Introduction: The Sociology of Belarusian Protest

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Revolutions and mass protests infuse their participants with a new sense of subjectivity. Breaking with routines, such events are also occasions of heightened curiosity and thirst for knowledge—about the protests themselves and about a society suddenly appearing thrillingly unfamiliar.

The ongoing Belarusian protests against the political regime of Aliaksandar Lukashenka are no exception. Erupting on August 9, 2020, in response to egregious electoral fraud and galvanized by a brutal police crackdown that subjected peaceful protesters to mass arrests, violence, and torture, they quickly produced an explosion of analysis and debate that has found a receptive audience among Belarusian citizens and the global academic community alike. The self-organized neighborhood groups emerging out of the first protest wave have invited Belarusian historians and philosophers to give courtyard lectures; field observations and statistical analyses have been shared in Telegram or Facebook groups, at protest marches in Hrodna and Homel′, and at solidarity events in Hamburg and Houston. Much of the international scholarly debate took place in the form of webinars: a makeshift solution owed to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, these had the unexpected benefit of showcasing the work of Belarusian scholars much faster than would otherwise have been possible.

The present forum grew out of one of the first such webinars in August 2020.[1] Its focus is on protest itself, its various participants and non-participants, and the ways and extent to which social relations are being transformed in them. Its perspective is sociological in a broad sense. Thus

1. The Sociology of Belarusian Protest, August 26, 2020. Sponsored by the Einstein Forum, the Ukraine in European Dialogue Program at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, the Democracy Seminar (part of Public Seminar and the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies at the New School for Social Research, New York), and the Research Committee 47 (Social Classes and Social Movements) of the International Sociological Association. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaMS1ng2e0M (accessed January 28, 2021).

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our forum provides a counterpoint to a flurry of articles that have looked at the protests primarily through a political science lens, as an expression of contention between macro-actors—the Belarusian protesters understood as an opposition movement, the country's leadership, and its ambivalent backers in the Kremlin—and focusing on questions of strategy, tactics, and regime types.[2] It also complements the first journal issues on the topic, published mostly in languages other than English, which have proposed to interpret the movement either as a postcolonial revolution finally replacing stale post-imperial nationalism with a new subjectivity rooted in ethnic and cultural diversity,[3] or as a catch-up revolution replaying the central European revolutions of 1989 to topple a regime frozen in time.[4]

The emancipatory appeal of the Belarusian revolt against the authoritarian system does echo the events of 1989 that saw the collapse of communist regimes in eastern and central Europe. Belarus, however, is likely to divert from the scripts of westernization and liberalization evident in other east European states, as the study of protest imaginaries by Nelly Bekus demonstrates. Drawing on an analysis of the symbolic dimension of the Belarusian repertoire of contention, her essay shows how the broad range of intersecting and distinct social groups participating in the protests facilitate a process of re-signification of the cultural and political ideas that were previously involved in the symbolic struggles among the official and oppositional elites.

Simon Lewis's insightful account shows the role that music and verse has played in that re-signification. He demonstrates not only how musical and poetic production has supplied the emotional and linguistic templates to mediate responses to events, but has served to build a sense of collective identity among protesters, establishing transnational solidarity and, ultimately, affecting the emotional regime of Belarusian society. The songs, slogans, and poems of protest are often seen as *resources* or *tools* deployed by protest movements to achieve objectives such as unity, resilience, and organization. So are media, including social media such as the Telegram messenger app that has served as a crucial part of the information infrastructure in Belarus since August 2020. Mischa Gabowitsch's essay goes beyond this instrumental perspective to capture other ways of engaging with the online and offline ecology of protest—ways that may turn out to have a longer-lasting impact than the question of the movement's short-term success or failure in toppling the dictator.

2. Lucan Ahmad Way, "Belarus Uprising: How a Dictator Became Vulnerable." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (October 2020): 17–27.

3. The following articles appeared in Ab imperio no. 3 (2020): Ilya Gerasimov, "The Belarusian Postcolonial Revolution: Field Reports," 259–72; Mark Tsinkevich, "Postkolonial′naia revoliutsiia v postsovetskoi Belarusi," 273–79; Irina Romanova, "Voina mirov: Znaki, simvoly, mesta pamiati," 280–308; Sergei Zelenko, "Khronotop protestnogo plakata: Karnaval bez dialoga," 309–22; Alexander Friedman, "Belarusian Revolution 2020: Jewish Perspectives," 323–48; Maksim Rust, "Kak internet (pochti) pobedil rezhim," 349–62.

4. "Macht statt Gewalt oder: Gewalt statt Macht Belarus: Schritte zur Freiheit oder: Repression, Schikane, Terror," a special issue of *Osteuropa* 70, no. 10–11 (2020), at https://www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/hefte/2020/10-11/ (accessed March 9, 2021).

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The other essays in this cluster probe the unprecedented situation in Belarus from the perspective of a range of social identities available in Belarusian society: women, the new creative and IT class, and factory and kolkhoz workers.

Natalia Paulovich addresses the much-noticed visibility of women in the protest movement. Drawing on studies of women's agency in non-western contexts, she argues that the prominent displays of traditional female aesthetics and emphasis on women's role as wives, mothers, and grandmothers does not diminish the protests' feminist dimension. Elena Gapova highlights the prominent role played by a new class of IT professionals and creative precariat striving for rights and recognition as carriers of a broader societal and economic transformation. Being integrated in the global post-industrial service and creative economy, these groups have engaged in full-scale defiance of the paternalist state, placing the quest for liberal citizenship at the core of the Belarusian revolution.

An alternative class dimension is explored by Volodymyr Artiukh in his study of the labor unrest that has not only been one of the most unexpected aspect of the Belarusian events but has represented a unique form of workers' mobilization not seen in any other post-Soviet country. Drawing on an analysis of protest event data, his article reveals how joining the protests allowed Belarusian workers, even if temporarily, to overcome atomization and challenge the regime of bureaucratic despotism characteristic of Belarus's state capitalism. Finally, Ronan Hervouet provides important insights into why the collectivized countryside has remained largely detached from the protests. Informed by a rich ethnographic study of the moral economy of kolkhoz workers, his essay depicts the continuing appeal of a strong state as a protective force in the countryside, resulting in a growing divergence between political and societal expectations in urban and rural settings.

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