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Symbols of the Belarusian Resistance after the 2020 Presidential Election

Zarys treści: Protesty, które wybuchły w sierpniu 2020 r. na Białorusi, były największym protestem społecznym przeciwko władzom od początku powstania państwa. Ich cechą wyróżniającą było bezprecedensowe użycie symboli sprzeciwu przez ich uczestników. Od pierwszych dni protestujący wyróżniali się wysokim poziomem świadomości wykorzystania symboli oraz umiejętną adaptacją odniesień historycznych i kulturowych. Uciekali się do zapożyczania symboli wcześniej używanych w kraju lub za granicą, wykorzystując pamięć zbiorową i tworząc własny system symboliki. Białoruskie społeczeństwo wyszło z protestów znacznie osłabione. Liderzy protestów albo trafili do kolonii karnych, albo musieli uciekać za granicę. Jednak na arenie międzynarodowej reakcja Białorusinów zmieniła ich wizerunek. Przed sierpniem 2020 r. oceniano ich jako uległych i biernych. Po nim ujawnili się jako naród wytrwały i kreatywny.

Outline of Content: The protests that erupted in August 2020 in Belarus constituted the largest public outcry against the authorities since the beginning of the state's establishment. Their distinguishing feature was their participants' unprecedented use of symbols of defiance. From the first days, protesters stood out for a high level of awareness of the use of symbols and skilful adaptation of historical and cultural references. They resorted to borrowing symbols previously used at home or abroad, using collective memory and producing their own system of symbolism. Belarusian society emerged from the protests significantly weakened. Protest leaders either ended up in penal colonies or had to flee abroad. Internationally, however, the reaction of Belarusians has transformed their image. Before August 2020, they were judged subservient and passive. After that, they revealed themselves as a tenacious and creative nation.

Słowa kluczowe: opór społeczny, protest, Białoruś, symbolika protestu, wybory na Białorusi w 2020 r., Alaksandr Łukaszenka

Keywords: civil resistance, protest, Belarus, symbols of protest, presidential elections in 2020, Aleksandr Lukaszenka

Introduction

"Protest has become a part of our life, as integral as work or time with family. […] Each march is a reminder that Belarusians will not surrender".[1] These were the words spoken in December 2020 by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who, according to most independent calculations, was the victorious rival of Alexander Lukashenko in the presidential election of August 2020. The phrase 'Belarusians will not surrender' encapsulates a critical shift in the country's societal consciousness. For decades, Belarusian society was perceived as passive, a product of both authoritarian control and a lack of national identity distinct from its Soviet past. Tsikhanouskaya's words, therefore, highlight political resistance and a reawakening of national self-awareness.

Since the announcement of the election's results, which most Belarusians and Western countries considered falsified, protest actions have been organised throughout the whole country. They lasted from the election's day till January 2021, with significantly diminishing participation in the last weeks. The sustained protest period suggests a level of mobilisation and social resilience rarely seen in the post-Soviet sphere.

This wave of protests constituted the largest social outburst against the authorities since establishing the independent Belarus. Therefore, it is important to analyse why this particular moment in Belarusian history led to such a massive mobilisation. A closer examination reveals that the strategic use of symbols played a crucial role in uniting a previously fragmented society. Symbols acted as a unifying force, bridging generational and ideological divides within the opposition.

In light of contemporary research on social resistance, which emphasizes the importance of symbols as mobilisation tools, the Belarusian protests serve as a valuable example of this phenomenon. Indeed, when evaluating the effectiveness of protests globally, the role of visual and performative symbols cannot be overstated. The scale of this phenomenon prompts us to analyse the Belarusian symbols of the protests and examine their sources. Did their creators draw from the past, particularly from common identity roots? Or did they instead look to the future, similarly to the demonstrators on the Maidan Square in Kyiv, using the symbols of the European Union? The juxtaposition of historical symbols with those looking forward is key to understanding the complexity of the Belarusian protests. Did Belarusians reach for the sources of Belarusian culture, or for universal signs already proven successful in other countries?

The multiplicity and intensity of the use of symbols leads to reflection on the dynamics taking place among them – were they introduced interchangeably, or did they complement each other and occur in parallel?

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[1] C. Turp-Balazs, 'In Belarus, protest has become a part of everyday life', 7 Dec. 2020, https://emerging-europe.com/news/in-belarus-protest-has-become-a-part-of-everyday-life/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

It is thus reasonable to select the most frequently used symbolism and find its sources, assuming that they constituted a symbolic melange unprecedented both in Belarus and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. However, this does not mean that it was randomly selected.

The analysis of Belarusian resistance symbols becomes a study of their cultural roots and an attempt to understand how the conscious use of symbolism can affect the dynamics and success of a social movement. The conscious use of symbolism in the Belarusian protests reveals a movement that was acutely aware of the power of image and narrative in shaping public opinion. The symbols acted as vehicles for collective identity and as tools for communicating with both the domestic audience and the international community.

This novelty effect was reflected in intense coverage in all media, especially social media. The analysis of media messages – from official channels, primarily television and press, as well as recorded by private individuals – usually observers or participants of events, is the basic material that has been analysed in terms of symbols, their message and content in the period from the beginning of the protests to the end 2020. When looking for their sources, a comparative method was used, allowing them to be related both to the historical symbols of Belarus and those used during protests in other countries of the region, and even going far beyond its territory.

Theoretical Foundations of Non-Violent Resistance in Belarus

The aforementioned novelty effect and the attention that the protests in Belarus attracted resulted not only in extended media coverage but also in scientific research, which focused on political dynamics, mass mobilisation, the instrumental role of digital media, and women's participation. Sofie Bedford explored the erosion of authoritarian stability and pointed out how the unprecedented mobilisation in 2020 destabilised the pillars of Lukashenko's power, namely repression, co-optation, and legitimation.[2]

A framework to understand the emergence of new subjectivities within Belarusian society during the protests was provided by Nelly Bekus and Mischa Gabowitsch;[3] They suggested that this upheaval may have lasting impacts on state-society relations. Complementarily, Aliaksei Kazharski highlighted the horizontal solidarity and mass mobilisation that contributed significantly to nation-building during the protests.[4]

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[2] S. Bedford, 'The 2020 presidential election in Belarus: Erosion of authoritarian stability and re-politicization of society', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 49, no. 5 (2021), pp. 808–19.

[3] N. Bekus, M. Gabowitsch, 'Introduction to the special issue on protest and authoritarian reaction in Belarus: New subjectivities and beyond', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2023), pp. 1–21.

[4] A. Kazharski, 'Belarus' New political nation? 2020 anti-authoritarian protests as identity building', *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2021), pp. 69–79.

Furthermore, the cultural and political processes of this mobilisation were analysed by Bekus, who linked it to thirty years of nation-building efforts.[5]

Women played a central role in the protests, which Elena Gapova describes as a "revolution with a female face".[6] Numerous scholars, among them Natallia Paulovich and Vasil Navumau and Olga Matveieva, have focused on the agency of female protesters and how their presence redefined Belarusian gender dynamics.[7]

While these works cover the broad political and social dimensions of the protests, a gap remains in understanding how symbols were implemented by Belarusian protesters. This aspect of the resistance, which underscores the strategic deployment of symbols to challenge authoritarianism, deserves further exploration.

The mentioned scientific publications align with the trend of literature devoted to non-violent resistance. This surge in academic interest can be seen as part of a broader analytical movement that seeks to understand not just the tactics of civil struggles but the deeper socio-political dynamics that enable such movements to sustain themselves over time. The field of non-violent struggle has been developing since the 1980s, with special emphasis on the strategy undertaken by the protesters, which is considered an essential condition for success.[8] Gene Sharp's three-volume work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* became canonical, forming the initial theoretical framework of the phenomenon of protest and resistance, based on his vision of the theory of power. Sharp's framework, which emphasises the strategic use of non-violent methods, is particularly relevant to the Belarusian context, where a significant variety of them was implemented, and a great part of them was based on symbols and their meanings.

In the late twentieth century, Sharp's approach resulted in many publications on the subject, which primarily documented and analysed successful protests. These publications provide first critical insights into how resistance movements harness the power of collective identity and symbols to sustain momentum, a dynamic clearly observable in the Belarusian case. These works include publications by Stephen Zunes, Lester Kurtz and Sarah Beth Asher or Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall.[9]

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[5] N. Bekus, 'Reassembling society in a nation-state: History, language, and identity discourses of Belarus', *Nationalities Papers*, no. 51 (2023), pp. 98–113.

[6] E. Gapova, 'Class, Agency, and Citizenship in Belarusian Protest', *Slavic Review*, vol. 80, no. 1 (2021), pp. 45–51.

[7] N. Paulovich, 'How feminist is the Belarusian revolution? Female agency and participation in the 2020 post-election protests', *Slavic Review*, vol. 80, no. 1 (2021), pp. 38–44; V. Navumau, O. Matveieva, 'The gender dimension of the 2020 Belarusian protest: Does female engagement contribute to the establishment of gender equality?', *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2021), pp. 1–19.

[8] Sh.E. Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions. Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century* (Oxford, 2011), p. XII.

[9] *Nonviolent Social Movements. A Geographical Perspective*, ed. S. Zunes, S. B. Asher, L. Kurtz (Oxford, 1999); P. Ackerman, J. DuVall, *A Force More Powerful. A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, 2000). The latter book was the basis for an Emmy-nominated documentary series, as well as a video game designed for activists but also for use by researchers.

The first decade of the twenty-first century brought comparisons of non-violent protests that focused on the causes and circumstances of successful or unsuccessful confrontations. A prelude to this kind of analytical approach was a book by Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler.[10] Kurt Schock's book entitled *Unarmed Insurrections. People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* constitutes another valuable publication in this field. Its author considers the importance of flexibility and innovation as success factors in protests.[11] The protests in Belarus demonstrated this flexibility through their creative use of symbols, both in drawing on historical memory and adopting strategies seen in other non-violent movements. This adaptability underscores Schock's emphasis on the importance of innovation in non-violent movements.

The canonical literature on civil resistance also includes a collective work edited by Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash entitled "*Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*". Particularly noteworthy is the summary chapter written by Ash, which summarises the experiences and lessons important for the further development of this area of research.[12]

The book of Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman, *How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy*, significantly contributed to the development of research on nonviolent struggle, including the refutation of the thesis that violence is the only effective way to lead to political change. The authors analysed sixty-seven cases of non-violent overthrowing of authoritarian regimes between 1972 and 2002.[13] Karatnycky and Ackerman's conclusions directly apply to Belarus, where the protests – despite their failure to unseat Lukashenko – demonstrated the potential for long-term political change through sustained non-violent methods. Although unsuccessful in overthrowing the regime, the Belarusian protests contribute to this ongoing analysis of how non-violent methods play a role in long-term efforts toward political change. This underscores the idea that non-violent protests may not result in immediate victory but can lay the groundwork for future successes, a crucial aspect of protest theory that applies to the Belarusian case.

The most comprehensive comparison of the effectiveness of violent and non-violent campaigns was conducted by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, who analysed 323 campaigns between 1990 and 2006. Researchers found that

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[10] P. Ackerman, Ch. Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1994).

[11] K. Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections. People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis, 2004).

[12] T.G. Ash, 'A Century of Civil Resistance: Some Lessons and Questions', in: A. Roberts, T.G. Ash, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford, 2004).

[13] A. Karatnycky, P. Ackerman, *How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy* (New York: 2005).

non-violent campaigns were twice as likely to achieve their goal as violent campaigns (53 per cent versus 26 per cent).[14] Even though the Belarusian protests cannot be qualified as a success story, they offer a concrete example of Chenoweth and Stephan's findings, as the movement's commitment to non-violence allowed it to sustain widespread participation and gain international attention, even in the face of state violence.

The above-mentioned works, as well as many others, provide a theoretical and analytical basis for researching the protests that took place in Belarus in 2020. The Belarusian case highlights the need to study the interaction between strategy, symbolism, and societal engagement in non-violent movements. In the vast majority of these works, resistance participants' creativity is considered one of the basic success factors. This creativity is not merely a by-product of the protests but a strategic element, essential for maintaining momentum and adapting to evolving political circumstances. Its fundamental objective is to attract and keep as many people involved as possible. One of the manifestations of this invention is the sphere of symbols used by the protesters.

Starting from the beginning of the twenty-first century researchers began to pay more attention to symbols in protests and social campaigns. Previously, this topic was relatively rarely discussed, with few exceptions, such as the work of James M. Jasper.[15] He emphasises that symbols are not just static representations but are embedded within a movement's cultural and emotional fabric. Jasper discusses how movements creatively utilise symbols to communicate their values, beliefs, and grievances to both supporters and opponents. These symbols help unify participants, express the moral foundation of the protest, and often serve to create a collective identity.

Jasper views symbols as tools that connect the broader cultural frameworks to a movement's specific actions and tactics. This process involves taking well-known cultural elements and repurposing them to fit the narrative of the protest. In this way, symbols are dynamic and can evolve, contributing to social movements' strategic and cultural dimensions.

In her article, Trisha Goodnow concentrated on the effectiveness of symbols in protests and noted that it depends on their ability to be easily reproduced and their ambiguity, allowing them to be interpreted in various contexts.[16] In the case of Belarusian protests, the exact mechanisms that have been effectively employed in other movements worldwide can be observed. The increasing attention to the role of symbols in contemporary protests reflects a growing recognition of their

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[14] E. Chenoweth, M.J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works. The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, 2011), p. 7.

[15] J.M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest; Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago–London, 1997).

[16] T. Goodnow, 'On Black Panthers, Blue Ribbons, & Peace Signs: The Function of Symbols in Social Campaigns', *Visual Communication Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2006), p. 170.

power to mobilise and sustain resistance, particularly in the digital age, where visual and performative elements of protest can quickly gain global visibility.

The importance of the visual and symbolic spheres was widely discussed in the journal *Social Movements, Conflict and Change*, which devoted an entire issue to this theme in 2013.[17] It included new analytical concepts and case studies from various regions of the world. The analysis of symbolic messages in digital media is one of the main themes of *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*, which qualifies them as visual and performative forms of protest.[18]

Preceding Conditions and Triggers of the Belarusian Protests

The first post-election protest in Belarus took place as planned on the evening of the election on 9 August 2020 at Victory Square in Minsk. Opposition circles had predicted the possibility of electoral fraud well before the election and accordingly made necessary preparations. This early preparation highlights a growing awareness among opposition groups of the authoritarian tactics used by the regime. By anticipating fraud, these groups could mobilise quickly, demonstrating a key aspect of non-violent resistance – the ability to adapt to and pre-empt state actions. As in the following days, on the election evening, the security forces, armed with shields and clubs, attacked the gathering people. Attacks were carried out not only on protesters but also on passers-by.

On 13 August, women joined the protests *en masse*. They had been present since the onset of the demonstrations, albeit not in such significant numbers. Typically, they were attired in white and red garments and carried flowers, which they endeavoured to offer to the officers. The entry of women into the protest arena prevented the protests from collapsing.[19] This shift underscores the strategic role of women in protests – their participation not only broadens the social base of the movement but also reinforces the movement's non-violent message.

The first mass anti-Lukashenko rally in Minsk took place on 16 August 2020, at the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War on Victory Avenue in Minsk. An estimated 200,000 Belarusians attended the event. On 1 September

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[17] *Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements*, ed. N. Doerr, A. Mattoni, S. Teune, 'Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change' Series, vol. 35 (Leeds, 2013).

[18] *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*, ed. A. McGarry, I. Erhart, H. Eslen-Ziya, O. Jenzen, and U. Korkut (Amsterdam, 2019). It is worth adding that in recent years, individual forms of protest have also begun to be analysed, e.g. graffiti as carriers of symbols of resistance, see G. Marche, 'Expressivism and resistance: Graffiti as an infrapolitical form of protest against the war on terror', *Revue Française d'Études Americaines*, vol. 131, no. 1 (2012), pp. 78–96.

[19] S. Sierakowski, 'Belarus Uprising: The Making of a Revolution', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2020), pp. 5–16, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/belarus-uprising-the-making-of-a-revolution/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

on the first day of the new academic year, students in many cities in Belarus joined the protests.[20] Over 33,000 people were detained and prosecuted during the peak of the anti-Lukashenko rebellion, i.e. from May 2020 to the end of 2020. Criminal charges were filed against 900 individuals involved in the events.[21]

This spontaneous self-organisation of society aligns with Sharp's theories on the strategic importance of collective action in non-violent resistance.[22] The involvement of various groups, including women, students and workers, reflects the broad participation essential for sustaining a movement, as noted by many theorists, including Chenoweth and Stephan.[23] This strategic avoidance of violence helped maintain the legitimacy of the protests both within the country and in the eyes of the international community, a critical factor in sustaining long-term resistance movements.

The unprecedented action of the self-organising society in Belarus, taking place outside the power structures, could be observed already during the outbreak of the first wave of the Covid-19 epidemic. Unlike Western European leaders, the Belarusian state authorities, led by the president, ignored the scale of the threat. Lukashenko referred to any reports of a pandemic as "mass psychosis" and recommended that Belarusians respond to them by drinking vodka, going to the sauna and driving tractors.[24] He openly mocked those who raised concerns about the virus, dismissing the threat by declaring: "No one will die from the coronavirus

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[20] Some of them started a blockade of university buildings, and some Minsk students went to the Ministry of Education.

[21] K. Glod, 'Belarus's New Age of Civic Activism Is Changing the Country', 22 Feb. 2021, https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/02/22/belarus-s-new-age-of-civic-activism-is-changing-country-pub-83904 (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024). Among the publications summarising the scale of repression carried out during and after the detentions, see 'Seeking Justice Stories of Violence in Belarus August 2020 through the eyes of Belarusian media', https://belarusinfocus.pro/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Seeking_justice_web.pdf (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024); S. Malerius, 'Repressions reveal the ruthlessness of the Lukashenka regime', *New Eastern Europe*, no. 5 (2021), https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/09/12/repressions-reveal-the-ruthlessness-of-the-lukashenka-regime/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024); M. Chodownik, O. Marques, 'The essence of Belarusian solidarity', *New Eastern Europe*, no. 5 (2021), https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/09/12/the-essence-of-belarusian-solidarity/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024); C. Turp-Balazs, 'Impunity for perpetrators of torture in Belarus reinforces need for international justice', *Emerging Europe*, 1 Feb. 2021, https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/impunity-for-perpetrators-of-torture-in-belarus-reinforces-need-for-international-justice/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024). Police brutality has been documented in numerous photographs, including by female reporters, and will be presented in February 2021 at a museum in Vilnius, see 'The Belarus revolution: Fuelled by women, documented by women', *Emerging Europe*, 22 Feb. 2021, https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/the-belarus-revolution-fueled-by-women-documented-by-women/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[22] G. Sharp, *There are Realistic Alternatives* (Boston, 2003), p. 20.

[23] Chenoweth, Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, p. 40.

[24] Y. Serhan, 'What Belarus Learned From the Rest of the World', *Atlantic*, 26 Aug. 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/belaurus-protest-tactics-hong-kong/615454/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

in our country".[25] In this situation, volunteers dealt with the purchase of the necessary medical equipment and health care products for the medical staff, organising fundraising campaigns.

This earlier self-organisation during the pandemic crisis laid the groundwork for the collective action seen during the protests. It revealed the capacity of Belarusian society to operate independently of the state, a key factor in non-violent resistance movements where decentralisation of organisation can be an asset against centralised authoritarian regimes. The shift from organising health-related actions to mobilising against electoral fraud illustrates the fluidity and resilience of a movement that is essential for its survival and growth, especially when faced with repression from the state.

Joint action in the fight against the epidemic and limiting its effects in the pre-election months, i.e. in the spring and in the first part of summer 2020, transformed and harmonised with the initiatives related to the campaigning of the opposition candidates. Compared to previous campaigns, these were completely new faces, not belonging to political parties associated with the former opposition. This time, the stage was taken by people previously little known as candidates – the founder of the very popular YouTube channel Strana dlya Zhizni (Country for Life), Sergei Tsikhanouski, the founder of the Belarusian Hi-Tech Park Valery Tsepkalo and the former head of Bielgazprombank Viktar Babaryka. After their imprisonment, Belarusians associated with them and supporting their candidacies began to prepare actions for the civic counting of votes. Having realised the scale of falsifications, they concentrated on a show of public opposition.[26]

To fully understand the scope of the 2020 protests, it is essential to recognise that they did not arise in isolation but were deeply rooted in Belarus's complex historical and cultural landscape. As a nation, Belarus has experienced long periods of foreign domination, which has influenced its national identity. For centuries, the territory was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which left a profound cultural mark.[27] After the partition of Poland in the late eighteenth century, Belarus became part of the Russian Empire, further entrenching its relationship with Russia. This historical

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[25] R. Noack, W. Glucroft, 'What's behind the Belarus protests?', *Washington Post*, 14 Aug. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/08/14/whats-behind-belarus-protests/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[26] Belarusians already had experience from earlier post-election protests. In 2006, they were organised by the youth organisations Zubr and Malady Front (Young Front). This wave of protests is sometimes referred to as the jeans or cornflower revolution. (I. Petz, 'The mood has changed', *Eurozine*, 3 Nov. 2020, https://www.eurozine.com/the-mood-has-changed/# [accessed: 10 Oct. 2024]). During this period, the tradition of gathering in the centre of Minsk on the 16th of each month was also initiated to protest and commemorate the mysterious disappearances of opposition activists, including Anatol Krasouski, on 16 September 1999, whose bodies have never been found.

[27] T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven–London, 2003).

context of being part of larger empires instilled a duality in the Belarusian identity, where both Western European influences and Russian connections coexist.[28]

In the twentieth century, Belarus's incorporation into the Soviet Union as the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) reinforced a Soviet identity that eclipsed pre-Soviet traditions. The use of Russian language and culture dominated, suppressing local Belarusian symbols, traditions, and the national language.[29] The Soviet regime promoted a centralised and collective identity that minimised Belarus's distinct cultural history. However, in moments of national awakening, such as during the short-lived independence of Belarus after World War I and later during the dissolution of the USSR in the 1990s, Belarusian national symbols such as the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms resurfaced as potent symbols of resistance and independence.[30]

Strategic Adaptation of Non-Violent Protest Methods in Belarus

The protests that broke out on the post-election evening on 9 August 2020 differed significantly from those previously undertaken in Belarus. Their first distinguishing feature was the unprecedented scale and the range of ways of expressing objections. The non-violent methods included, in particular, protest marches, rallies, demonstrations, chains created by people holding hands, protest letters, appeals to the authorities and the international community, strikes, including occupational strikes, refusal to pay for municipal services, cyberactivism, singing caresses, creating murals, etc. In line with Sharp's theories on non-violent resistance, the wide variety of these methods illustrates the creativity and adaptability that are crucial for sustaining a movement against an oppressive regime.[31]

The largest gatherings were held in pre-planned locations, such as the 16th August rally in front of the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War on Victory Avenue in Minsk, but also in spontaneously selected locations, such as the Pushkinskaya metro station in Minsk, where the police shot and killed Aleksander Taraikowski on 10 August. The use of spontaneous locations is an example of a decentralised organisation, where flexibility in choosing protest

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[28] N. Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative 'Belarusianness'* (Budapest, 2023).

[29] D.R. Marples, *Our Glorious Past: Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (New York, 2014).

[30] P.A. Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh, 2014). More about the history of Belarus, see *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. E. Korosteleva, I. Pertova, and A. Kudlenko (Abingdon, 2023); P. Hansbury, *Belarus in Crisis: From Domestic Unrest to the Russia-Ukraine War* (London, 2023); T. Stenstrom, *Belarus – A Silenced History; A Chronological Account from the Middle Ages to the War in Ukraine* (Stuttgart, 2024); A. Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven, 2021).

[31] G. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, part 3: *The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, 2000), p. 501.

sites ensures the movement's sustainability despite repression. Another expression of solidarity was Belarusians placing lighted candles in the windows. These symbolic acts of solidarity reflect the importance of non-violent public displays, which help build a collective identity among protesters and reinforce the movement's legitimacy.

In order to use the technique of spreading the protests, the activists decided on so-called star marches, which started in different districts of the city and met in the centre near the obelisk of the "Homeland". This method of diffusion across various districts, which then converged into a central location, demonstrates an intentional strategy to maintain visibility while dispersing state forces, aligning with Sharp's principle of avoiding direct confrontation.[32]

Marches were organised mainly on Sundays until 11 October, when, for the first time, the security agents forced the dispersal of the marchers. Protest picnics, which took place in backyards and courtyards in the suburbs of Minsk and other cities, were also a form of protest. The protesters gathered near the murals created during the protests and related to them. The authorities prepared a list of the most active districts, labelling them 'unsafe', and tried to put pressure on them. An example of such actions may be the three-day shutdown of access to water in the Novaya Borovaya district.[33] These small, decentralised actions can be seen as an application of the "flexibility" principle in the theory of non-violence, where protests adapt to different environments and levels of repression while maintaining their focus on non-violent resistance.[34]

Unlike the protests of 2006 and 2010, this time, they covered not only Minsk but also other cities, including provincial towns and villages, which until now were considered strongholds of support for Lukashenko.[35] The spread of protests beyond Minsk represented a significant shift in the social base of the resistance, further weakening the regime's grip on local power structures.

The persistence and spread of the protests were made possible by the efficient use of social media.[36] The civil resistance theory suggests that control over communication channels is essential for organising resistance. In this case, the regime's attempts to block the internet only reinforced the protesters' reliance on alternative platforms like Telegram, illustrating the strategic importance of maintaining communication even in hostile environments.[37] The most popular of them became NEXTA, with over 2 million subscribers, i.e. almost 20 per cent of the population.

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[32] Ibid., p. 620.

[33] G. Levchenko, *Opposition neighborhood in Minsk marks third day without running water*, 17 Nov. 2020, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/11/17/opposition-neighborhood-in-minsk-marks-third-day-without-running-water (accessed: 22 Oct. 2024).

[34] Chenoweth, Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, p. 56.

[35] Petz, 'The mood has changed'.

[36] Y. Serhan, 'What Belarus Learned'.

[37] Chenoweth, Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, pp. 35–36; D. Cortright, *Gandhi and Beyond: Nonviolence for a New Political Age* (London, 2009), pp. 201–04.

The non-violent struggle against the regime also took place on relatively new levels, i.e. in cyberspace. This expansion into digital resistance represents a new frontier in non-violent movements, where technological expertise is leveraged to undermine the regime's control of information and communication. Activists from the IT sector blocked the website of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs. The publication of personal data of police officers involved in suppressing the protests constituted their most spectacular action. At the end of September 2020, due to hacking the websites of two Belarusian state television channels, ONT and BT, activists displayed recordings of the suppression of the protests. By using digital tools to bypass traditional media, the activists succeeded in bringing images of state brutality to a broader audience, both domestically and internationally. These photos appeared for the first time on state television, which has so far not shown the brutality of the security forces in the face of non-violent protests.[38] The programmers' goal was to put pressure on the officers and their families, and thus persuade them to refuse to follow orders. This tactic aligns with Sharp's principles of targeting the loyalty of the regime's enforcers, creating moral dilemmas that weaken the state's ability to rely on its security apparatus.[39]

Mass Participation and the Transformation of Protest Dynamics in Belarus

A very wide social participation constituted another novelty of 2020 compared to the previous post-election protests in 2006 and 2010. This expansion of participation is a critical factor that distinguishes successful non-violent movements, as observed by scholars like Chenoweth and Stephan, who emphasise that broad-based societal engagement increases the likelihood of success.[40] In earlier years, protests were organised by opposition leaders, who relied mainly on students and the intelligentsia. They were able to attract only narrow groups with already-defined political views. These earlier movements were limited by their narrow social base, which constrained their ability to mobilise mass participation. In contrast, the 2020 protests represented a broader cross-section of society, significantly expanding the conflict from an 'opposition versus power' dynamic to a 'society versus power' confrontation.

This extension resulted from joining the protests by groups that had been inactive or marginally active in the previous protests and therefore perceived in the

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[38] Paul Goble, 'NEXTA Telegram Channel And Cyber-Partisan Hackers Two Most Important Online Players in Belarus-OpEd', *Eurasia Review*, 11 Oct. 2020, https://www.eurasiareview.com/11102020-nexta-telegram-channel-and-cyber-partisan-hackers-two-most-important-online-players-in-belarus-oped/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[39] Chenoweth, Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, pp. 46, 50–51.

[40] Ibid., p. 30.

category of Lukashenko's actual electorate, i.e. state employees, including workers from numerous state-owned factories, teachers and health sector employees.[41] The inclusion of these groups, traditionally seen as loyal to the regime, was a pivotal moment in the protests, as it signalled that dissatisfaction with Lukashenko's rule was no longer confined to the opposition elite but had spread across different social strata.

During this wave of protests they joined the representatives of the private sector, in which, due to the knowledge of using social media and fighting in cyberspace, the wide participation of representatives of the IT industry was particularly important. The role of the IT sector, particularly in the digital organisation and communication of protests, reflects a modern dimension of non-violent resistance where technological skills are leveraged to bypass state control over information.

The widespread participation of women characterised all these groups. The active involvement of women also resonates with the non-violent theories that underscore the symbolic power of including marginalised groups in protests, helping to challenge the regime's narrative and broaden the base of support.

Looking for the reason for unprecedented participation in the protest movement, the explanation can be found in the lack of its ideological basis. This absence of a rigid ideological foundation allowed for greater inclusivity, as participants were united not by a specific political agenda but by a shared opposition to Lukashenko. The protests were neither pro-Russian nor pro-European, and what all the participants had in common was their opposition to Lukashenko. This attitude was additionally ignited by the brutality, with which he proceeded to suppress the protests.[42] This is consistent with Sharp's concept that repressive actions by regimes often backfire, increasing solidarity and mobilisation among protesters, as seen in the Belarusian case.[43]

In addition, in an online survey conducted in late 2020, almost 80 per cent of Belarusians who admitted having participated in the protests, claimed that they were motivated to do so by a wave of violence initiated by the regime.[44] In a study organised by Berlin's Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (Centre for Eastern European and International Studies), 2,000 Belarusians aged 16 to 64 were surveyed. 14 per cent of them admitted that they took part in the

[41] H. Vasilevich, 'Belarusian national identity: what did the 2020 protests demonstrate?', *Regard sur L'Est*, 12 Oct. 2020, https://regard-est.com/belarusian-national-identity-what-did-the-2020-protests-demonstrate (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[42] B. Bayhan, 'Determination and unity are key to the success of the Belarus revolution', *Emerging Europe*, 5 Sep. 2020, https://emerging-europe.com/voices/determination-and-unity-are-key-to-the-success-of-the-belarus-revolution/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[43] Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, part 3, pp. 657–58.

[44] F. Krawatzek, G. Sasse, 'Belarus protests: why people have been taking to the streets – new data', *Conversation*, 4 Feb. 2021, https://theconversation.com/belarus-protests-why-people-have-been-taking-to-the-streets-new-data-154494 (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

protests, and 6 per cent refused to answer this question, which may indicate that it would be positive, but they are held back by fear of repression by the authorities.

The Transformative Power of the White-Red-White Flag

Another distinguishing feature of the post-August rebellion in Belarusian society was the widespread use of symbols by the protesters, which played a particularly important role in the spatial dynamics of events. As sociologist Nelly Bekus aptly wrote: "This massive influx of political newcomers created a new social context for the protests, in which the cultural and political symbols that were previously involved in the struggles between authority and opposition, were reappropriated and reshuffled, creating a new kind of blended symbolism of protest".[45] The non-violence of the protests, which resulted from the strategic decision of the leaders and was the basic factor in the mobilisation of their participants, constituted the basic aspect of the symbolic sphere. Maintaining the streets' cleanliness and order following the protests also carried a symbolic significance.

Symbols are one of the basic weapons of the non-violent struggle. Nevertheless, the impact of this factor depends on the ability to use and disseminate them. The symbolic sphere of the protests is a manifestation of the creativity of the participants and leaders of the events. Through symbols, the main ideas and values embodied by the protesters are conveyed, and their identity is defined in relation to others, both opponents and those who keep their distance. Symbols mobilise participants and adapt to the evolving context of resistance, allowing the movement to remain relevant and engaging. Such creativity is also essential for maintaining a protest's momentum and distinguishing the movement from the state, thus enhancing the sense of solidarity among protesters. Symbols help shape the image for both internal and external needs, i.e. world public opinion.[46]

From the very beginning and at every stage of the protests in Belarus, symbols played an important role. The most prominent of these was the white-red-white flag, which became a central emblem of the resistance. In Soviet times, it was identified with the opposition, and especially with the Belarusian National Front. Between 1991 and 1995, it became the official national symbol, but after coming to power, Lukashenka restored the Soviet red and green flag, depriving it of the hammer and sickle. As Bekus aptly noted: "Becoming a major symbol of the Belarusian protests in 2020, the white-red-white flag, however, did not signify the ideological victory of the old opposition. Instead, it has been reinvented as an emblem of struggle

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[45] N. Bekus, 'Historical Memory and Symbolism in the Belarusian Protests', *Cultures of History*, 16 Feb. 2021, https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/belarus/historical-memory-and-symbolism-in-the-belarusian-protests/#part3#part1 (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).
[46] Bekus, 'Historical Memory'.

for Belarus without Lukashenka.[47] This reinvention of the flag as a contemporary symbol aligns with Sharp's theory, where the reappropriation of historical symbols strengthens the identity and unity of the resistance.[48]

The borderline moment from which the flag can be perceived as the main symbol of the protests was the rally organised on 16 August 2020 with the participation of 200,000 Belarusians, who gathered next to the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War. One of the protesters climbed onto the sculpture 'Homeland' and wrapped a flag around it. The authorities' reaction was to cut off the sculpture with a cordon of police forces and security wire, so that no one could repeat this action. As Nelly Bekus writes: "Wrapping the 'Motherland' sculpture in the white-red-white flag on 16 August performed an act of illustrative assemblage charged with political symbolism: two previously conflicting frames – the symbol of anti-Soviet nationalism and the epitome of 'the glorious Soviet past' – have been combined in a representation of the new Belarus emerging during the protest".[49] This act of re-signification highlights the fluidity of symbols in non-violent movements, where symbols are continually adapted to reflect the current struggle and future aspirations.

Soon, white-red-white flags appeared everywhere, not only during protests, but also on houses, balconies and cars. The proliferation of these symbols, often used in everyday objects like clothing and masks, underscores the extent to which the movement permeated daily life, embedding its resistance in both public and private spaces. These colours began to be widely used during protests, but also outside them, as the basic colours of clothing and protective masks, which often became the reason for arrests. The women handed white and red flowers to the representatives of the security forces standing in the cordons. Underwear was hung on the balconies, arranging it according to the colours.

Women in wedding dresses with red belts painted in the middle appeared on the streets. One of the first to come up with the idea of using a wedding dress as a symbol of protest in this way was Inna Zaitseva, who, during an interview, stated: "The flags are being taken, so I decided to become a flag myself".[50] In the first days of September, brides in white-red-white dresses appeared on the streets of Grodno. Going out on the streets in such clothes was supposed to show women's determination, but also innocence.[51] The photos of young women dressed as brides,

[47] Ead., 'Echo of 1989? Protest Imaginaries and Identity Dilemmas in Belarus', *Slavic Review*, vol. 80, no. 1, pp. 4–14, doi:10.1017/slr.2021.25, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/slavic-review/article/echo-of-1989-protest-imaginaries-and-identity-dilemmas-in-belarus/B590F9290CF7D-14287583DD3EE5BF853 (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[48] G. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, part 2: *The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, 2000), p. 135.

[49] Bekus, 'Echo of 1989?'.

[50] '"Sʹciagi adbirajucʹ, dyk ja sama vyrašyła stacʹ sʹciagam". Chto takaja niaviesta z pratestaŭ', Radio Svoboda, 27 Sep. 2020, https://www.svaboda.org/a/30857994.html (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[51] 'Simval novaj čystaj Bjelarusi. Njaviesty ŭ biel-čyrvona-bielych sukienkach vyjšli na akcyju ŭ Grodnie', 18 Sep. 2020, *Hrodna.Life*, https://hrodna.life/2020/09/18/nevesty/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

posing against the backdrop of squadrons of fully armed security forces, carried one of the strongest media messages and were often posted in the world's public media. This creative act, which transformed the physical presence of protesters into symbols themselves, illustrates Schock's emphasis on the flexibility of non-violent protests, where participants use innovative methods to maintain the visibility of their cause despite repression.[52]

The flag was accompanied by the return of the coat of arms of Pogonia, on which the figure of the rider was often changed to a woman, initially referring to Tsikhanouskaya as Lukashenko's rival, and then including meanings with the broad participation of women in the protests. This transformation of the Pogonia symbol into a feminist representation underscores the dynamic use of symbols in the Belarusian protests, aligning with the theories of symbolic re-signification discussed earlier. The change of the image of the horseman into an Amazon rider made by the designer Julia Golovina and the poet Ales Rumor caused some resistance at the beginning, but the further course of events and the increasing role of women in the protests meant that there were even voices about a permanent change of the coat of arms.[53]

Symbolism and Leadership: Women at the Forefront of the Belarusian Protests

Already in the first days of protest, the second, apart from the flag, the icon of the Belarusian symbolism of the protest has appeared. It took the form of representations of three key female figures: Maria Kalesnikava – a musician and chief of the Babaryka campaign, Veronika Tsepkalo – the wife of the candidate Valery Tsepkalo, who was ousted by Lukashenko, and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – a housewife who she campaigned in place of her imprisoned husband. They were depicted in photographs, drawings, or graffiti. The gestures they made during joint meetings and press conferences held before the elections – a heart, a clenched fist, and the 'V' sign – became additional visual symbols of the protests. These symbols were then printed on T-shirts, flags, and posters. While it is true that the ideological dimension of women's participation in the protests was not directly highlighted in public discourse, the very presence of these women in key leadership roles and their transformation into symbols of resistance carried a profound significance.[54]

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[52] Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections*, p. 144.

[53] M. Martysevich, 'Belarus: The Alphabet of Protest', transl. N. Mamul, *Culture.pl*, 13 Oct. 2020, https://culture.pl/en/article/belarus-the-alphabet-of-protest (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[54] Even though these three leaders became the faces of the rebellion, women's issues were not publicly discussed either during the campaign or during the protests. None of them raised questions about equality, violence against women, discrimination or other issues associated with typical feminist slogans, see L. Fein, 'Women and Feminism in Belarus: The Truth behind the

Their visibility challenged the traditional image of women as passive observers in political conflicts, instead positioning them as central figures in a national struggle for change. As emphasised in non-violent resistance theories, these gestures and visual representations play a crucial role in uniting and mobilising different segments of society. By simplifying complex political issues into universal symbols of love, peace, and solidarity, these women leaders strengthened the movement's emotional connection with the broader public, ensuring its local and international resonance. The message of love propagated by the female leaders of the protests was expressed in the spontaneous hugging of armed soldiers and policemen, who blocked the way of the protesters.

Furthermore, their role as symbols transcended conventional feminist narratives, emulating a broader societal opposition to the Lukashenko regime. The lack of explicit feminist demands does not negate the symbolic power of their participation, as their leadership in a highly visible, non-violent movement inherently questioned established gender roles in Belarusian society. In this sense, the symbolic role of women in these protests extends beyond specific feminist agendas, representing a larger fight for justice, dignity, and human rights.

The images of the leaders were also placed on buildings in the form of murals. Anna Redko's work depicting Maria Kalesnikova has become the most famous. Inspired by a well-known Second-World-War propaganda poster from 1941 entitled 'Homeland is calling', the artist depicted the leader of the protests with the slogan 'Homeland, Masha, Calls You'. Instead of the military oath card from the original poster, Redko presented her with a torn passport in her hand. In this way, the artist referred to and commemorated the event of September 8, 2020, when Kolesnikova tore her Belarusian passport to prevent the security services from throwing her out of the country. As a result, she was imprisoned. Redko has repeatedly reproduced and displayed the Kalesnikova image on Minsk apartment buildings. This act of using historical symbolism to connect contemporary events with the past aligns with theories on the power of cultural memory in resistance movements. The use of familiar historical imagery can serve to both rally internal support and convey a message of legitimacy and continuity to external observers.

An artwork from the collection of Viktar Babaryka, the former president of the bank, and later Lukashenko's would-be opponent, has also become a symbol of protests related to the image of women. Even before the elections, his art collection, including works by Belarusian artists, was confiscated. Among them was a portrait entitled 'Eva' by Chaïm Soutine, which was reproduced on T-shirts and canvas bags in the first weeks of the protests. The image of the face of 'Eva' on canvas was also used by the artists from the 'Belarus Free' group, dressed in prison clothes and performing in London, during performances organised

"Flower Power'", An Interview with Irina Solomatina, *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, 18 Oct. 2020, https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article54876 (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

by them. The strategic use of art, especially pieces tied to national or cultural identity, is another example of how non-violent movements mobilise symbols that resonate deeply within the society. By integrating these artworks into the protest, the demonstrators were able to evoke a sense of shared heritage and collective memory, further strengthening the movement's symbolic power.

In addition to the three leaders of the protests, 73-year-old Nina Bahinska has become a symbol after a video circulating on social media of a policeman trying to snatch a white-red-white flag from her during a protest on 26 August.[55] Bahinska's presence during subsequent protests always met with great enthusiasm of his co-participants and additionally encouraged them to continue the protests. The participation of older generations in the protests, symbolised by Bahinska, adds another layer to the multi-generational solidarity that is crucial for broadening the movement's support base, as highlighted by Chenoweth and Stephan in their analysis of successful non-violent movements.[56]

Symbolic Actions and Historical Resonance in Belarusian Resistance

Women also played a key role in organising chains of Belarusian people holding hands. Therefore they themselves turned into symbols of this protest wave.[57] After the first few days of arrests of the protesting men, Belarusian women decided to show solidarity with them. While calling for an end to violence against imprisoned and tortured men as well as holding white and red flowers, they demonstrated a non-violent attitude towards police brutality. By embodying values like peace and solidarity, the women turned resistance into a powerful message of unity, drawing attention to the oppressive actions of the regime.

This form of expressing resistance had its roots in the pre-election period when Belarusian citizens queued to sign electoral cards. Collecting a certain number of votes was necessary to enable candidates opposing President Lukashenko to be officially acknowledged to run in the elections. The support scale for opposition candidates meant that Belarusians stood in queues for hours, creating a culture of queuing protest.[58] Historically, the act of queuing has been associated with

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[55] 'Why a great grandmother is the symbol of Belarus protests', *Christian Science Monitor Daily*, 9 Sep. 2020, https://www.csmonitor.com/Daily/2020/20200909/Why-a-great-grandmother-is-the-symbol-of-Belarus-protests (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024); M. Roache, 'Meet the 73-Year-Old Great-Grandmother Defying the Dictatorship in Belarus', *Time*, 2 Oct. 2020, https://time.com/5895174/nina-baginskaya-belarus/.

[56] Chenoweth, Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, p. 40.

[57] Bekus, 'Historical Memory'.

[58] J. Harper, 'The art of protest in Belarus', *Emerging Europe*, 17 Apr. 2021, https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/the-art-of-protest-in-belarus/ (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

patience and endurance under oppression in many post-Soviet societies, particularly during times of scarcity and crisis. The long lines of people queuing to vote or support opposition candidates recall similar scenes from the late Soviet period, when waiting in line was a daily manifestation of endurance. In this context, the queuing during the 2020 protests could also be interpreted as a symbolic representation of collective endurance against authoritarianism, deeply embedded in the socio-political experience of Belarusian citizens under Lukashenko's rule.

In August 2020, an action of support and solidarity for the protests in Belarus was organised and disseminated under the name "The Baltic Way 2020". On 23 August 2020, mainly Lithuanians, but also Belarusians living in Lithuania, numbering altogether more than 50,000, formed a chain of over 30 km from Vilnius to the border with Belarus.[59] Their objective was to express solidarity with the protesters and commemorate the anniversary of the "Baltic Road", which occurred 31 years ago. Then, the chain connected an estimated two million Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians, demonstrating their desire to proclaim independence from the USSR and commemorating the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which ended their short-lived statehood. The Belarusian protesters in 2020 deliberately invoked this historical reference, as the Baltic Way remains one of the most potent and successful demonstrations of peaceful resistance in the post-Soviet space. This reference not only grounded the 2020 protests in the broader historical narrative of non-violent resistance to Soviet and post-Soviet authoritarianism but also symbolised solidarity with neighbouring countries that had successfully thrown off oppressive regimes. Successful resistance movements often borrow methods from historical struggles.[60] In this case, the re-enactment of the Baltic Way serves as a gesture of solidarity and a powerful reminder of past victories against authoritarianism. The application of chain as a form of protest in Belarus could be interpreted as the last, belated stage of the end of the Soviet era in Europe.[61]

The practice of forming human chains or queues, though seemingly simple, aligns also with the assertion that non-violent resistance is often most effective when it taps into everyday actions that people are comfortable participating in. This 'normalisation' of protest enables higher participation rates and maintains momentum over time.[62]

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[59] For more on the initiative to create a chain born in Lithuania, see 'Lithuania plans human chain from Vilnius to Belarusian border to show solidarity', *LRT English Newsletter*, 14 Aug. 2020, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1210622/lithuania-plans-human-chain-from-vilnius-to-belarusian-border-to-show-solidarity (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

[60] L.A. Smithey, 'Identity Formation in Nonviolent Struggles', in: *Recovering Nonviolent History: Civil Resistance in Liberation Struggles*, ed. M.J. Bartkowski (London, 2013), pp. 37–38.

[61] Bekus, 'Historical Memory'.

[62] S. Crawshaw, J. Jackson, *Small Acts of Resistance: How Courage, Tenacity, and a Bit of Ingenuity Can Change the World* (New York, 2010).

Another reference to the tradition of the Baltic human chain was made by organising a "chain of penance", just two days before the Baltic Way 2020. It connected the detention centre on Akrestina Street with the memorial site in Kurapaty, which, for many Belarusians, constitutes the quintessence of the genocide committed against Belarusians by the Soviet authorities. A poster published on the Internet on the *Novyi chas* website entitled 'Kurapaty-Akrestsin prison'. Never Again" promoted the event, emphasizing the connection between the crimes of the Stalinist period and the events of 2020. The Kurapaty genocide was interpreted as the beginning of the symbolic road that Belarusians went through, and the arrest at Akrestina Street – its end.[63]

This other act of linking the past and present highlights the strategic use of memory in protests. By framing current repression in the context of past atrocities, the organisers strengthen the emotional and historical significance of the protest, a technique seen in many successful movements.[64] In this case, the symbolic connection between Kurapaty – a site of mass Soviet executions – and Akrestina, known for the brutal treatment of political prisoners in 2020, reinforced the message that Belarus continues to struggle against authoritarian oppression.

On November 1, 2020, i.e. on the annual day of remembrance of the ancestors, Kurapaty also became the leading destination of the protest march, which was named 'Dziady Suprats Teroru' (*Dziady* against terror, with *Dziady* being in Belarus is a traditional day in memory of the ancestors). Since 1988, initially, on the initiative of the Belarusian People's Front, the people murdered in Kurapaty have been commemorated every year with a march of remembrance organised by the oppositionists. The choice of Kurapaty as the protest destination underscores the protesters' understanding of symbolic geography.

The appearance of posters with direct references to the Stalinist period added a novelty during the march on 1 November 2020. The organisers intended to compare it with the contemporary situation in Belarus, by writing on the poster: "My grandfather was imprisoned in the gulag in the 20th century. His grandson – in the gulag in the 21st century".[65]

The memory of Stalinist and German crimes was an important element of the narrative of the protests. In the messages circulating on social media, the behaviour of the Belarusian security services in 2020 towards women was compared to crimes committed by SS soldiers. This was to "expose the sheer brutality of the Lukashenka regime and show how alien it is to the Belarusian people".[66]

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[63] J. Prus, 'W Mińsku "łańcuch pokuty" od Kuropat do aresztu na Akrescyna', 21 Aug. 2020, https://dzieje.pl/wiadomosci/w-minsku-lancuch-pokuty-od-kuropat-do-aresztu-na-akrescyna (accessed: 22 Oct. 2024).
[64] *Recovering Nonviolent History*, pp. 37–38.
[65] Bekus, 'Historical Memory'.
[66] Bekus, 'Echo of 1989?'.

By connecting their current struggle with historical sites of oppression, Belarusians framed their movement not just as a reaction to contemporary politics, but as part of a long-standing fight for justice. This spatial linkage allowed the protesters to draw parallels between the Soviet past and the contemporary authoritarian regime, reinforcing the moral and emotional weight of their cause.

Adapting International Protest Tactics to Belarus

The references to earlier protest actions that forced changes or became their symbol constituted a separate group of symbols used during the protests in Belarus. For their own needs, Belarusians have adopted patterns and symbolic forms of protests known from struggles in other countries, one example is 'The Baltic Way 2020'. By incorporating methods from other countries, the Belarusian protesters were able to enrich their own strategies, making them more dynamic and difficult to suppress.

Symbolism, especially related to colours, played a crucial role in the visual identity of various protest movements, which achieved success in other countries. The colour revolutions in post-Soviet countries, such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004–05, heavily influenced the Belarusian protest movement. During the Orange Revolution, the campaign of Viktor Yushchenko, the opposition candidate, utilised orange as a unifying symbol. Similarly, the Belarusian opposition adopted the white-red-white flag as a central symbol of their resistance, drawing on national historical symbols to create a modern-day emblem of defiance.

Inspiration from the 2019–20 protests in Hong Kong also became apparent during the Belarusian demonstrations. For example, white and red umbrellas, frequently seen during Belarusian protests, adapted the umbrellas used in Hong Kong's protests. In Hong Kong, umbrellas were originally used to shield protesters from tear gas and pepper spray. Belarusian protesters adapted this tactic, using umbrellas to protect themselves from pepper spray and marking paint fired by police to facilitate arrests. This practical adaptation reflects Sharp's argument that non-violent movements must often develop tools that serve both symbolic and functional purposes, helping protesters resist while maintaining the non-violent nature of their actions.

In parallel, inspiration from Hong Kong was also drawn in the sphere of protest methods, e.g. in using the technique of the flash mob so-called tactic of 'Be Water' – appearing in one location, dispersing before confrontation with police, and reappearing elsewhere. As the journalist and pro-democracy activist Franak Viacorka claimed, the only way to avoid arrest was to follow Hong Kong's 'Be Water' tactic, which meant avoiding confrontation with police by appearing in one place, disappearing and reappearing elsewhere".[67] This tactic of mobility

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[67] K. Zaiets, J. Borresen, 'What is happening in Belarus? We explain the historic pro-democracy protests', *USA Today*, 15 Sep. 2020, https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/2020/09/08/water-belarus-demonstrators-borrow-tactics-hong-kong-protests-they-rally-democracy/3437180001/.

and fluidity proved crucial in Belarus, where protesters had to constantly adapt to state repression. The 'Be Water' tactic exemplifies the importance of strategic innovation in non-violent movements, a point scholars such as Schock, Chenoweth, and Stephan emphasise.

The performance of the song *Magutny Bozha* (Almighty God) in public places, especially on the platforms of Minsk subway stations and in shopping malls, also referred to protests in Hong Kong.[68] In Hong Kong, the song *Glory to Hong Kong* unified protesters and served as a collective expression of identity and morale. Music, as a tool of resistance, has been recognised by theorists like Lee Smithey as a means of fostering collective identity and maintaining morale. In Belarus, the choice of *Magutny Bozha* helped evoke a sense of shared heritage and religious significance, further deepening the emotional impact of the protests.[69]

International inspiration was not limited to Hong Kong. Belarusian activists also drew from the women's protest movements in the United States, particularly the Women's Marches following the 2016 election, and from the "Ladies in White" movement in Cuba, which was formed by the wives and female relatives of political prisoners. The prominence of women in the Belarusian protests, symbolised by leaders like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Maria Kalesnikava, reflected a global trend of women's significant participation in non-violent resistance movements.

The influence of neighbouring countries does not limit itself only to Ukraine. The song *Sciany* (Walls), an anthem of the Polish "Solidarity" movement, became a popular song among Belarusian protesters. Written by Jacek Kaczmarski in the 1980s, the song symbolised resistance to communist oppression in Poland.[70] The Belarusian protesters' use of *Sciany* evoked solidarity with past resistance movements in Central and Eastern Europe and highlighted the continuity of the fight for freedom in the region. Initially sung in Russian, the song was quickly translated into Belarusian, reflecting the broader cultural revival taking place alongside the political protests.

By drawing on local and international symbols, Belarusian protesters forged a powerful collective identity that resonated both within and beyond the borders of Belarus. These inspirations from other protest movements not only reinforced the legitimacy of the Belarusian resistance but also provided a blueprint for innovative tactics that could adapt to the regime's attempts to suppress dissent.

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[68] Hong Kong protesters performed the song *Glory to Hong Kong* at airports and also in shopping malls.

[69] Smithey, 'Identity Formation in Nonviolent Struggles', pp. 37–38.

[70] The original was the Catalan song *L'Estaca* written in 1968 by Luis Llach.

Conclusion

The choice of symbols and content appearing in the cultural sphere of the protests largely resulted from and was related to the protesters' demands. The Belarusian slogans were identical to Tsikhanouskaya's postulates and focused on internal Belarusian affairs. In her election manifesto, Tsikhanouskaya limited herself to three main demands and, at the same time, election promises: the liberation of political prisoners, stopping the violence by the security forces, and the quick organisation of free and fair presidential elections. Unlike many earlier protests in the region, which contrasted particularly strongly with EuroMaidan, slogans related to geopolitics and the choice between Russia and the European Union were absent in Belarus. Therefore, the protesters did not use the flags of the European Union.

The endurance of the protests was not only a reflection of dissatisfaction with the political regime but also a demonstration of the strength of the symbols and tactics used by the protesters, which helped maintain momentum despite increasing repression. Symbolism played a central role in unifying diverse segments of Belarusian society, acting as a powerful tool to build collective identity and communicate the movement's messages. These protests, the largest in Belarus's post-independence history, showcased the strategic use of symbols to maintain the movement's visibility and cohesion.

From the first days of the protest in Belarus, there was a high level of awareness of the use of symbols and the skilful application of historical and cultural references. The borrowing of symbols previously used in the country and abroad, the use of collective memory by recalling cultural and historical references, and the creation of one's own system of symbols took place during the actions undertaken.

These symbols, often rooted in Belarusian history, such as the flag or Pahonia coat of arms, were complemented by universal symbols of resistance, creating a rich tapestry of meaning that resonated with both domestic and global audiences. The careful selection of symbols also reflected a movement conscious of the power of visuals in shaping public perception. The adoption of the white-red-white flag and colours as the overriding symbol of the protests constituted the most important borrowing from the past. Contrary to the Orange Revolution, it was not a new creation, i.e. the colour of a new political proposal, embodying a certain vision of the future. Belarusians did not also reach for the flag of the European Union embodying a vision of the future, as it happened in the case of Euromaidan. Instead, Belarusians reached for their history by borrowing one of its most important symbols, which, as it might seem wrong, was effectively supplanted by Lukashenko's regime.

As Nelly Bekus pointed out: "It reveals how a broad variety of actors engaged in contention activated a process of re-signification of cultural and political symbols and ideas and led to the formation of a blended socio-cultural imaginary, which

integrates previously disconnected and competing projects and ideologies".[71] The protests in Belarus have become "a unique space of fluid social and cultural interactions, in which identities and meanings form, coalesce, and change".[72]

The strategic use of symbols from Belarusian history alongside more universal symbols of resistance indicates also a nuanced approach to identity construction. This fusion of past and present allowed the movement to appeal to a broad audience. Protesters' use of these symbols was not random but a deliberate effort to invoke a collective national identity that stood in contrast to the regime's Soviet-influenced narrative.

Unlike the Ukrainian Maidan, which explicitly embraced European identity, the Belarusian protests remained somewhat ambiguous, reflecting a movement more focused on rejecting authoritarianism than on projecting a specific future geopolitical alignment. This strategic ambiguity allowed the protests to unite people of various political leanings, focusing on the immediate goal of removing Lukashenko without being distracted by debates over Belarus's geopolitical future. By avoiding a direct association with either Russia or Europe, the movement maintained a level of inclusivity that was crucial for mobilising a broad section of the population.

One of the distinguishing features of the 2020 protests was their adaptability. The fluidity of symbol usage, from the historical to the contemporary, reveals a movement that was not rigidly bound to a single narrative. This flexibility allowed the protests to remain relevant in the face of state repression. The movement borrowed strategies and symbols from other successful non-violent protests, such as Hong Kong's 'Be Water' tactic, emphasising mobility and avoiding direct confrontation. This ability to adapt symbols and tactics not only kept the movement alive but also highlighted its creative resilience. According to them, creativity and the ability to adapt symbols in the process of social resistance are key to the success of a protest movement.

Women played an especially prominent role in the Belarusian protests, becoming both leaders and symbols of the resistance. Their participation not only broadened the movement's base but also reinforced its non-violent nature. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, and Veronika Tsepkalo became powerful symbols of defiance, their gestures and actions transformed into visual markers of the protest. Their prominence challenged traditional gender roles in Belarus and underscored the inclusive nature of the movement. Their actions, from holding flowers to engaging in peaceful civil disobedience, emphasised the moral high ground of the protests and helped maintain widespread support.

Looking toward the future, it is clear that while the protests have not yet succeeded in their goal of ousting Lukashenko, the movement has created a strong

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[71] Bekus, 'Echo of 1989?'.
[72] Ibid.

foundation for potential political change. The experiences of 2020 demonstrated that symbols, when used effectively, can help sustain a non-violent movement even in the face of brutal repression. Like other nations that, contrary to them, have succeeded in non-violent struggle, Belarusians displayed remarkable innovation in creating and adapting symbols, which became a cornerstone of their strategy. This innovation was evident in the use of historical symbols and the integration of global protest tactics, making the Belarusian movement part of a larger international trend of peaceful resistance.

While the immediate goals of the 2020 protests have not been achieved, the symbolic foundations they laid are likely to continue influencing Belarusian society. The ability to adapt these symbols to changing political and social circumstances provided the movement with a level of resilience that countered the state's repressive measures. International attention to the protests, drawn in part by the compelling symbolism, suggests that the movement has left a lasting impression both within Belarus and globally.

In conclusion, the 2020 Belarusian protests offer a compelling example of how symbols can be harnessed to drive non-violent resistance. Each symbol was carefully chosen to convey specific political messages. The fact that certain symbols, such as those promoting a European future, were absent, suggests that the movement was deliberately avoiding aligning itself too strongly with any one geopolitical identity, focusing instead on the immediate goal of dismantling the Lukashenko regime. The protests demonstrated the power of symbols not only to mobilise mass participation but also to maintain the moral and strategic coherence of the movement. The careful balance of historical references with contemporary non-violent tactics created a movement resonating across multiple societal levels.

In the long term, this creative and adaptable use of symbolism may be the key to sustaining the Belarusian movement. The protests may not have resulted in immediate political change, but they have planted the seeds for future movements. This adaptability, as suggested by researchers of the civil resistance, is crucial for the sustainability and success of a protest movement. The movement's strategic use of symbols, its inclusiveness, and its ability to maintain focus on rejecting authoritarianism without being bogged down by ideological divides suggest that it will remain a force in Belarusian politics. Even if the movement's immediate goals were not realised, the 2020 protests will likely be remembered as a pivotal moment in the ongoing struggle for democracy in Belarus.

Abstract

The protests that erupted in August 2020 in Belarus constituted the largest public uprising against the authorities since the state's establishment. Their distinguishing feature, not only in historical but also in regional terms, was the unprecedented use of symbolic melange by their participants. This does not mean, however, that they were randomly selected. From the

very first days of the protest in Belarus, there was a high level of awareness of the use of symbols and the skilful use of historical and cultural references. Protesters both borrowed symbolism previously used at home or abroad, exploited collective memory by invoking cultural and historical references, and created their own system of symbolism.

Numerous media messages – both from official channels and recorded by private individuals – provide interesting analytical material on the protests. The analytical and theoretical basis for considering the phenomenon is provided by the literature on nonviolent struggle, which has been developing, especially in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It considers the creativity of the resistance participants to be a fundamental factor in the success of protests, and its manifestation is precisely the sphere of symbols used by the protesters.

Opposition to electoral rigging has not brought positive results in Belarus. Protest leaders either ended up in penal colonies or, to avoid arrest, had to flee abroad. Belarusian society emerged from the protests significantly weakened. Internationally, however, the reaction of Belarusians to blatant injustice has transformed their image. Before August 2020, they were judged subservient, with few exceptions passive. After that, they revealed themselves as a tenacious nation and, thanks to the symbolism used, creative, among other things.

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