



THE CREATIVITY OF THE RESISTANCE AFTER THE 2020 BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract. The protests that followed the 2020 Belarusian presidential election marked an unprecedented display of creativity as a tool of resistance. This study introduces the theoretical model of creative resistance as a civic awakening, demonstrating how creativity in 2020–2021 Belarusian protests operate on two levels: as 1) symbolic resistance to oppressive regimes and as 2) a mechanism for cultural renewal. In the Belarusian case, acts such as the reclamation of historical symbols, the leadership of women, and the innovative use of art and humour went beyond political defiance. They catalyzed a process of cultural rebirth, reasserting suppressed national identity and collective memory. This model offers a framework to analyze how creativity in social movements can challenge authoritarianism while reshaping national identities. The study provides insights relevant to broader discussions of political resistance, highlighting the dual role of creativity as both a tool for opposition and a vehicle for cultural regeneration.

Keywords: 2020 Belarusian presidential election, Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus, civil resistance, creativity, protest, symbols of protest.

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1. Introduction

“It seemed as if the whole city was one large family. People were happy to respond to any request, whether you needed lighting equipment for an art performance or a 300m² – large storage for a virtual project – you are welcome. The amount of help and support was massive. For 26 years, we lived in a void where you must obtain permission for everything. However, last year was the beginning of a true ‘festival of disobedience’. For example, if we were not allowed to stick anything to walls – we went there and did that” (Korsun, 2021, p. 132).

The statement was made by Irina Varkulevich, a Belarusian artist. She was referring to the sudden and extraordinary wave of 2020–2021 Belarusian protests (hereinafter: (Belarusian) protest(s)) that erupted following the 2020 Belarusian presidential election (hereinafter: election(s)) on 9 August, after the state electoral commission announced Alexander Lukashenko as the winner.

According to most independent calculations, there was no doubt that the presidential armchair should belong to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, but the elections were hijacked against the will of the Belarusian nation. Since the announcement of the results, protest actions have been orchestrated across the entire country.

In the first post-election weeks, despite the brutal reaction of the security forces, protests took place every day, and were especially numerous on Sundays. The acts of resistance lasted until the first months of 2021, but due to the increasing brutality of the authorities, they were extinguished in the following months.

For several weeks, the protests in Belarus took center stage in European and global media coverage. Despite Lukashenko being labeled as the last dictator in Europe, prior to this period, Belarusian society was generally seen as accepting its fate and not prone to protests. This series of protests marked the most significant societal uprising against the authorities since the establishment of the state.

Given the magnitude of this phenomenon, there is a need to investigate the Belarusian creativity applied in the protests and understand its origins. Therefore the central research question is: what forms of creative expression were most frequently utilized during the protests? And related to this, did those who introduced and utilized these creative methods of protest draw inspiration from the historical roots of common identity, did they look forward and create new symbols or did they opt for universal symbols already proven successful in other countries? By exploring these questions, the goal is to provide a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of creativity in political resistance, offering insights that are applicable beyond the specific case of Belarus and enriching the broader discourse on social movements and cultural resistance.

The questions stem from a comprehensive theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of creativity in social and political movements. The central research question emerges from the intersection of several theoretical perspectives. The theories of Jacques Lacan, Paul Ricoeur, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Hannah Arendt, among others, highlight the transformative power of creativity in shaping individual and collective identities, creating new narratives, and fostering autonomy and collective action. These theoretical considerations dictate the formulation of research questions that aim to uncover the depth and impact of creative strategies within the protests.

This study will build on these theories but also go a step further by proposing a new theoretical model of creative resistance as a civic awakening. This model aims to demonstrate how the unique forms of creative expression observed in the Belarusian protests go beyond traditional protest symbolism, serving as a process of national cultural renewal and identity redefinition. Through this lens, the Belarusian case provides an opportunity to develop a unique theoretical contribution to the study of creativity in political movements.

The focus on creativity as a central strategy is not arbitrary. It is guided by historical and contemporary analyses of how cultural and symbolic practices can galvanize movements and challenge oppressive regimes. By situating the analysis within this theoretical framework, it is clearly demonstrated that the creative methods employed by Belarusian protestors were not merely spontaneous acts of resistance, but rather deliberate strategies deeply rooted in both local cultural heritage and broader theoretical principles of creativity in political action.

The data for this study are derived from a variety of sources, including media messages from official channels such as television and press, as well as content shared by private individuals – observers or participants of the protests – on social media platforms. The collected data include images of protest art, such as murals, posters, and performances, as well as

textual content like slogans, chants, and social media posts. These sources provide a comprehensive view of the creative expressions used during the Belarusian protests. The primary reason for collecting these data is to capture the diverse aspects of the creative strategies employed by the protestors and to understand their origins and impacts.

The study employs a comparative approach, enabling connections to be drawn between historical symbols of Belarus and those employed in protests across the region, extending even beyond its borders. This method involves analysing content to identify recurring themes and symbols, and to trace their historical and cultural roots. Therefore the study is primarily an analysis of visual and textual content, or discourse. Visual content includes symbols, such as the white-red-white flag, murals, and other protest art, while textual content encompasses slogans, chants, and social media posts. These forms of data represent the key artifacts of the creative expression used during the protests.

The methods chosen for analysing this content include content analysis, which allows for the identification of recurring themes and motifs, and semiotic analysis, which examines the meanings embedded in the symbols and signs used by the protestors. The data were collected using a variety of methods, including media analysis, archival research, and the examination of social media archives. In particular, this research uses online materials shared by protestors and journalists, supplemented by scholarly accounts of the protests. Although no direct interviews or ethnographic research were conducted in this study, the findings from previous ethnographic and historical studies were incorporated to enrich the analysis.

By comparing the creative expressions used in the Belarusian protests with those from other movements, the study seeks to uncover patterns and insights that highlight the role of creativity in political resistance. The goal is to provide a deeper understanding of the innovative and transformative power of creativity in political resistance. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on social movements and cultural resistance, offering new insights into how creative strategies can effectively challenge oppressive regimes and foster solidarity among diverse groups.

2. Literature review on the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests

Numerous scholars have examined the Belarusian protests, focusing on various dimensions such as political dynamics, social movements, and the role of digital media or women participation. The unprecedented challenge to Lukashenko's regime in 2020, as discussed in *Strategic Comments* (2021), was marked by broad support from various social groups, including those traditionally pro-government. Despite this, Lukashenko managed to retain power with significant assistance from Russia. This dynamic, according to Gabowitsch (2021), underscored the distinctive style of the protests, which heavily relied on symbols and the strategic use of *Telegram* (software) for organizing local protest groups.

Bedford (2021) explored the erosion of authoritarian stability and the re-politicization of Belarusian society, noting that the unprecedented political mobilization in 2020 was facilitated by a breakdown in the traditional pillars of authoritarian rule: repression, cooptation, and legitimation. This theme of societal change is further elaborated by Bekus and Gabowitsch (2023), who provided interpretive frameworks for understanding the emergence

of new subjectivities in Belarusian society, suggesting that these protests could lead to long-term changes in state–society relations. Kazharski (2021) added that the mass mobilization and new forms of horizontal solidarity seen during the protests significantly contributed to nation-building in Belarus. This perspective is complemented by Bekus (2023), who examined the political and cultural processes of nation-building over the past thirty years, highlighting how linguistic policy and historical memory have shaped Belarusian identity, particularly in light of the protests.

Gapova (2021) emphasized the unprecedented mobilization following the elections, focusing on issues of agency and participation in political decision-making. This comprehensive analysis is echoed in the special issue of the publications “Understanding the 2020 Mass Mobilization in Belarus” (Onuch & Sasse, 2022), which, although lacking an abstract, provided detailed insights into the mass mobilization. Onuch et al. (2023) contributed a survey-based assessment of the protesters, shedding light on the socio-demographic characteristics and grievances that drove people to the streets. Further exploring this theme, Onuch and Sasse (2023) examined the broader dynamics of mass mobilization in Belarus, offering both comparative and case-specific analyses to deepen our understanding of these events.

The pivotal role of digital media, particularly *Telegram* (software), in mobilizing and mediating the protests was explored by Koran (2023), who described the uprising as a “*Telegram*-revolution”. Greene (2022) added to this discussion by investigating the impact of media consumption on political opinions during the protests, finding that the choice of news media was a strong predictor of political attitudes.

Understanding the Belarusian protests also involves recognizing the broader socio-political landscape. The publication “The Protest Movement in Belarus: Resistance and Repression” (Strategic Comments, 2021) by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, United Kingdom, provided an overview of the political dynamics and the ongoing role of the protest movement in shaping Belarusian politics. Similarly, Lane (2009) examined the strategies of mass mobilization and their implications for state stability. A key comparison was made by Way and Tolvin (2023), who contrasted the Belarusian protests with those in Ukraine, highlighting Lukashenko’s success in establishing authoritarian economic and coercive institutions. This strategy, they argue, raised the costs of opposition activity and hampered the development of a strong national identity in Belarus, essential for a committed opposition capable of challenging Lukashenko’s power (Way & Tolvin, 2023).

The participation and significance of women in the Belarusian protests have also been a focal point of scholarly attention. Paulovich (2021) characterized the movement as a “revolution with a female face”, analyzing the agency of female protesters and their use of traditional feminine aesthetics to subvert patriarchal stereotypes. Navumau and Matveieva (2021) examined how female participation expanded the public sphere and contributed to changes in gender-related policies, based on in-depth interviews with gender experts and activists. Adding to this discourse, Gaufran (2021) highlighted the creative re-appropriation of visual narratives that challenged the hypermasculinity of Lukashenko’s regime, demonstrating how the protests redefined gendered agency in Belarusian politics.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the political, social, and gender dimensions of the Belarusian protests, there remains a gap in understanding the creative

strategies employed by protestors. This gap is to be filled by analyzing the innovative use of language, narrative, art, and humour as central strategies in the protests. The highlight of these creative forms of political expression contributes to a broader understanding of how creativity can effectively challenge oppressive regimes and sustain social movements.

3. Theoretical approach to creativity

The notion of creativity has been analyzed over the centuries, even millennia, by philosophers, historians, psychologists, sociologists, as well as representatives of the sciences and natural sciences. The subject was touched upon by Aristotle (1996), among others.

The issue of creativity, though often not directly, was dealt with by representatives of the French post-structural school. In the theory of one of the main representatives of this trend Lacan (2006), creativity is a process of questioning, creating new meanings or transforming existing ones in the formation of identity. Since, according to him, language played the most important role in the formation of individual and group identity, Lacan analyzed creativity in terms of the process of creating new meanings and symbols and the search for new forms of expression. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Belarusian protests, where protestors used creative slogans, symbols, and chants to express their identity and resistance, reshaping the narrative of opposition through language. In the proposed creative resistance a civic awakening model, this linguistic creativity does not merely reflect identity but actively reconstructs it. The creation of new slogans, symbols, and chants during the protests redefined collective identity, facilitating a process of cultural renewal through which Belarusians reclaimed their suppressed identity. This process is deeply intertwined with civil resistance, where creative acts not only express dissent but also serve as mechanisms of restoring and redefining national identity.

Another philosopher focusing mainly on language, in whose work creativity occupied a significant role, was Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1973, 2024). In the process of narrative creation, which according to him is creativity, individuals form their identities. In analyzing the concept of narrative, Ricoeur focused on the connection between the fixed and the variable. In this view, the creation means the ability to change narratives both individually and culturally. The protests undertaken by Belarusians demonstrated this dynamic vividly as they created new narratives of unity and resistance, thus transforming their cultural identity and social cohesion through storytelling and shared experiences. Building on Ricoeur's ideas, the proposed and mentioned above model posits that creativity in protest movements serves as a tool for rewriting national narratives. In Belarus, the protestors used creative expressions to not only resist the authoritarian regime but also craft a new narrative of national identity, rooted in their collective memory and cultural history. This narrative was transformed through their creative acts, marking a significant shift in their cultural identity.

More attention was paid directly to creativity by Castoriadis (1987), for whom the concepts of autonomy and creation were fundamental in this context. He saw social reality not only as the result of social forces and other found determinants, but as the result of active efforts to create something new. In shaping this reality, imagination and symbolism are important to him. The process of creation takes into account unpredictability and randomness.

The Belarusian protests, marked by spontaneous acts of creativity, from flash mobs to artistic installations, underscore Castoriadis' view of social reality as an arena for creative autonomy and innovation. In the creative resistance as a civic awakening model, the spontaneous creativity of the Belarusian protests is seen as a manifestation of cultural autonomy. Protesters did not simply react to repression; they actively reshaped their social reality by reclaiming and transforming cultural symbols. The model frames this as a form of cultural rebirth, where the creative reappropriation of symbols such as the white-red-white flag represents not only political resistance but also a renewal of cultural identity.

In the circle of German-speaking culture and philosophy, much attention was paid to the concept of creativity in political activity by Arendt. Arendt wrote about the creative potential of human action in the public sphere in *The Human Condition* (1998, originally published in 1958), among others. There Arendt uses the term *natality*, understood as the ability to give rise to something new. The great importance in Arendt's thinking and political sphere was attached to collective action in it, understood also as collective creation. The Belarusian protests epitomized Arendt's concept of natality through the emergence of new political expressions and forms of collective action that redefined public participation and political engagement. From the creative resistance as a civic awakening perspective, Arendt's notion of natality aligns with the idea that creativity during protests is not only an act of resistance but also an act of collective creation. This creativity gives birth to new political and cultural identities. In Belarus, the collective creative actions of the protestors – whether through art, symbols, or public performances – initiated a process of cultural renewal, wherein Belarusians collectively forged a new sense of national belonging and democratic aspirations.

Since the first decade of the 21st century, attempts to approach the issue of creativity comprehensively and to frame it from different perspectives have intensified (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010). An extensive examination that gathers various theories and themes concerning the aspect of creativity has been conducted by Runco (2007). His research is centred on the diverse and complex characteristics of creativity. Additionally, Runco explored how creativity is interconnected with humour. This is particularly pertinent to the Belarusian protests, where humour was a powerful tool for dissent, used to undermine authority and foster solidarity among protestors. The creative resistance as a civic awakening model integrates this aspect by highlighting how humour, as a form of creative resistance, plays a crucial role in rebuilding social cohesion and identity. In Belarus, humour not only delegitimized the regime but also strengthened community ties, allowing protestors to reclaim a sense of agency through shared laughter and solidarity.

Applying the notion of creativity to the protests in Belarus provides a multifaceted understanding of the movement. It reveals how protestors utilized language, narrative, autonomy, and collective action to forge new identities and societal structures, highlighting the innovative and transformative power of creativity in political resistance.

In summary, the proposed model extends the existing theories on creativity by proposing that in contexts of political oppression, creativity serves both as a form of resistance and a means of cultural rebirth. The creative actions seen in the Belarusian protests did not simply express dissent. They also actively reshaped national identity and collective memory, giving rise to a new, culturally revitalized Belarusian identity. This model provides a framework to

understand how creativity functions not just as a tool of opposition but as a mechanism for renewing cultural and national identity in repressive contexts.

4. The eruption of the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests

A wave of protests and accompanying burgeoning displays of creativity broke out in Belarus just days after the elections. As scheduled, the initial post-election protest in Belarus unfolded in the evening of 9 August, 2020, at the Victory Square, Minsk, Belarus. Opposition circles had anticipated electoral fraud long before the event and made preparations accordingly. The protests presented notable distinctions from previous instances in Belarus. Their primary characteristic was the unprecedented scale and diverse methods employed to voice objections. The non-violent approaches encompassed various activities such as protest marches, rallies, demonstrations, human chains, protest letters, appeals to both authorities and the international community, strikes (including occupational strikes), withholding payments for municipal services, cyber-activism, symbolic acts like singing caresses, and the creation of murals, among others.

The largest gatherings were held in pre-planned locations, such as the 16 August, 2020, rally in front of the Belarusian Great Patriotic War Museum on the Victors Avenue, Minsk but also in spontaneously selected locations. The latter ones can be exemplified by the Pushkinskaya (Minsk metro) station, where Alexander Taraikovsky was tragically shot and killed by the police on 10 August, 2020. The brutal reaction of the security forces, as evidenced by the violence at Pushkinskaya (Minsk metro) station, highlights the state's attempt to suppress dissent through fear and intimidation. However, this only intensified the protestors' resolve, demonstrating the dynamic between state repression and protest resilience.

The analysis of the protest locations and their significance reveals a strategic use of urban space to maximize visibility and impact. By choosing both prominent and spontaneous locations, protestors ensured widespread media coverage and maintained the element of surprise, making it difficult for security forces to predict and prevent gatherings. This strategic dispersion of protest sites reflects a sophisticated understanding of urban geography and the tactical advantages it offers.

The brutality of the security forces was evident from the first hours of the protests. In the subsequent days, security forces, equipped with shields and clubs, launched attacks on the assembled crowd. These assaults targeted not only protesters but also bystanders. Throughout the peak of the anti-Lukashenko rebellion, between August, 2020, and March, 2022, a total of 40 000 Belarusians faced politically motivated charges and underwent legal proceedings within the country's penal system (International Partnership for Human Rights et al., 2020; Malerius, 2021; Chodownik & Marques, 2021; Turp-Balazs, 2021).

The broad participation from various segments of society marked a remarkable difference in the events of 2020 compared to the disturbances following the 2006 and 2010 Belarusian presidential elections. Earlier protests were orchestrated by opposition leaders, predominantly drawing support from students and the intelligentsia. These movements could only attract limited groups with pre-established political perspectives. Consequently, the conflict during those periods was delineated as "opposition *versus* power". However, starting from

August, 2020, a discernible shift occurred, expanding the conflict to a “society *versus* power” dynamic. This evolution was driven by the inclusion of previously inactive or marginally active groups in past protests, often perceived as part of Lukashenko’s electorate – state employees, encompassing workers from various state-owned factories, teachers, and healthcare professionals (Vasilevich, 2020). During this wave of protests, individuals from the private sector joined forces, with notable participation from the information technology industry due to their adeptness in using social media and engaging in cyberspace. A notable feature across all these groups was the significant involvement of women, which added a unique dimension to the resistance. Women not only participated in large numbers but also led many of the movements, symbolizing the fight for both political change. This struggle was embodied by figures such as Maria Kalesnikava, Veronika Tsepkalo, and Tsikhanouskaya, whose leadership galvanized public support and drew international attention to the gendered dimensions of the protests.

The involvement of various societal groups indicates a broad-based coalition against Lukashenko’s regime, suggesting that the protests were not merely a political opposition but a societal revolt. This wide-ranging participation also points to deep-seated grievances across different strata of Belarusian society, making the movement more resilient and harder to suppress.

5. The recreation of the national flag

A notable feature of the post-August, 2020, uprising in Belarusian society was the creativity exhibited by the protesters, a factor that significantly influenced the spatial dynamics of the events. The cornerstone of the creative sphere was formed by the non-violent nature of the protests, which constituted a strategic decision by the leaders and a fundamental factor in mobilizing participants.

In the early days of the struggle, protesters crafted a tangible symbol that unquestionably became the most significant throughout the entire wave of protests – the white-red-white flag. During Soviet Union times, this flag was associated with the opposition, particularly the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). Between 1991 and 1995, it served as the official national symbol, but upon assuming power, Lukashenko reinstated the Soviet Union red-green flag, omitting the hammer and sickle. As aptly noted by Bekus,

“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 for Belarus without Lukashenko” (2021a, p. 9).

In this context, the white-red-white flag served as a powerful symbol of resistance and national identity. The widespread adoption of the flag by protesters, as well as its presence in various forms of protest art, underscores its significance as a unifying emblem. By reclaiming this historical symbol, protesters not only expressed their dissent but also articulated a vision for a democratic future rooted in national heritage.

The shift in public sentiment towards the white-red-white flag, despite historical associations with opposition groups, underscores also a significant cultural and political transfor-

mation within Belarusian society. This shift was driven by the flag's recontextualization as a symbol of collective resistance and future aspirations, rather than past political ideologies.

Furthermore, the choice of the white-red-white flag and its widespread acceptance reflect a deeper psychological and cultural resonance within the protest movement. This choice signifies a rejection of the official symbols imposed by Lukashenko's regime and a reclamation of historical identity, which fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose among the protestors.

In the first days of the August, 2020, protests, apart from the white-red-white flag, there was also an official red-green flag among the demonstrators, but soon it was clearly identified as a symbol of power and its terror. Considering the attitude of Belarusians to it, the choice of the white-red-white flag by the demonstrators may have seemed quite surprising at first. The results of research collected and published in 2013 and 2018 by the German-language *Belarus-Analysen*, indicated that in 2013 only less than 10% of Belarusian citizens identified themselves with the white-red-white flag, while for over 67% the symbolism of the red-green flag was more important. 14% of respondents treated them similarly (Laender-analysen.de, 2013). In the research repeated five years later, i.e. in 2018, the identification with the symbolism introduced by Lukashenko was even more clear. The sense of identity with the red-green colours of the flag was expressed by 72% of the respondents, only 7% with the white-red-white and 7% mentioned identification with both (Laender-analysen.de, 2018).

In the meantime, both the official and unofficial flag were used by Belarusian artists as an object of experimentation. One of the precursors of this artistic expression was Vladimir Tsesler, who posted numerous visual variations related to flags on his *Instagram* account. In his visions the central red colour took many forms – from simple, e.g. a heart symbol, to more complex, e.g. reflections of the contours of protesting people (Norris, 2021). In turn, the transformations of the red-green flag referred to negative motives, e.g. Tsesler coloured a police baton with these colours. His works, as well as of many other artists reworking the motif of a red stripe on a white background, were included in the online Flags Museum (Muziej sciahoŭ, 2025).

Before long, white-red-white flags became ubiquitous, not just within the confines of protests, but adorning houses, balconies, and cars across the landscape. These colours became a prevalent theme not only during protest events but also extended beyond, serving as the primary hues for clothing and protective masks – items that frequently led to arrests. Women would offer white and red flowers to security forces positioned in cordons. Balconies displayed arranged underwear, following the white and red colour scheme.

One of the most striking appearance on the streets, reproduced intensively by social media, were women in wedding dresses with a red sash down the center. The innovative idea of using a wedding dress as a symbol of protest was pioneered by Inna Zaitseva, who declared during an interview: "The flags are being taken, so I decided to become a flag myself" (Zaicava, 2020). In the initial days of September, 2020, brides wearing white-red-white dresses emerged on the streets of Grodno, Belarus. Venturing out in such attire aimed to showcase women's resolve while also embodying innocence (Hrodna Life, 2020). Images of young women in bridal attire, posing against the backdrop of heavily armed security forces, conveyed one of the most potent media messages and were frequently featured in global news outlets.

6. Real and imaginative women as symbols of the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests

Creative actions were also concentrated on and performed by three women – Kalesnikava, a musician and chief of the Viktar Babaryka campaign; Veronika Tsepkalo, a spouse of the disqualified candidate Valery Tsepkalo, who was ousted by Lukashenko; and Tsikhanouskaya, a housewife who stepped into the political arena to campaign on behalf of her jailed husband. In popular accounts, the three began to be called “our girls” and “the three graces” (Solomatina & Fein, 2020). The images of these individuals were prominently replicated through photographs, illustrations, or street art. Iconic gestures from their collective appearances – a heart shape, a fist, and a peace sign – came to symbolize the movement.

Their likenesses were not just on portable objects but also immortalized on walls as murals. Among these, Anna Redko’s depiction of Kalesnikava is particularly renowned. Redko drew inspiration from Irakli Moiseevich Toidze’s famous World War II poster *The Motherland Calls* created in 1941, adapting it to feature Kalesnikava accompanied by the Russian slogan *Motherland Mother calls!* (in Russian: *Rodina-mat’ zovyet!*). Such poster art, resonant with patriotic fervour, has historical precedent, with notable examples including Dmitry Moor’s *Did You Volunteer?* (orig., in Russian: *Zapisalsya dobrovol’tsem?*) created in 1920 and the American recruitment poster *I Want You for U.S. Army* created in 1917.

Redko’s artistic representation diverged from the original by substituting the military oath card with a ripped passport held in the subject’s hand. This artistic choice serves as an homage to the incident on 8 September, 2020, when Kalesnikava destroyed her Belarusian passport to avoid being expelled from the nation by security forces, an act which led to her detention. The depiction of Kalesnikava by Redko has been widely replicated and is a common sight on residential buildings throughout Minsk. This transformation of a historical propaganda poster into a symbol of modern resistance exemplifies how creativity can bridge past and present struggles, reinforcing a collective narrative of resilience and defiance.

In addition to reproductions of photographs of female protest leaders, artistic images of imaginary women also took on a symbolic dimension. An example of such initiatives were the protest actions linked to the state’s action undertaken towards public exhibition of the painting *Eva* (created in 1928) by Chaïm Soutine. This piece was the most valuable in a collection exceeding 100 artworks, amassed at the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk, and other locations by Babaryka, the former head of *Belgazprombank*. The collection included works by Belarusian-origin artists from the so-called School of Paris. In June, 2020, as a result of legal proceedings against the bank, the state seized the collection. The seizure of *Eva* sparked numerous protests within the art community and initiated a movement that employed reproductions of the female portrait as a symbol of protest on T-shirts, canvas bags, and stickers (Korsun, 2021).

After the outbreak of post-election protests, the reproductions of the painting became even more popular. On the one hand, *Eva* became the personification of all Belarusian women, especially those subjected to repression (Borisionok, 2020). On the other hand, it symbolized unjustified and even ridiculous actions by the authorities. In November, 2021, the portrait *Eva* and other works from the *Belgazprombank* collection returned to the gallery and could be seen again (Kovtiak, 2022).

In October, 2020, another painting, this time by contemporary artist Yana Chernova, entered the symbolic sphere of the Belarusian protests and gain popularity. Chernova's image, *Belarusian Venus* (orig., in Belarusian: *Bielaruskaya Vieniera*, created in 2020), was depicted as a naked woman with marks from a beating lying on a red and white background. In reality, Chernova's model was a participant in the protests, but she was not beaten. The artist decided to transfer bruises from photos of beaten men onto her body (Potarskaya & Solomatina, 2020).

The use of women as central figures in protest imagery underscores the gender dynamics within the movement and challenges traditional gender roles. The symbolic use of women's images highlights the intersection of gender and political resistance, adding a layer of complexity to the protests and broadening their appeal.

7. Drawing on the past

In the wake of the 2020 Belarusian electoral turmoil, a series of potent and historically resonant protests unfolded, weaving the past and present into a tapestry of defiance and solidarity. August, 2020, saw a resurgence of the Baltic Way spirit, as thousands formed a human chain, a gesture linking not only geographies but also decades of shared resistance. In August, 2020, a demonstration titled the Baltic Way 2020 was created to show unity with the Belarusian protests. On August 23, 2020, predominantly Lithuanians joined by over 50 000 Belarusians residing in Lithuania, assembled to form a human linkage stretching over 30 kilometers from Vilnius, Lithuania, up to the Belarusian frontier (Baltic News Service, 2020). This act was not only a gesture of support for the Belarusian protesters but also a tribute to the 31st anniversary of the original Baltic Way. That historic chain linked around two million individuals from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, who stood united to assert their sovereignty from the Soviet Union and to mark the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact's impact on their nations. The recent formation of a human chain in Belarus echoed this past event, claiming a symbol of a concluding phase in the protracted dissolution of Soviet Union influence in Europe (Bekus, 2021b).

The strategic use of historical references, such as the Baltic Way, illustrates how the Belarusian protests drew on the collective memory of past resistance movements to galvanize support and create a sense of continuity in the struggle against oppression. By invoking these historical events, protestors not only strengthened their narrative of resilience but also connected their movement to broader regional struggles for freedom and sovereignty.

On November 1, 2020, coinciding with the traditional day for honoring forebears, Kurapaty, Minsk, a site deeply associated with the mass atrocities perpetrated by the Soviet regime against the Belarusian people, was the focal point of a demonstration titled *Dziady against Terror* (orig., in Belarusian: *Dziady suprats teroru*). This annual procession has taken place since 1988, spearheaded by the BPF, to pay tribute to the victims slain in Kurapaty. The March, 2020, was distinctive, featuring placards that made explicit allusions to Joseph Stalin's reign of terror. This was to draw a parallel between the past and the present repressions in Belarus, epitomized by a poster stating, "My grandfather was imprisoned in the gulag in the 20th century. His grandson – in the gulag in the 21st century", thus highlighting a grim continuity across generations (Bekus, 2021b).

The use of Kurapaty as a site for protest underscores the deep historical consciousness of the movement. By linking contemporary struggles with the historical memory of political repression in the Soviet Union, protestors effectively framed their resistance as part of a long-standing fight for justice and national dignity.

The historical allusions, particularly to the grim episodes like the executions by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, orig., in Russian: *Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del*, NKVD), emerged as a poignant set of symbols during Belarus' political upheaval. Recalling the atrocities of both Stalinist and Nazi periods played a crucial role in the protest narrative. On social media, comparisons were drawn between the 2020 actions of Belarusian state security against women and the wartime atrocities by the *Schutzstaffel*, serving to lay bare the extreme harshness of Lukashenko's governance and its estrangement from the Belarusian populace (Bekus, 2021a).

This rekindled tradition, along with tributes at sites steeped in painful memories, underscored a narrative of resilience against oppression. These forms of protests, which had its roots in history, were not just a response to current events but a profound statement of collective memory and a rebuke of authoritarian legacies.

The strategic comparison of Lukashenko's regime to historical totalitarian regimes was a powerful rhetorical tool that amplified the moral and ethical dimensions of the protests. This approach not only delegitimized the current regime but also invoked a universal condemnation of authoritarianism, resonating with international observers and human rights advocates.

8. Drawing on the spirit of others

During the Belarusian protests, a distinct array of symbols emerged, many of which drew inspiration from regional as well as more remote movements that resulted in significant change. The Belarusian demonstrators adopted various tactics and symbolic gestures that echoed the essence of other international movements. A notable aspect of this trend was the use of colour symbolism, reminiscent of various "colour revolutions" like the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, where orange became a key motif linked to Viktor Yushchenko's presidential campaign.

In Belarus, white and red umbrellas became a common accessory among protesters, a practice influenced by the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests (hereinafter: Hong Kong protests). These umbrellas served a dual purpose: they were a symbol of resistance and offered practical protection against pepper spray and coloured marking agents used by police to identify and apprehend participants in the demonstrations.

The public performances of the hymn *Almighty God* (orig., in Belarusian: *Mahutny Bozha*), especially in the subways and malls of Minsk, served as a tribute to the acts of civil protest witnessed also in Hong Kong. Similarly, Belarusian protest strategies were influenced by the techniques of Hong Kong's protests, including the use of flash mobs. According to journalist and democracy advocate Franak Viačorka, emulating the *Be Water!* strategy from Hong Kong – which involves evading the police by quickly gathering, dispersing, and then reconvening – was key to avoiding detainment (Zaiets & Borresen, 2020). Viačorka also highlighted

that the Belarusian movement drew inspiration from the women-led protests in the United States and the *Women in White* movements in Cuba.

The adaptation of protest tactics from other global movements highlights the interconnectedness of contemporary civil resistance movements. By learning from the successes and challenges of other protests, Belarusian demonstrators were able to refine their strategies, making them more effective in the face of state repression. This cross-pollination of ideas and tactics also underscores the global nature of the struggle for democracy and human rights, situating the Belarusian protests within a broader international context.

The impact of surrounding nations was also discernible during the protests. The song *Walls* (orig., in Polish: *Mury*, written in 1978), which became an emblematic hymn of the *Solidarity* (orig., in Polish: *Solidarność* (Polish trade union)) in the 1980s, penned by Jacek Kaczmarski, frequently resonated at the gatherings. Originally performed in Russian in Belarus, it was swiftly adapted into the Belarusian language and sung at demonstrations to express support for Tsikhanouskaya.

The use of *Solidarity* (Polish trade union) songs further demonstrates the strategic borrowing of symbols from other successful resistance movements. This not only fostered a sense of solidarity with other oppressed peoples but also provided a source of inspiration and moral support for the Belarusian protestors. By aligning their struggle with the historical success of movements like *Solidarity* (Polish trade union), protestors reinforced their own legitimacy and determination.

Similarly to other protests in the world, also in Belarus, satire constituted another weapon of the protesters. It played a vital role in reduction of the sense of fear, most often by ridiculing the opponent. For that reason, a cockroach with a cartoon-like head of president Lukashenko became a common symbol used in Internet posts, flyers, or graffiti. This idea was borrowed from the campaign of Sergei Tikhanovsky, which ran under the slogan *Stop the Cockroach!* (orig., in Belarus: *Spynicie tarakana!*). As a consequence, people who had been gathering on the streets since the election day often brought flip-flops with them. This footwear, which is sometimes used at home to kill cockroaches, has become one of the symbols of the protest.

9. Drawing on state's brutality

In the very first days of the protests, the repression and brutality of the security forces was met with an artistic response. Following the harsh arrests and detentions of protesters, friends and relatives of those confined in the Okrestina, Minsk, organized an event called *My Cell* (orig., in Belarusian: *Maya kamiera*) on 22 August, 2020. At the Victory Square, a group of 50 stood tightly together within a space marked on the ground to represent a cell designed for six, highlighting the overcrowded conditions faced by the incarcerated demonstrators. The purpose of this demonstration was to express unity with those imprisoned and to visually communicate to onlookers and the global online community the cramped conditions under which the protesters were being detained (Sudak, 2020).

This demonstration not only highlighted the inhumane treatment of detained protestors but also served as a powerful visual metaphor for the suffocating political environment under

Lukashenko's regime. By bringing attention to these conditions, the protestors were able to garner sympathy and support from both domestic and international audiences, further isolating the regime.

Particular courage was shown by protesters who took individual actions. In October, 2020, Ulyana Nevzorova stood on a subway train between seated passengers holding a poster with the words: *This poster may become the cause of my detention* (Chrysalismagazine, 2020b). This sparked discussions among passengers, and one of them tried to take it away from her. The following month, the same artist made a public appearance with a poster with the caption: *I can't forget this August* (Chrysalismagazine, 2020a).

In August, 2020, a group of musicians formed the *Free Choir* (orig., in Belarusian: *Volny Khor*), which quickly became one of the largest undercover communities bringing together the profession as a response to police brutality. Anticipating the possibility of arrest and attack by security forces, they organized performances in parts online, but also in subway stations, train stations, shopping malls, and other public places. The *Free Choir* constituted one of the artistic pillars of the protests in Belarus. It was formed on a self-organizing basis and had no hierarchy. Its repertoire mainly included old folk songs, the national anthem, songs associated with resistance against the Soviet regime, as well as other patriotic songs (Valynets, 2021).

The emergence of the *Free Choir* as a decentralized, self-organizing protest group highlights the innovative ways in which Belarusian society adapted to the increasingly repressive environment. The use of music and cultural heritage as forms of protest not only maintained the morale of the protestors but also served as a subtle form of defiance that was harder for the regime to suppress. This approach illustrates the adaptability and resilience of the movement, as well as its deep connection to Belarusian cultural identity.

10. In search for safer places

As the brutality of the security forces escalated, the scale of the protests began to diminish and some protests began to move to less public areas, *i.e.* to yards farther from the center, so-called neighbourhoods. One of the most active neighbourhoods was the relatively newly built *Kaskad* residential complex, Minsk. Its residents were on average younger and more affluent compared to Minsk's population. Many worked in Belarus' burgeoning information technology sector, while a small percentage worked in and depended on government institutions (Koziura & Bystryk, 2020).

From the first days of the protest, a white-red-white flag was hung between houses. *Kaskad* gained the most publicity because of the mural titled *DJs of Changes*. It depicted two musicians Kirill Galanov and Vlad Sokolovsky publicly playing the song *Changes!* (orig., in Belarusian: *Peremen*, created in 2020) composed by Viktor Tsoi, a pioneer of the Russian rock scene of the perestroika time. Since then, the song has been treated as an anti-regime protest song in the post-Soviet space. The courtyard around the mural was named Square of Changes, Minsk, after its name. The mural has been repeatedly painted over by security forces, but each time residents have recreated it. Not even the insertion of police officers, who made sure it did not appear on the wall again, stopped them from doing so. The courtyard

in the *Kaskad* neighbourhood inspired many other Minsk local communities to protest near their homes. Together they watched companies, theatrical performances and organized mini-concerts.

The shift of protests to more localized and less public areas reflects the adaptability of the movement in the face of increased repression. By decentralizing and moving to smaller, community-based protests, the movement was able to continue despite the state's efforts to suppress larger gatherings. This strategy also fostered a stronger sense of community and solidarity among participants, who could rely on their neighbors for support and protection.

In addition to the move of the protests to backyards, another way to avoid repression and censorship for the art world was to move to online space. In art galleries specially created for this purpose, works with themes against Lukashenko and his repressive apparatus were exhibited in online spaces. The *Chrysalis* (magazine) joined the resistance by preparing a virtual exhibition of art referring to the protests. It contained artworks from all over Belarus. *Chrysalis* (magazine) has been organizing exhibitions of visual artists for years, primarily on its website and *Instagram* account. The magazine's platform, which was made available to The Free Belarus initiative, included reproductions of paintings, illustrations, photographs, but also graffiti and banners, as well as photos of tattoos. The magazine also recalled earlier works by artists who opposed the regime. In this way, it showed the tradition of resistance in Belarus. For example, in 2012, Russian-born artist Tima Radhy created an installation entitled *Stability*, which presented a pyramid of shields used by the security forces with a throne on top.

By leveraging digital platforms, artists were able to reach a global audience, bypassing state-controlled media and creating a virtual space for dissent. This strategy not only preserved the cultural and artistic aspects of the movement but also ensured that the message of resistance continued to spread, even as physical protests were suppressed.

As the brutality of the authorities intensified, protesters began to devise strategies for organizing actions without direct participation. One such action, undertaken in February, 2021, involved attaching flowers to walls and railings with duct tape as a gesture of solidarity with Katsiaryna Barysevich (*Chrysalismagazine*, 2021).

This change in tactics is well reflected in the words of one of the organizers of the campaign: "They are beating us, they detain us and give us huge fines, but we still exist. We have become invisible, but we are still the majority" (Kovtiak, 2022).

By finding new ways to express dissent, such as through symbolic gestures and decentralized actions, the protestors were able to maintain momentum and visibility, even in the face of severe repression. This evolution in tactics highlights the innovative and flexible nature of the Belarusian resistance, which continually adapted to the changing political landscape.

11. Conclusions

The unprecedented surge of creativity witnessed during the Belarusian protests marked a significant chapter in the history of regional civil movements. The protests revealed a deep connection to the nation's historical and cultural fabric. They signified not only a spontaneous outpouring of dissent but also a wellspring of collective identity and memory, artfully wielded as instruments of nonviolent resistance.

Analyzing the creative strategies employed by the protestors reveals several key insights. The use of symbols, such as the white-red-white flag and bridal imagery, highlighted a deep connection to Belarusian cultural heritage and identity. These symbols helped unify the protestors and communicated their resistance to both national and international audiences. The movement was deeply rooted in a narrative of national sovereignty and pride, distinguishing it from other regional protests that relied more heavily on external geopolitical symbols.

This wave of protest diverged from previous regional movements by consciously avoiding the use of slogans and symbols associated with the Euromaidan protests, such as the flag of Europe. Instead, it emphasized historical and cultural symbols that resonated more deeply with collective memory and identity of Belarusian. This approach fostered a unique and cohesive identity among the protestors. The choice of the white-red-white flag as the dominant symbol underscored a preference for national history over the new political symbols or alignment with external entities. It reinforced a sense of continuity with Belarusian struggles and helped strengthen the protestors' sense of unity.

The protests also drew on historical narratives, such as the grim episodes of NKVD executions, to underline the theme of resilience against oppression. Protestors skillfully used social media to compare current state actions to past atrocities, drawing powerful parallels that strengthened their narrative and garnered empathy from domestic and international audiences.

The visibility and impact of the protests were amplified by the symbolic use of bridal imagery and the leadership of prominent female figures, adding moral authority and emotional resonance. The involvement of women in key roles highlighted issues of gender equality and further solidified the identity of the movement.

These elements together forged a powerful amalgamation of creativity, historical awareness, and modern communication strategies, unprecedented in both Belarus and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The strategic integration of cultural symbols and innovative protest tactics created a multifaceted approach that was both resilient and adaptable in the face of state violence and censorship. Additionally, the protests have transformed public and digital spaces into arenas of artistic expression, effectively countering repression with creativity.

In essence, the Belarusian experience epitomizes a historical moment where creative resilience confronted authority and forged new narratives of national identity. As 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" (2021a, p. 1).

The Belarusian protests offer scientifically new insights into the role of creativity in social movements. They highlight how creative strategies can effectively mobilize support, sustain momentum, and challenge oppressive regimes by drawing on cultural heritage and historical symbols. This analysis not only enriches the discourse on political resistance but also provides valuable lessons for future movements seeking to harness the power of creativity in their struggles for justice and democracy.

However, this study goes beyond analyzing the protest's symbolic and historical references, proposing a new theoretical model: creative resistance as a cultural rebirth. It posits that creativity in protest movements serves not only as an instrument of resistance but also as a mechanism for cultural renewal. In the Belarusian context, the creative acts of protest – whether through the reclamation of the white-red-white flag, the symbolic leadership of women, or the innovative use of art and humour – did more than oppose Lukashenko's regime. They initiated a process of cultural rebirth, wherein suppressed national identity and collective memory were reasserted and transformed into a new, unifying narrative of Belarusian identity.

The creative resistance as a civic awakening model highlights how, in authoritarian contexts, creativity functions on two levels. On the surface, it provides immediate and symbolic resistance to oppressive power structures. On a deeper level, it acts as a catalyst for the renewal of cultural identity, where repressed symbols, histories, and narratives are reimagined and reintegrated into the collective consciousness of the movement. The Belarusian protests demonstrated this dual role of creativity, where acts of resistance simultaneously worked to reclaim and regenerate a national identity that had been stifled under authoritarian rule.

This perspective enriches the understanding of how creativity not only challenges political regimes but also contributes to the broader process of reshaping national identities. The Belarusian case illustrates how cultural heritage and collective memory play a crucial role in driving both political resistance and social transformation. By drawing on both historical and contemporary forms of creative expression, the model provides valuable insights into how movements sustain momentum and mobilize diverse groups through creativity. This contribution advances the discourse on the intersection of creativity and political resistance, offering a framework that could apply to other instances of civil resistance and cultural renewal.

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