-dolzhny-pozvolit-obidet-prostogo-cheloveka-lukashenko-poruchil-proverit-prichiny-uvolnenij-v-394179-2020/, accessed November 14, 2020.

4.   Reported in *Nasha Niva*, June 18, 2020, https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=253764, accessed November 14, 2020.

5.   President Lukashenka arrived at the Minsk Wheeled Motor Traction Vehicle Plant (MZKT) on August 17, after a week of labour unrest here and in several other large plants. He descended onto the inner courtyard in a helicopter and started his speech with threats to fire those who protested. At some point he heard people shouting from the crowd 'Go away!' (his full speech is available on Zerkalo's youtube channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7mWrLV7K70, accessed July 10, 2021).

6.   Reported by RIA Novosti, August 24, 2020, https://ria.ru/20200824/1576229889.html, accessed August 25, 2020.

7.   Curiously, Fillipovich commented on the opposition activity with scepticism. In his regular Youtube blogs he expresses suspicion that people are lured into protests in order to get detained. True to his populist style, he spread bits and pieces of a conspiracy theory according to which Belarusian authorities are behind the opposition.

8.   Tsikhanouski's Youtube-channel was set up in March 2019. At this moment, 'Strana dlia zhizni' is run by a team of his collaborators based abroad and mostly features interviews with opposition politicians and experts. As of July 10, 2021 it is accessible at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFPC7r3tWWXWzUIROLx46mg.

9.   At the start of his campaign, Tsikhanouski came up with the slogan 'Stop the cockroach!,' comparing the president with an insect in a reference to Korney Chukosvki's children's poem. The literary reference was lost on many, while the visual dehumanizing depiction dominated the first months of opposition campaigns.

10. This slogan stems from several internet-surveys conducted by non-governmental media in May 2020. According to the surveys by a popular internet-portal Onliner.by and an opposition-minded online magazine 'Nasha Niva', the incumbent president Lukashenka was supported by 3% of the audience. Although these media outlets did not claim that these surveys were representative of the whole population, being instead heavily biased towards the supporters of the opposition candidates, the National Academy

of Sciences of Belarus declared them 'political surveys' that required a state authorization to be conducted and published. Among the supporters of the opposition candidates, this quasi-sociological result turned into a tongue-in-cheek meme 'Sasha 3%', referring to the presidents' Aliaksandr 'Sasha' Lukashenka low support levels. By the logic of creating a populist discursive cleavage, the opposition supporters called themselves the 97%, possibly with a reference to the 'We are the 99%' of the Occupy Movement.

[11] As a presidential candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia was offered airtime on the national TV channel 'Belarus 1'. Her second address, which I am referring to in this article, was broadcast on July 21, 2020, but has been subsequently removed from the TV channel's Youtube profile. As of July 10, 2021, it is accessible on the Youtube-channel of the opposition think-tank Reform.by at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_LyuTI-05w.

[12] These are the estimates of the journalists. The attendance announced by the authorities was 65000 (according to *Versia,* August 17, 2020, https://versia.ru/miting-v-podderzhku-lukashenko-ne-smog-obognat-po-chislennosti-mnogotysyachnuyu-akciyu-ego-protivnikov-u-stely-v-minske).

[13] From the facebook page of Siarhey Navumchyk, Facebook/Siarhiej Navumchyk, August 9, 2020.

[14] From the facebook page of Viacheslav Bobrovich, Facebook.com/vbobrovich, January 2, 2021.

[15] Gessen, Masha. "Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia is overcoming her fears," The New Yorker, December 13, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-is-overcoming-her-fears, accessed January 20, 2020.

[16] The survey was conducted between 14 and 20 January 2021 using the Computer Assisted Web Interview method among 926 participants representing the urban population in Belarus. The survey sample may be biased towards the supporters of the political opposition. The presentation of the results can be found here https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f48Bx2saI1VpWDhSGPdqanfrqhddrw6x/view (accessed July 10, 2021).

[17] Tor Band, "*My – ne 'narodets'*" ('We are not little people'), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rai9tQCrRsQ, accessed on November 10, 2020.

[18] 'V gostiakh u Gordona', August 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5UmsPFMUaw, accessed November 10, 2020.

[19] From an alleged audio intercepted by opposition activists, reported in Mediazona-Belarus, January 15, 2021, https://mediazona.by/article/2021/01/15/karpenkov, accessed February 2, 2021.

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