

Belarusian Protests: Collective Memory and Symbolic Sites in the Context of War Memory

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Abstract: In August 2020, presidential elections were held in Belarus, followed by waves of mass protests and a period of harsh repression by the Lukashenko regime. In this period of myriad political conflicts and polarized society, there have been numerous cases of re-appropriation of language and symbols associated with World War II. In this paper, I explore the ways in which the Belarusian protest movement of the 2020s shaped memories of past conflicts, which it subsequently transferred into these struggles for memory. This paper attempts to capture what kind of memories and historical associations were used by the protesters to convey messages about their identity, values, and ideas. Stopping at several examples, I reflect on the activists' repertoire of actions in which the movement sought to disrupt and reformulate the dominant practice of the official narrative of the Great Patriotic War, which is central to the legacy in the symbolic canon of the contemporary Belarusian regime. The memory of the Great Patriotic War and the founding myth of the partisan republic, which for many years were the exclusive domain of the neo-Soviet identity, were transformed during the protests into a potent symbolic and rhetorical arsenal for mobilizing opponents of the regime.

Keywords: Belarus, memory politics, social movement, national identity, World War II, protest

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Introduction

Social movements are often described as inherently new, almost ahistorical factors monitoring only a synchronous image of its time, which is practically accepted without reference to the past. In this way, the set perspective may seem too one-sided when, at the symbolic level, protests are accepted as new and unprecedented, as carriers of the future and innovation, unburdened by the context of the past. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that these are social movements, and the actors are involved in the process of building collective memory, defined as a set of symbols and practices that refer to the past and are shared by a particular community of people (Zamponi 2013). Thus, the social movement can also discursively refer to history, re-create, reinterpret, and question it in a nostalgic way, which is reflected in memories of past social arrangements and conflicts. The past can be summoned here in various ways (Daphi and Zamponi 2019; Daphi and Zimmermann 2021).

In this sense, there has recently been an interest of scientists in connecting two specific areas: the study of social movements and the study of collective memory. Over the last decade, there has been a significant shift in terms of the amount of literature produced bridging these two research areas, with studies focusing on the social movements' mnemonic activities. Collective memory is increasingly considered a useful tool in deepening our understanding of social movements (see, for example: Baumgarten 2017; Daphi 2017; Doerr 2014; Hajek 2013; Neveu 2014). The social movement can then be seen at this level as basically "*mnemonic communities*", in the participatory effects of which there is "*mnemonic socialization*" that within the community includes the transfer of the past into the present and interpretation of memories for social actors (Zerubavel 1996).

The specific case of Eastern Europe is not yet more prominently represented in these recent expert debates, and the case of the Belarusian protests in 2020 could be seen through this conceptual framework outlined above, which emphasizes the importance of collective memory within the social movement. In this specific context of the recent protests in Belarus, the ubiquity of past symbols and their historical grounding in the current collective action can hardly be denied. It is not just memories of previous revolutions (e.g., comparisons with 1989, inspiration in Hong Kong protests) or previous mobilizations that have fundamentally affected repertoires of actions, strategies or ideological frameworks that have been considered successful or useless. There is no doubt that the emancipatory appeal of the Belarusian protests may give the impression of a historical parallel with the anti-Soviet revolutions of 1989, but it is at the level of interpretive and symbolic treatment of the historical memory of the communist heritage, and we find here

completely different ways that the demonstrating protagonists of the association used as they communicated a message about their identity.

This study focuses on how activists demonstrate memories of past conflicts and engage in memory struggles, given the specific context of the Belarusian protests that took place against the backdrop of the rigged presidential elections in 2020. I will try to describe what kind of memories and historical associations the protesters themselves used to convey a message about their identity, values, and ideas, which they used afterwards in the struggle to reformulate the hegemonic (official) or other “mainstream” version. In such memory struggles, the bearers of the “anti-memory” are often the social movements whose protagonists try to interpret the frame as a historical story with its “villains” and “own heroes” (see, e.g., Neveu 2014).

Belarusian activists drew memories from local or supranational traditions of the past, which, however, were to suit their current protest purposes or to disrupt official remembrance. As early as 2020, the nation’s previously promoted opposition discourse, consolidated around the memory of the victims of Stalinism, gained unprecedented social appeal, which manifested itself during various annual and commemorative events at the Kurapaty Memorial. The Kurapats represent perhaps the most significant symbolic place associated with Stalin’s terror and the victims of the NKVD, but efforts to “revive” this memory during the protests did not lead to complete alienation of the Soviet legacy, as was the case in post-communist times in other Central and Eastern European countries. The Kurapats became one of the most important points of reference in this multi-layered process of selection, hierarchization and assessment of historical memory, where past experiences of police violence, torture and abuse were transferred to the present with the persistent Belarusian regime. The memory of the Great Patriotic War, which was previously associated with official memory and politics, was suddenly effectively re-appropriated by the demonstrators and provided them with a framework for reconsidering their identity (Bekus 2021).

In order to reconstruct the protest events, the paper draws on an extensive set of records from the public speeches of key political representatives of the opposition movement, publicly known figures in the environment of opposition discourse, such as popular artists, political commentators, or human rights organizations. As sources of information, the records of the opposition movement were analyzed in the form of press releases, websites, social networks and above all telegram chats, videos, and other visual records important for the expression of commemorative acts within the protest resistance. In addition to opposition representatives and participants of the protest movement, the collected material also includes media outputs of representatives of the official regime. Last but

not least, in an attempt to capture and frame the wider context, the article tried to integrate the results of the analysis with a number of secondary sources that correspond to the topic of the chosen case study.

Conceptual basis

The 1980s were characterized by a trend of use of several innovative concepts that greatly influenced the literature on social movements, which to some extent foreshadowed the later inclusion of memory in the analysis of protest and controversial politics. In this spirit, the “cultural reversal” in social movement studies meant that much more attention was paid to how activists make sense of their environment and actions, how they turn cultural products into attributes and interpret their political complaints through them. The symbolic dimension of collective action has become significant along with researchers focusing on interpretive processes, especially in the context of frame analyses (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson and Modigliani 1989), and also on building collective identity (Melucci 1989, 1996; Touraine 1981; Daphi 2011).

In terms of cultural approaches to the study of social movements, attention has long been focused on framing processes, which was conceptually proposed and further elaborated by Snow and his colleagues (1986), who managed to combine resource mobilization and socio-psychological perspectives by emphasizing thought dynamics among social movement organizations and potential participants in the movement. When it comes to external communication, the framing approach provides us with important guidance on how memory can be used strategically. Social movements “*frame or assign meaning to events and conditions and interpret them in ways that are designed to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, gain the support of onlookers, and demobilize antagonists*” (Snow and Benford 1988: 197–198). Memory affects the probability that certain images will be resonant and central. To explain why certain frames resonate with respect to collective memory, we need a detailed reconstruction of contemporary collective memory and the memory struggles in which the movement is incorporated (Baumgarten 2017: 53).

While framing can be useful for answering certain types of questions on specific topics (see the previous paragraph), it cannot be overlooked that this approach also has its significant limitations. For example, when it highlights the strategic attitudes of activists as calculating actors and their ability to persuade, which largely obscures the limitations of the different discursive fields that these actors deliberately try to manipulate (Steinberg 1999: 742, 772). Jansen

also points to the ontological shortcomings of framing, which he finds in the reification of the metaphorical and ideological frames used, which are considered a phenomenon in themselves (“*sui generis*”); at this level, they are schematically grasped, regrouped, and utilized by activists and in the next phase isolated, identified and cataloged by analysts. According to Jansen, the ontological status thus understood should undermine the often-assumed goal (Benford 1997; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986) to view framing as a process while at the same time leading to an ahistorical view of frames, symbols, and their use. The problem with frame analysis may also be that it is too rigid for those who prefer a more subtle approach to cultural and historical analysis. Last but not least, its partial limitation can also be attributed to the fact that it is designed primarily to explain mobilization patterns (see, e.g., Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). A well-limited focus on mobilization can blind analysts to other important dimensions of the phenomenon, as participation may not always be central to the analytics. It is the consideration of different dimensions that can ultimately contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the culture of the movement, social dynamics, or interactions with related or hostile groups (Jansen 2007: 957–958).

In this context, Olick talks about the basic dichotomization of approaches in the study of collective memory, when one layer is conceptualized in terms of the aggregation of individual memories (so-called “collected memory”). The second type mentioned is a perspective that refuses to reduce collective memory to a collection of individual memories. It represents a collectivist conception of memory. While the dimension of “accumulated memory” allows the importance of group processes to be taken into account, the perspective of collective memory emphasizes that some aspects of collective memory cannot be reduced to an aggregation of individuals (Olick 1999: 343–345). Nevertheless, there is a growing effort to link the two approaches in constructing a new “historical sociology of mnemonic practices” (Olick and Robbins 1998), able to take into account both public and private contexts and factors. An example of bridging this gap can be the work of Baumgarten (2017), who distinguishes between “group memory” and “collective memory”. Group-specific collective memory is constructed in the daily interaction of group members. A social movement usually consists of activist groups that construct their own collective memory based on the collective memories existing in society and, at the same time, contribute to the formation of collective memory at the social level (Baumgarten 2017: 52).

The construction of group memory manifests itself during the interactions between variously involved actors, whose actions are not completely arbitrary, but their chosen procedures in the interpretation of the past are largely subject

to already existing national struggles over memory. In the very process of creating a commemorative repertoire, the movement must deal with the filtering of available and unwanted pasts, which are often pre-embedded in the structure of the wider collective memory through the identitarian ideological frames of the movement (Baumgarten 2017: 59–60). Social movements often include distinct communities referring to different sets of symbols and practices, where a particular actor may belong to more than one group, allowing the development of a multi-level identity based on different mnemonic practices (see Zamponi 2013). Like official memory, movement counter-memory is primarily selective in its development of memory practice: “Dominant memory is not monolithic, nor is popular memory purely authentic” (Olick and Robbins 1998:127). Protagonists of the movement operate in the area of collective memory production, where they engage in polyvocal interpretation, with an effort to assert their moralizing imperatives, how to “correctly” interpret the past, who should remember and what form the historical narrative should take (Della Porta and Tufaro 2022: 1387–1391).

At this level, collective memory is seen as a mnemonic landscape subject to diverse contextual interpretations, which represents a controversial terrain in which actors (individuals and groups) compete to define the past and symbolic places of memory (see Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Olick and Robbins 1998). In these memory struggles, memory and recollection are nothing rigid or static, but rather the optics are aimed at capturing constant change and shaping never-ending processes that involve differences of power, stratification, and rivalry (Farthing and Kohl 2013; Olick and Robbins 1998). Strategic use and memory formation has been observed in elites and challengers not only in larger commemorative events (Fishman 2011), which can be described as various ceremonies and rituals (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), but also in daily activities (Farthing and Kohl 2013), again forgotten events (Schudson 1992) or the reputation of public figures (Polletta 1998; Verdery 1999). Social movements are essentially part of the field of actors involved in memory struggles, where these actors or interested groups claim commemorative events, documentation of the past or publicly support the popularity of certain historical figures (Ghoshal 2013).

Research here focuses mainly on the actors, processes and factors involved in this choice, including movements that can act as “mnemonic factors” (Peri 1999: 106) and perform “memory work” (Schwartz 1996; Zelizer 1995). Of interest here is the study of so-called counter-memories – “against the grain” memories of marginalized groups and events – explicitly examining such a controversial nature of memory (Goldberg, Porat and Schwarz 2006; Molden 2016; Olick and Robbins 1998). Accordingly, scientists are increasingly focusing on basic

alternative memories that challenge the hegemonic version reproduced in state institutions. The traditional model based on the conflict between official state-approved memory and alternative memories of citizens (Olick 2003) has recently been challenged by works focusing on the role of civil society actors, including the movement, in negotiating the hegemonic narrative of the past (Hajek 2013). Recent studies have analyzed the predominance of certain past narratives as a result of a more complicated and complex process in which the state is only one of the actors competing in a highly media-driven field, partially dominated by market dynamics and deeply structured power relations (Daphi and Zamponi 2019: 402).

Glorification of the Soviet war heritage and partisan resistance in the official memory of Belarus

Through several generations in Belarusian society, the idea that the Great Patriotic War was a sacred event and the basis of the history of the Belarusian people was internalized and consolidated. Towns and villages are dotted with war memorials, and many schools have a museum dedicated to local history and war veterans and partisans who lived and fought in neighboring villages or towns. Meetings with war veterans are held regularly at all schools (Zadora 2017: 87–88).

The celebration of victory is always on a large scale, while the official ideology of the Belarusian regime in this context sacralized and incorporated for its purposes the most important symbolic dates referring to the Great Patriotic War (June 22, 1941; July 3, 1944; and May 9, 1945). Shifts in the symbolic dates and places of remembrance is a strong political message. After coming to power, Lukashenko initiated a controversial referendum to change in the date of Independence Day. The original date was July 27, referring to the adoption of the Declaration of sovereignty of Belarus and the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. However, since the disputed national referendum of 1996, Independence Day has been set to July 3, commemorating the liberation of Minsk by the Red Army from Nazi invaders in 1944 (Silitski 2005: 87).

The central trop of unity among all Belarusians, who by definition were loyal communists, was most powerful in the account of the “Belarusian partisans” who acted as a metonymic indicator of Belarus’s war activity as a whole:

«Советская Белоруссия внесла неоценимый вклад в разгром врага. Она стала республикой-партизанкой. В строй народных мстителей встали около полумиллиона человек. Восемьдесят восемь из них удостоены высокого звания Героя Советского Союза. Героическое сопротивление народа фашизму, начавшееся в Брестской крепости, в боях под Гродно,

Минском, Полоцком, Лепелем, Витебском, Борисовом, Могилевом и Гомелем, продолжалось до полного изгнания оккупантов»² (Лукашенко 2014a).

The partisans fought heroically under the leadership of the Communist Party, which brought victory, and the Belarusian population always saw the partisans as their own armed forces, their defenders, who did everything in their power to save the people of Belarus (Романовский 1975: 43).

«На фронте и в тылу, в партизанских отрядах и в подполье, в мрачных гетто и концлагерях советские люди совершили подвиг, равного которому нет в мировой истории, превратив трагедию в триумф, а горечь поражения – в праздник Победы. Беларусь стала первым рубежом обороны, не покоровшимся врагу. Подвиг защитников Брестской крепости, мужество сотен тысяч партизан и подпольщиков, доблесть солдат-освободителей, спасших нашу Родину от фашистского ярма, золотыми буквами вписаны в скрижали отечественной истории»³ (Лукашенко 2013).

The partisans embodied the people and vice versa. According to this circular logic, all Belarusians defended the USSR because of their innate love for Soviet power, and the war “heroism” of the Belarusian people was the embodiment of their timeless Soviet devotion. The guerrilla heroism was a proof of Soviet Belarusian identity (Lewis 2017: 377).

«Всем тем, кто сознательно искажает факты, и тем, кто заблудился, запутался, напомним: это не коалиция западных союзников гнала

² “Soviet Belarus has made an invaluable contribution to the defeat of the enemy. It became a partisan republic. About half a million people joined the ranks of the people’s avengers. Eighty-eight of them were awarded the high title of Hero of the Soviet Union. The heroic resistance of the people to fascism, which began in the Brest Fortress, in the battles near Grodno, Minsk, Polotsk, Lepel, Vitebsk, Borisov, Mogilev and Gomel, continued until the occupiers were completely driven out” (translated by the author).

³ “At the front and in the rear, in partisan detachments and in the underground, in gloomy ghettos and concentration camps, Soviet people accomplished a feat that has no equal in world history, turning tragedy into triumph, and the bitterness of defeat into Victory Day. Belarus became the first line of defense that did not submit to the enemy. The feat of the defenders of the Brest Fortress, the courage of hundreds of thousands of partisans and underground fighters, the valor of the soldiers-liberators who saved our Motherland from the fascist yoke, are inscribed in golden letters in the tablets of national history”.

гитлеровских агрессоров от Москвы до самого Берлина, не союзники уничтожили коричневую чуму там, где она зародилась, не они освободили от захватчиков Советский Союз, нашу Беларусь и Минск. Это советский народ, мы, белорусы, не покорились. Народ встал на защиту своей Родины. Миллионы людей – воины Красной армии, подпольщики и партизаны – сражались с врагом с первого до последнего дня»⁴ (Лукашенко 2021).

The relatively short phase of the post-Soviet period (1991–1994) was marked by an initiative to reconsider the current historiographical approach (Lindner 1999: 423–477), but this process abruptly ceased with the advent of August 1995 when Lukashenko ordered the removal of all humanities textbooks published between 1992–1994 from schools and universities. This was followed by a revision of school textbooks and the removal of politically unreliable teachers and researchers from state institutions (Lindner 1999: 441).

After Lukashenko took office, the tradition of the Soviet mnemonic heritage was revitalized and “rediscovered” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and began to be instrumentalized by official structures into a central ideological framework of a political program that played a central role in building historical narrative, memory, and national identity in newly consolidating regime. In the first decade of his rule, the regime continued to satisfy the then-dominant nostalgia for the Soviet past, which reflected real sentiments within Belarusian society. In this context, the official historiography emphasized the unity of the three East Slavic nations («концепция Западнорусизма») and the “brotherhood” of the Belarusian and Russian nations, which followed a continuity dating back to Kievan Rus (Rudling 2017: 77).

The referendums soon returned the original Soviet symbols, albeit with some minor changes. Russian was established as the second official language, and, for example, the 1996 referendum constitutionally legitimized a shift in the official state calendar and established July 3 as Independence Day. Constitutional changes that expanded the scope of the president’s executive powers gave the presidential administration the responsibility for planning and budgeting state

⁴ “To all those who deliberately distort the facts, and to those who get lost, confused, let me remind you: it was not the coalition of the Western allies that drove the Nazi aggressors from Moscow to Berlin itself, it was not the allies who destroyed the brown plague where it originated, it was not they who liberated the Soviet Union from the invaders Union, our Belarus and Minsk. These are the Soviet people; we Belarusians did not submit. The people stood up to defend their homeland. Millions of people – soldiers of the Red Army, underground fighters, and partisans – fought the enemy from the first to the last day”.

celebrations.

However, with the onset of the new millennium, the official version of Belarusian nationalism quietly began to deviate from the broader concept of the “neo-soviet cult of remembrance”. Such delimitation efforts came increasingly in waves as the rift in the consensus between Minsk and the Kremlin escalated, requiring some distance from Russian influence (Ioffe 2021: 152–153). In this sense, maintaining Belarus’s independence, protecting its own borders, and consolidating Belarusian statehood has become a priority. Thus, in terms of narratives and reminders of the war years and victories, the Belarusian leader tried to create a nation by claiming a specific Belarusian version of the Great Patriotic War (Marples 2012: 440–441). The official narrative changed its trajectory and ceased to represent only a duplication of the Russo-centric model and was no longer focused only on the Soviet and Slavic origins of Belarus and Belarusians. The official narrative of Belarusian nationalism, as presented in history textbooks, has now often had to manoeuvre between pro-Russian and nativist concepts to create its own narrative, which Grigory Ioffe described as “*Creole*” (Wilson 2011: 203–206; Ioffe 2007: 365–369).

If the Soviet myth of a “guerrilla republic” underlined the Belarusian nation’s contribution to the pan-Soviet pantheon of heroic triumphalism, a version promoted by the Lukashenko regime nationalized the myth in unobtrusive yet identifiable ways (Rudling 2008; Marples 2014). We can observe this, for example, in the performance “Flower of Victory”, which represents this trend of isolationist memorization. While in 2015, the Ukrainian authorities apparently adopted the Western symbol of the poppy and tried to convert the country from a Eurasian to a European model of civilization, Belarus chose an apple flower decorated with a ribbon in the national colors (red and green). It represents an emptied semantical symbol that both rejects the Russian commemorative hegemony of St. George’s Ribbon but at the same time maintains a distance from the Western European victim-centred narrative.

The Belarusian case is, therefore, a peculiar mosaic of overworked Soviet tropes, in which the regime does not fundamentally adhere to the Russo-centric or Eurasian civilizational identity but also rejects Western sacrificial narratives and develops demands for its own autonomous space of national memory (Fedor 2017: 20–21).



Picture 1. Ribbon of Saint George
(published in РИА Новости in 2022)⁵



Picture 2. “Flowers of the Great Victory”
(published in БЕЛТА in 2020)⁶



Picture 3. Red Poppy Flower
(published in BBC News Україна in 2017)⁷

⁵ https://ria.ru/20220505/lenta-1786961521.html?fbclid=IwAR3K-7BtD59AI0w-4SqTk_qky9UAac5AGdRJ0maxi0zkL1QWPgacCjwj0WU

⁶ https://www.belta.by/society/view/on-air-marafon-belarus-pomnit-tsvety-velikoj-pobedy-projdet-5-8-maja-388996-2020?fbclid=IwAR3hCby_NEU4MFyMaqcnlOelj_XZD3sSwk5hAggGffXIDZahhs6ELCwtGRY

⁷ https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-russian-39842931?fbclid=IwAR3hCby_NEU4MFyMaqcnlOelj_XZD3sSwk5hAggGffXIDZahhs6ELCwtGRY

Implementation of Soviet heritage in the Belarusian protest movement

The state manifests itself not only as an arena where the multiple meanings of the past are constructed but also as one of the agencies that produce a specific narrative aimed at weakening the memory agenda produced by other actors. The memory representations created by political and cultural actors were aimed at fighting the state's policy of oblivion and turning the memory of communist repression into a counter-hegemonic place of resistance to the state. «Вчерашний день показал силу мирного протеста и бессилие режима. Весь мир знает, что Куропаты для белорусов – напоминание о бесчеловечных преступлениях, которые долгие годы скрывала советская власть. И вчера режим Лукашенко совершил новое преступление. У места, где были убиты тысячи невинных белорусов, он снова открыл огонь по людям. В день марша против террора режим устроил новый террор»⁸ (Тихановская 2020).

However, the memory of the victims of Stalin's crimes did not lead to the complete alienation of the Soviet legacy, as was the case in post-communist times in other Central and Eastern European countries. It has become only one of many elements of a multifocal system of historical and cultic reference points, which has strengthened a language capable of relating past experiences of police violence, torture, and abuse to the present (Bekus 2019: 1603–1605).

«А метафоры про 37 год все чаще звучат всерьез на кухне, чем в шутку на улице. В том самом 1937 году и во времена сталинских репрессий проводились аресты и казни самых работающих, честных, интеллигентных, активных и разумных людей, сейчас нас ждет тоже самое, расстреливать разве что будут реже. (...) Мы не отдадим страну кровавому диктатору! Мы не позволим вернуть 37 год»⁹ (Telegram МКБ – Мая Краіна Беларусь 2020a).

⁸ “Yesterday showed the power of peaceful protest and the impotence of the regime. The whole world knows that Kurapaty for Belarusians is a reminder of the inhuman crimes that the Soviet government hid for many years. And yesterday Lukashenko's regime committed a new crime. At the place where thousands of innocent Belarusians were killed, he again opened fire on people. On the day of the march against terror, the regime staged a new terror”.

⁹ “And metaphors about 1937 sound more and more serious in the kitchen than jokingly on the street. In the same 1937 and during the Stalinist repressions, the most hard-working, honest, intelligent, active, and reasonable people were arrested and executed, now the same thing awaits us, except that they will be shot less often. (...) We will not give the country to a bloody dictator! We will not allow the return of the year 1937”.



Чай з малинавым варэннем



Picture 4. „Из Института истории Академии наук массово увольняют ученых. До этого они не раз выходили на акции с плакатами «1937=2020»”.¹⁰



Picture 5. Ноч Расстрелянных Паэтаў.¹¹

«Праз восем дзесяцігоддзяў мы зноў сутыкаемся з гвалтам і рэпрэсіямі ў адносінах да беларусаў, якія маюць іншае меркаванне. Свабода думкі і творчасці зноў знішчаецца судамі і іншымі дзяржаўнымі ўстановамі,

¹⁰ <https://web.telegram.org/k/#@belteanews>

¹¹ <https://web.telegram.org/k/#@mkbelarus>

а пераемнікі НКУС і цяпер катуюць беларусаў у турмах і на вуліцах. Аднак варта памятаць, што як незабытыя імёны расстраляных у 37-ым, так будуць увекавечаны і злачынствы дзеючай улады ў адносінах да іншадумцаў»¹² (Latushka 2020).

The protests also included a symbolic reference to the Memory of the Great Patriotic War, which was previously associated mainly with the official memorial practice and the identity policy of the regime. Among the protesters and memorial protagonists, it was effectively re-appropriated and provided them with heroic resources that serve to create an assertive identity for those who are determined to overthrow Lukashenko's regime.

«Доброе утро, друзья! 22 сентября 1943 года белорусские партизаны ликвидировали главу фашистской администрации в Беларуси Кубе. Сегодня белорусские партизаны освобождают страну от фашистской оккупационной власти Саши-таракана»¹³ (Telegram Баста! 2020b).

The reference frameworks of World War II became, in addition to the traditional opposition discourse emphasizing the memory of the Stalinist victims, a central consolidating focus on raising the morale of the Belarusian demonstrators. «Это повторение 1937 и 1941-1944, когда неприкрытое насилие среди бела дня было нормой. На нашем Геббельс ТВ, конечно, расскажут про агрессивных молодчиков, провоцировавших милицию, но мы то все знаем, мы то видим. Люди идут с поднятыми вверх руками на стволы, направленные им в грудь. «Смотри в окно, а не в телевизор»»¹⁴ (Telegram Баста! 2020c).

¹² “After eight decades, we again face violence and repression against Belarusians who have a different opinion. Freedom of thought and creativity is once again being destroyed by courts and other state institutions, and the successors of the NKVD are still torturing Belarusians in prisons and on the streets. However, it should be remembered that just as the names of those executed in the 37th are not forgotten, so will the crimes of the current government against dissidents be immortalized”.

¹³ “Good morning, friends! On September 22, 1943, Belarusian partisans liquidated Cube, the head of the fascist administration in Belarus. Today, Belarusian partisans are liberating the country from the fascist occupation power of Sasha the cockroach”.

¹⁴ “This is a repeat of 1937 and 1941–1944, when naked violence in broad daylight was the norm. On our Goebbels TV, of course, they will talk about aggressive thugs who provoked the police, but we know everything, we see it. People walk with their hands up on the barrels aimed at their chests. “Look out the window, not the TV”.



Picture 6. «Вставай, Марат, опять фашисты в Беларуси!»¹⁵

On the one hand, the participants in the demonstrations were able to appropriate the narrative of victory, but they also drew on the symbolic space of victims of Stalinist repression, which was originally an ideological pillar of the opposition's alternative vision of Belarus, promoted in the past (see, e.g., Bratachkin 2022: 193–196).

«Камуністы пасьля сваёй ганьбы і паразы на Дзяды ў Менску 30 кастрычніка 1988 году цяпер ужо не рашыліся забараніць мэмарыяльнае шэсьце ў Курапаты. (...) Мы паставілі Крыж перад уваходам, на самым

¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHYfZ2pnRS2/?fbclid=IwAR27oXUX6B6Qlgt0Y2hrk14W19b1BVE8BrBWwOEltrUMs0ljVY9s-h81Kx0>

пачатку курапацкага лесу, разумеючы, што ён будзе не прадметам, а сакральнай з'явай, сымбалам у памяць пра генацыд. Прыйдзе час, і мы ўсталюем гэты крыж са сталі, на трыццаць мэтраў, на курапацкай Галгофе, каб відаць быў над лесам здалёк. Каб кожны бачыў і разумеў, як трэба берагчы свабоду, жыццё, Беларусь і народ»¹⁶ (Навумчык 2009).

However, this should be judged through the prism of an emic perspective that is not subject to ethnocentric distortion. Bekus argues that *“remembering the victims of Stalinist crimes, however, does not convert into a full-scale “postcolonial othering” of the Soviet steed the socialist legacy, as was the case in central and east European postcommunism, but has become one of the elements in the multi-directional system of historical and cultural references that shapes the identity of the protesters”* (Bekus 2021: 13–14).

This observation leads me to discuss the open nature of symbolic constructions because they can be a source of unification as well as a source of conflict (see, e.g., Neveu 2014: 276). In Belarus, the authoritarian regime dominated the public space for a long time, controlling the official narrative and form of state celebrations, as well as the boundaries within which celebratory practices took place. It supervised institutional, legal, and administrative restrictions of public gatherings, strongly limiting public space for alternative celebrations (see Rohava 2019: 897–898). De-Stalinization and general de-Sovietization in Belarus had only an episodic character before full program implementation, and following the model in the Baltic countries, the BPF lost support, and the Belarusian society spoke out politically against such an intended direction (Акудовіч 2001). The subsequently determined official discourse was a positive return to the Soviet period of history, which was re-actualized and presented as a crucial memory for modern nation and state-building. The totalitarian past, Stalinism, did not become a current topic in the public discourse of Belarus, as it was, for example, in the already mentioned Baltic states. The problem of Stalinist repressions has not been subjected to a more in-depth review at the institutional level, even though some school textbooks mention repressions, their mechanism, and meaning are not analyzed in detail, but rather are often ignored or marginalized. History

¹⁶ “Communists, after their disgrace and defeat at Dziady in Minsk on October 30, 1988, have not decided to ban the memorial procession in Kurapaty. (...) We placed the Cross in front of the entrance, at the very beginning of the Kurapatsky Forest, realizing that it will not be an object, but a sacred phenomenon, a symbol in memory of the genocide. The time will come, and we will install this steel cross, thirty meters high, on the Kurapatsk Golgotha, so that it can be seen above the forest from afar. So that everyone sees and understands how to protect freedom, life, Belarus, and the people”.

courses, on the other hand, are devoted to topics related to the war. For the purpose of patriotic education of the young generation at all universities and for all fields special courses about the history of the Great Patriotic War and the subject “Foundations of the ideology of Belarusian statehood” are introduced (Романова 2020: 281–282).

The best practices of the memorial policy of previous years have been modified and updated to be used effectively for the regime’s discursive interpretations of recent protest events. Contemporary official policy and its speakers in the state media reframe and emphasize their narrative of the present in historical references to the central trope around the never-ending and transcending memories of the Great Patriotic War, where supporters of the regime claim to be descendants of heroes and guardians of memorial shrines that they believe are trying to desecrate the descendants of previous collaborators.

«Разве могли мы раньше представить, что площадь Победы в Минске или музей истории Великой Отечественной войны будут пытаться осквернить символами, навсегда запятнанными коллаборантами, работавшими на нацистов? К сожалению, мы это увидели.

И вот чтобы этого больше никогда не повторилось, нам нужна целенаправленная, осознанная политика исторической памяти, чтобы наши люди знали и не забывали смыслы и ценности Победы, ценили подвиги и достижения предков и не позволяли отравить себя и своих детей идеологическим ядом. (...) И это уже происходит на примере расследования преступлений, связанных с геноцидом белорусского народа. Мы без лишней политкорректности стали называть имена преступников, многие из которых до сих пор живы и даже являются «героями» в некоторых соседних странах»¹⁷ (Дзермант and Щекин 2022).

¹⁷ “How could we have imagined that Victory Square in Minsk or the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War would be tried to desecrate with symbols forever tarnished by collaborators who worked for the Nazis? Unfortunately, we have seen it. And so that this never happens again, we need a purposeful, conscious policy of historical memory, so that our people know and do not forget the meanings and values of the Victory, appreciate the exploits and achievements of their ancestors, and not allow themselves and their children to be poisoned with ideological poison. (...) And this is already happening on the example of the investigation of crimes related to the genocide of the Belarusian people. Without much political correctness, we began to name the criminals, many of whom are still alive and even are “heroes” in some neighboring countries”.

This shift from political and propagandistic statements was also quite quickly transferred to the implementation of these ideological memory discourses in the field of education, where, for example, with the adoption of new curricula with instructional letters, there was also the publication of new textbooks (Bratachkin 2022: 197–198) to complete the transition to the updated curricula.

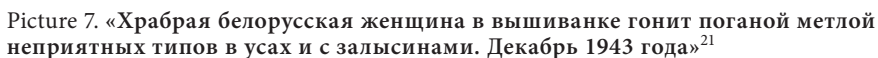
«Первый урок в школах пройдет на единую тему «Историческая память – дорога в будущее». (...) Министерство образования дает соответствующие рекомендации по освещению тех или иных тем, например, в инструктивно-методических письмах есть рекомендации по освещению темы геноцида белорусского народа в рамках преподавания учебных предметов»¹⁸ (БЕЛТА 2022а).

Regardless of the strong polarization of historical points of view, the current narratives presented in Belarus are significantly multi-layered. Ideas about the Belarusian identity fail to be mapped in clear contrasting differences (Kazakevich 2011: 50; Burkhardt 2016: 150). Indeed, Belarus is a striking illustration of the intertwined nature of memory, with competing layers of synchronic and diachronic interpretations visible in acts of remembrance (Krawatzek and Weller 2022: 31). «Пока мы готовим новый выпуск «Вожыка: раздавiм фашысцкую гадзiну», вы можете почитать старый. Смотрите, как храбрая белорусская женщина в вышиванке гонит поганой метлой неприятных типов в усах и с залысынами. Декабрь 1943 года»¹⁹ (Telegram Вожык 2020).

The previously postulated dichotomous boundaries between neo-Soviet and national discourse, or if you prefer “official” and “alternative” in the concept of Nelly Bekus (2010), began to be re-defined and to be mutually influence, which concerned not only the use of flags, but also tropes and various narrative abbreviations included in the vocabulary and presented in the form of protesters’ slogans (Kazharski 2021: 70–72). «(...) И вдруг сегодня днем все наши соседи во дворе опять изумились! Внезапно вывесил наш знаменитый дед

¹⁸ “The first lesson in schools will be held on a single theme “Historical memory is the road to the future”. (...) The Ministry of Education gives appropriate recommendations on the coverage of certain topics, for example, in instructional and methodological letters there are recommendations on covering the topic of the genocide of the Belarusian people as part of the teaching of academic subjects”.

¹⁹ “While we are preparing a new issue of “Vozhyka: razdavim fashysckuyu gadzinu”, you can read the old one. See how a brave Belarusian woman in an embroidered shirt drives away unpleasant types with mustaches and bald patches with a filthy broom. December 1943”.



²⁰ “(...) And suddenly this afternoon, all our neighbors in the yard were amazed again! Suddenly, our famous grandfather hung out next to a red-green flag, the same size, but only white-red-white. And he went out for a walk in the courtyard in his shabby jacket with front-line awards. – We are the Belarusian people! Not red, white, or green, but simply a single and indivisible people! It doesn't matter what our preferences, thoughts, and views are. But we are not RATS!”

23

However, when accumulated political injustice acquired political urgency for society, significant symbolic places, events, or slogans began to serve as important focal points and platforms for citizen mobilization. This also happened in the case of the protests in Belarus in 2020, which has long time paid for a stable regime in the context of authoritarian systems (Hall 2022: 1–6). «Сейчас второй 1937 год, в котором были гетто, только во время войны гетто создавались по национальному признаку, а теперь власти создали гетто по политической статье 24.23. Уровень умственного развития омоновцев заставляет задуматься об их адекватности. В отделении они хрюкали и смеялись с этого. Дмитрий уверен, что мы уже сделали многое, и осталось лишь немного дожать картонный режим»²² (Telegram Беларусь головного мозга 2021). During the protest marches, its protagonists began to appropriate a pre-existing symbolic heritage, but this did not happen in the ways that many experts and commentators had expected. Their spontaneous political mobilization from the bottom up brought new hybrid forms of symbolic expression, combining symbols and tropes from different repertoires, usually mutually defined within competing projects of identity discourses.

Revived traumas in the reminiscence of war suffering and resistance

During street protests in Belarus, expressions such as: “fascists”, “occupiers”, “Gestapo”, “Lukashians”, “Lukashenko’s punishers” regularly resonated, which was a reaction to the application of brutal and dehumanizing methods by the deployed repressive regime elements. «На Смогровском тракте вывели из дома 5 человек и поставили возле стены. Только не подумайте, что Гестапо вернулось»²³ (Telegram Чай з малинавым варэннем 2020). As police brutality against civilians has increased, the news about it was wildly spreading through social media, and the use of emotionally and historically charged comparisons to “National Socialism” has also increased in society. «У меня нет слов, сердце разрывается от боли. Это фашизм. Снова людей забрасывали гранатами, снова стреляли, жестоко, до смерти, избивали. Белорусы,

²² “Now is the second year of 1937, in which there were ghettos, only during the war, ghettos were created on a national basis, and now the authorities have created ghettos according to the political article 24.23. The level of mental development of the riot police forces one to think about their adequacy. In the department, they grunted and laughed at this. Dmitry is sure that we have already done a lot, and it remains only to squeeze the cardboard mode a little”.

²³ “On the Smogrovsky tract, 5 people were taken out of the house and placed near the wall. Just don’t think that the Gestapo is back.”

дорогие, мы должны держаться. Этому придёт конец»²⁴ (Facebook Nata Radina 2020).

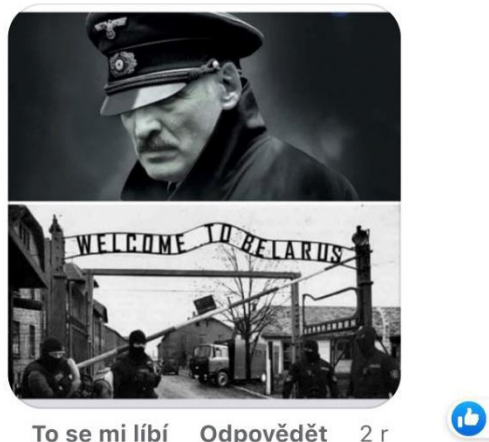
Photographs of women pressed against the wall and surrounded by people in uniform with weapons or detainees who stood for more than 10 hours against the wall with their hands raised in the police courtyard in the Soviet District of Minsk (ПУВД), evoked associations with fascists in the eyes of insiders.



Picture 8. Arrests of people during the 2022 protests.²⁵

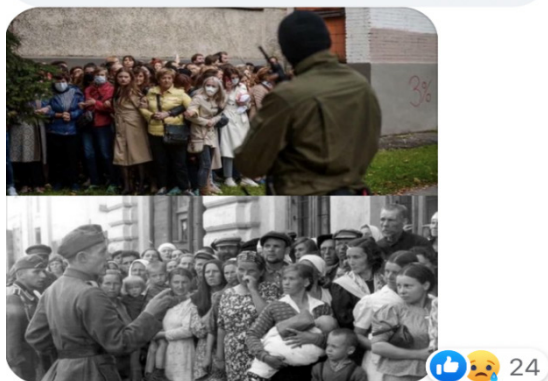
²⁴ “I have no words; my heart is breaking with pain. This is fascism. Again, people were pelted with grenades, shot again, brutally beaten to death. Belarusians, dear ones, we must hold on. This will come to an end”.

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/nikolai.khalezin/posts/pfbid02FNcEsVNt8twEe6xbKzD-Pr8qowXXJYSDM4BK5pqJkMhcuDi3NetX7DwxXH8k8cZYml>



Picture 9. Comparison of the Belarusian regime with Auschwitz.²⁶

Действительно , омон и милиция
Беларусии это фашисты



Picture 10. Comparison of the Belarusian OMON and police with the Nazis.²⁷

²⁶ https://www.facebook.com/majakrainabelarus/photos/a.553740438085659/3473494296110244/?type=3&paipv=0&eav=Afa4an9wrTiSAJUnhJvXGJLF10sP2nPOWZ-rJh2Y_KqZRL6wVd5rzTDTLCSXzsjLCAz0&_rdr

²⁷ https://www.facebook.com/soboll.ru/photos/pb.1652736554984208.-2207520000../2720697798188073/?type=3&eid=ARDJ4cGwP-J2wcjRezx8h4YCbNHjteBuS7on8dHZOps-9f5Yiv3Le1ZyrynXUBjzOxaH5zrGo2lUotRTh&paipv=0&eav=Afake_znZGUHyVzpnjeu-

Collages of these photos with photos of people from the Second World War appeared on the web. Police actions have been described as “genocide” against the Belarusian people.²⁸ Okrestina prison in Minsk, where most of the torture took place, has been compared to Auschwitz (Романова 2020: 283–285; Шалгалиева 2020).

«Я была в Освенциме. В Аушвице. Это маленькая польская деревенька на границе с Чехией. Там тоже живут люди, рожают детей, работают, радуются, умирают... Там до сих пор почти не растет трава... Потому что каждый молодой весенний побег был вырван ослабевшей рукой заключенного. В ИВС на Окрестина нет травы. Там бетон... Диана Балыко, с места событий»²⁹ (Facebook Диана Балыко 2020).

Daily, crowds of relatives and friends gathered outside Akrestsina and other prisons, waiting to hear about the fate of their loved ones or trying to deliver personal packages to prisoners. In his published text «Новый Рейх» (“New Reich”), N. Khalezin, who is the program director of the Creative Politics Hub and the artistic director of the Belarusian Free Theatre, describes the ideology of the Lukashenko regime in relation to the ideology and key figures of the Nazi Third Reich. The black uniforms of the OMON remind him of SS units, and their operations evoke memories of the previous period of the fascist occupation of Belarus. «Беларусские тюрьмы, превратившиеся в пыточные Гестапо со всем арсеналом насилия: от избиения и унижений, до нанесения увечий, изнасилований и убийств. (...) Отдельные сцены стали совпадать с нацистской оккупацией до деталей: стоящие на коленях люди лицом к стене с поднятыми руками; заграждения из колючей проволоки в центре Минска; мирные граждане в окружении людей в форме. Разница подчас лишь в том, что нацисты, в отличие от лукашенковских карателей, не прятали своих лиц»³⁰ (Халезин 2021).

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²⁸ Security forces staged the harshest crackdown on protesters on August 10: at least 291 people were injured in the streets – not counting the beatings at the police station and Akrestsin Street. On the same day, the most massive arrests took place: more than 3,000 people were taken to the police station (Литавин 2020).

²⁹ “I was in Auschwitz. In Auschwitz. This is a small Polish village on the border with the Czech Republic. People also live there, give birth to children, work, rejoice, die... Grass still hardly grows there... Because every young spring shoot was torn out by the weakened hand of a prisoner. There is no grass in the prison cell at Okrestina. There is concrete... Diana Balyko, from the scene”.

³⁰ “Belarusian prisons that turned into torture Gestapo with all arsenal of violence: from beating and humiliation, to inflicting injuries, rape, and murders. (...) Individual scenes began

The extraordinary commitment to civic and peaceful action that put the movement on the moral high ground drew on a traumatic war memory thoroughly cultivated since Soviet times. The commemoration was invoked to express widespread popular shock and outrage at the police violence unleashed against protesters, which destroyed Lukashenko's legitimacy and drew many previously apolitical Belarusians to protests.

«Оккупанты, каратели, фашисты — это лексика из чатов. И это правда. Мы сейчас выживаем в городе, захваченном оккупантами. Людей таранят машинами, глушат, слепят и травят газом. Увидев, что люди всегда дают проезд машинам скорой помощи, эти мрази стали на Скорых развозить ОМОН. Потому что улицы блокируются автомобилистами, чтобы автозаки не могли проехать. Нет, это уже даже не разгон мирных демонстрантов, это зачистка»³¹ (V Kontakte 2020). The cult of the war narrative, which his regime celebrated and promoted for many years, undoubtedly resonated in society, but now also in new symbolic narratives that denied the authority of the regime itself. «По городу начали расклеивать листовки. Видимо, надо сказать спасибо школьной программе по белорусской литературе — партизанские методы тут все знают с начальной школы»³² (V Kontakte 2020). The protest movement and the protesters themselves began to routinely refer to the authorities as “occupiers” and “fascists” who remain in power only thanks to their military and repressive power (Chernyshova 2021).

One other example in the memorial repertoire of protesters drawing on this reference in the fight against Lukashenko is *Vozhyk* («Вóжык»), whereby the authors decided to revive the cult magazine that was published from 1941 and during the war with the original name “Crush the fascist vermin”. This combat leaflet was published at different intervals and in different circulation, but it reached almost every guerrilla unit, occupied cities and towns through secret routes, attacking the enemy through satirical and scathing humor. In its modern reincarnation, it

to coincide with the Nazi occupation in detail: people kneeling facing the wall with their hands raised; barbed wire fences in the center of Minsk; civilians surrounded by people in uniform. Sometimes the only difference is that the Nazis, unlike the Lukashenko punishers, did not hide their faces”.

³¹ “The invaders, punishers, fascists are vocabulary from chats. And it is true. We are now surviving in a city captured by the invaders. People are hung up with cars, muffled, blind and poisoned with gas. Seeing that people always give passage to ambulances, these scum began to deliver riot police on ambulance. Because the streets are blocked by motorists so that the autozaks could not drive. No, this is no longer even overclocking of peaceful demonstrators, it is a stripping”.

³² “In the city began to lay leaflets. Apparently, I must say thank you to the school program in Belarusian literature – everyone here knows partisan methods from elementary school”.

was transmitted digitally on the encrypted channel called Telegram as a one-page A4 pamphlet containing anti-regime cartoons and satirical articles.³³ One of the Vozhyk editors herself stated that she chose the name because of its resonance with the wartime period: “*The authorities are monsters and fit the definition of fascism*” (Walker 2020a).

The transition from a dissident shelter to a social network was triggered by social processes for which traditional media lacked sufficient coverage in the Belarusian context. The already mentioned platform Telegram played a central role in shaping protest sentiments, as evidenced by its extensive subscriber base, constant flow of information from the field, and unprecedented increase of users. From a platform of discussions and news, it quickly turned into a tool of influence, where an instructional briefing on the current announced protest actions took place in the private chats of the biggest channels like “NEXTA” (Auseyushkin 2021; Wijermars and Lokot 2022; Parida 2021). Some Telegram channels, such as “The Punishers of Belarus” (“Karateli Belarusi”), even specialized in unmasking (doxing) through the publication of personal information of individual members of state security agencies involved in violent operations against protesters. On the ever-swelling blacklist published online, a profile with their photo, address, and other personal information appeared (Kazharski 2021: 76).

Not only did the confrontation taking place in virtual reality drew significantly from the repertoire of the Great Patriotic War narrative. The protest movement itself paradoxically also began to appropriate the sacred myth of partisan resistance against Nazism, which had been included on the pedestal of the official war narrative since Lukashenko’s accession. «Заметил, что тихари с наступлением сумерек боятся соваться в «спальники» Минска. Так фашисты в войну боялись соваться в «партизанские зоны». Их последователи ничем не отличаются. Знают, что опасно. Знают, кто тут хозяева, за кем сила. Уже собираемся на марш, готовим флаги и плакаты. Приглашаем всех»³⁴ (Telegram Баста! 2020a).

³³ The leaflet comes with the following message for potential distributors: “*Partisans! Download the PDF, print it and stick it in your apartment... We are the majority and together we will win!*” “During the August violence, it was incredible how people survived: they went out, returned home, had a quick sleep, and then left again. The guerrilla gene is alive in all of us” (Walker 2020a). Telegram channel to view here: https://t.me/vozhik_samizdat

³⁴ “I noticed that the quiet people are afraid to go into the “sleeping bags” of Minsk at dusk. So, the fascists were afraid to meddle in the “partisan zones” during the war. Their followers are no different. They know it’s dangerous. They know who is the boss here, who has the power. We are already going to march; we are preparing flags and posters. We invite everyone”.

The Belarusian partisan movement is portrayed as the largest resistance movement in world history due to its scope: *“There was no more massive resistance movement than what the partisans – in their underground activity – put up in Belarus against the fascist invaders.”* According to the official narrative, Belarusian heroism stands out in the entire war history and therefore deserves to be praised by the whole world, as Lukashenko expressed in 2005: *“We have established freedom and independence not only in our homeland but also in the whole world”* (Goujon 2010: 10–11).

«Побеждать фашизм – дело трудное, но наши предки справились. Теперь наш черед. Мы боремся за свою жизнь, за будущее наших детей и за всех тех, кто уже пострадал от террора. Открыто и из подполья, вместе и поодиночке, яркими поступками и ежедневными незаметными усилиями»³⁵ (Telegram МКБ – Мая Краіна Беларусь 2020b). The story of the partisan resistance against Nazism began to be symbolically framed for the purposes of demonstration, expression of opposition to the regime’s practices and created a tangle of positive images of solidarity and heroism when people thinking this way began to willingly identify themselves with the “grandsons of the partisans”. The Russian-language Telegram channel Nexta Live quickly became a crucial platform for demonstrators to bypass the authorities’ increased efforts to intercept and censor all communications between opponents of the regime during mass protests. It was the most watched Telegram channel for protesters, with more than 1 million subscribers at its peak, where moderators shared near-continuous updates on protest events, planned march locations, and step-by-step instructions (Mateo 2022: 32). Below is an excerpt from one such post, which offered protesters a map with the route of the planned march, safety information, what to bring and the location of the regime’s repressive squads. The sample from the post reveals the instrumental identification of the protesters with the partisan resistance, which became the central theme of that Sunday protest (October 18, 2020). The protest marches that took place every Sunday had their own name, and some of these marches included references and reminiscences highlighting certain places and figures of the historical practice of remembrance (I provide a partial chronology in the following subsection). «Сегодня в 14:00 мы выйдем на улицы, чтобы в очередной раз показать тирану, что его место — на свалке истории. Чтобы показать, что мы, потомки славных воинов и партизан, достойны своих предков, которые

³⁵ “Defeating fascism is a difficult task, but our ancestors coped. Now it’s our turn. We are fighting for our lives, for the future of our children, and for all those who have already suffered from terror. Openly and from the underground, together and alone, with bright deeds and daily inconspicuous efforts”.

однажды уже победили фашизм. Чтобы показать всему миру, что мы не сдаёмся и идём только вперёд!»³⁶ (Telegram NEXTA Live 2020b).

In various variants and equivalents, the anti-government movement claimed to have appropriated the narrative of the anti-Nazi resistance during World War II, claiming itself as the heir to the partisan uprising. For example, in this context, the protagonists of protest actions also tried to highlight the female face of partisan resistance and the heroic merits of women and mothers of partisans, which rhetorically followed a more general trend in emphasizing the feminine aspect in protest expression (see Gaufman 2021). «Вечером страшно выйти из дома. Каратели в черной форме пытаются людей, загоняют мирных жителей в храм и запирают двери. Каждый белорус с детства знает, как это называется. ФАШИЗМ. Наши бабушки одолели фашистов. Мы тоже победим! (...) В этот день мы, женщины Беларуси, вспомним наших бабушек. Они воевали и партизанили, стояли у станка, лечили раненых и растили детей. Благодаря им белорусы выжили как народ и сохранили свои ценности: человечность и достоинство»³⁷ (Telegram NEXTA Live 2020a).

In Telegram channels, groups were formed, which began to organize themselves often intuitively for protests in individual cities, streets, or panel houses. To do this, they began to use various conspiratorial practices, so that, for example, their identities would not be revealed, but it was also a strategy to demoralize opponents and motivate other supporters to action. «Беларусы уже не те пугливые люди, что были пару месяцев назад. Они могут постоять за себя и окружающих. Если милиция не прекратит свой беспредел, то они увидят партизанский дух не слабее того, что видели нацисты»³⁸ (Telegram Беларусь головного мозга 2020).

³⁶ “Partisans go on the march!

Today at 14:00, we will go out on the streets to once again show the tyrant that his place is in a landfill of history. To show that we, the descendants of the glorious warriors and partisans, are worthy of our ancestors, who once had already defeated fascism. To show the whole world that we do not surrender and go only forward!”

³⁷ “It’s scary to leave the house in the evening. Punishers in black uniforms torture people, drive civilians into the temple and lock the doors. Every Belarusian knows from childhood what it is called. FASCISM. Our grandmothers defeated the fascists. We will win too! (...) On this day, we, the women of Belarus, will remember our grandmothers. They fought and partialized, stood at the machine, treated the wounded, and raised children. Thanks to them, Belarusians have survived as a people and preserved their values: humanity and dignity.”

³⁸ “Belarusians are no longer the timid people they were a couple of months ago. They can stand up for themselves and others. If the police do not stop their lawlessness, they will see the partisan spirit no weaker than what the Nazis saw.”

The symbolic framework of the modern partisan movement provided the demonstrators with a ground for moral identification with the heroes of the resistance, but at the same time, this intention to appropriate the hegemonic official narrative provoked the official regime to react. A hybrid counter-narrative was formed here, which found new ways to try to subvert and question the legitimacy of power, where Lukashenko could no longer represent the defender of the historical legacy of the partisan resistance but had to face the same moral identifications with which he had previously tried to discredit the opposition movement himself. The resistance and resonance of this counter-memory are also evidenced by the fact that it persists in the discourse of the opposition even after the suppression of protests, and during the ongoing war in Ukraine, its importance is constantly increasing (The Guardian 2023).

In the discourse of the protest marches protagonists, the “partisans” were suddenly portrayed as the Belarusian people in opposition to the fascists and occupiers on the side of the authorities. In the environment of the Belarusian IT community, a “cyber-guerrilla” war of the Lukashenko regime was declared. Since the end of August, the “Cybernetic Partisans” have been hacking into the official website of Lukashenko’s administration. On the website of the Ministry of the Interior, for example, the official list of wanted persons was replaced by a list of wanted persons with Alexander Lukashenko and the Minister of the Interior Yuriy Karaeu. Internet activists encouraged the indifferent to join their movement regardless of gender, age, and religion.³⁹ Every time Belarusian cyber partisans hacked government-linked websites, they left an image of the hacker on the page with the Pahonia coat of arms and the words “Belarusian Cyber Partisans” (Kulakevich 2020: 106–107).

Symbolic imagination of space and the struggle for the appropriation of memorial monuments

Also, shifts in the urban dynamics of protest marches significantly reflected the power of historical reanimation against the background of important symbolic places and the memorable landscape of the capital of Belarus. The cultural grammar of protest that drives and sustains protest has often been formed spontaneously and through creative adaptation during the collective action itself. The protest imagination of the participants was represented in the urban landscape,

³⁹ “We always laughed at this stereotype of Belarusians as partisans, as if it was nonsense, but it was really surprising how people suddenly adopted this tactic as if they knew it from birth,” said Chernyavskaja (Walker 2020a).

which gave us a record of specific means of communication, cultural forms of expression, or historical associations involved in the articulation of the demand for change (Bekus 2021: 7–8). This gives us an opportunity to investigate the formation of the image of the protesters and ultimately into the process of rebuilding their identities. During the three post-election months, Sunday mass protests were held every week in the capital of the Republic of Belarus, including, for example: “March of Freedom” (16 August), “March of Heroes” (13 September), “March of Partisans” (18 October), “March against fascism” (November 22) (Зеленко 2020: 309–310).

When Independence Avenue and Independence Square were closed in Minsk, the route of almost all mass Sunday marches was transferred to the second most important Avenue of the Victors (“Проспект Победителей”), around the Museum of the Great Patriotic War. «В последней войне Беларусь потеряла каждого третьего. Практически была стерта с лица земли. В знак памяти, скорби и печали на нашей земле установлены тысячи мемориалов и памятников. И они для нас священны. Наши люди к ним ходят помолиться и возложить цветы»⁴⁰ (БЕЛТА 2020).

According to the regime representatives, the change of route of the protesters was not interpreted as a struggle for real physical space, as the wide avenue around the museum provided enough space for a multi-thousand gathering, but in their presented newspeak, it was an obvious attack and efforts to disrupt the established symbolic space in the official cosmology of the narrative.

«Мы не можем сегодня спокойно смотреть, как под флагами, под которыми фашисты организовывали массовые убийства белорусов, русских, евреев, представителей других национальностей, в этих священных местах проходят акции. Мы этого допустить не можем»⁴¹ (БЕЛТА 2020). In the narrative of official propaganda, protesters under fascist flags desecrate the people’s shrine – the monument of the Great Patriotic War (Романова 2020: 289–290).

After the end of the war, the Soviet state anchored the Belarusian war experience in a number of monumental complexes, including the most famous places of worship – Fortress of Heroes in Brest or Khatyn. «Обратите внимание, с каким упорством «невероятные» стремятся отметить именно в сакральных местах и опоганить псевдонациональной символикой и своим присутствием

⁴⁰ “In the last war, Belarus lost every third. It was practically wiped off the face of the earth. In the signs of memory, sorrow, and sadness, there are memorials and monuments on our earth. And they are our priests. Our people go to them to pray and lay flowers.”

⁴¹ “Today we cannot calmly watch how under the flags under which the Nazis organized the massacres of Belarusians, Russians, Jews, representatives of other nationalities, actions are being held in these sacred places. We cannot allow this”.

национальные святыни. Они же бесновались с символикой коллаборантов и предателей у стелы «Минск – город-герой» под окнами Музея истории Великой Отечественной войны»⁴² (Беларусь 1 2021).

The current Belarusian regime followed up on this cult of heroic war, participating in the revitalization and construction of an extensive network of memorial complexes⁴³ (Marples 2014: 225–233). The newly renovated Museum of the Great Patriotic War was inaugurated on the eve of the 70th anniversary of liberation from Nazism in 2014. On this solemn occasion, Alexander Lukashenko drew attention to the fact that Belarus was always against distorting the truth about the war and became the first country in the world to create a Museum of the Great Patriotic War. «Искреннее презрение у наших людей вызывает откровенная ложь о войне, когда разные псевдоисторики выставляют предателей героями, а захватчиков – освободителями, когда они бессовестно перекраивают историю под конкретный политический заказ и пытаются украсть у нашего народа Великую Победу. Таким мародерам мы давали и будем давать решительный отпор, отстаивая это важнейшее историческое достояние. И в этой войне против мародеров мы тоже будем вместе»⁴⁴ (Лукашенко 2014b).

Since its opening, the new museum has played a key role in official mass events, such as the annual parades held on May 9, Victory Day, or Independence Day on June 3rd. The vast complex standing on Heroes' Square, next to which stands the tall obelisk “Minsk – Hero City”, includes the story of the Soviet glorification of victory, which was inscribed into the capital's spatial imagination through symbolic reification (Zadora 2019: 343–344; Goujon 2010: 9–10).

⁴² “Pay attention to the tenacity with which the “incredibles” strive to mark themselves in sacred places and defile national shrines with pseudo-national symbols and their presence. They also raged with the symbols of collaborators and traitors at the stele “Minsk – Hero City” under the windows of the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War”.

⁴³ Today, on the territory of Belarus there should be about 9 thousand monuments and graves dedicated to the memory of the Great Patriotic War (<https://www.belarus.by/ru/travel/military-history-tourism/memorials-great-patriotic-war>).

⁴⁴ “Our people are sincerely contemptible for the frank lies about the war, when various pseudo-historians portray traitors as heroes, and invaders as liberators, when they shamelessly reshape history to a specific political order and try to steal the Great Victory from our people. We have given and will continue to give decisive fight back, defending this most important historical heritage. And we will also be together in this war against marauders”.



Picture 11. “Mom is with us!”⁴⁵



Picture 12. Campaign “Voices of Belarus”⁴⁶

voice_of_belarus • Sledování

voice_of_belarus You can help stop this. Tell your friends about what's happening in Belarus. Email your senator or MP and tell them you want to see action. They can do a lot if they think that you care.

Donate to the victim fund, link in bio. Fund helps repressed Belarusians who are illegally dismissed, brutalised and/or jailed.

Source @tutbylive

#FreedomBelarus #standwithbelarus
#Belarus #belarusprotests2020
#voice_of_belarus

⁴⁵ https://www.instagram.com/p/CEQ5zn2HY1G/?fbclid=IwAR3iL-V7ITz6t0WxPsKLoM3b_piUVSKZwCp8fil1KuUQJUNbTi-t0csIrwS

⁴⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/CK6eYxBnqFO/?fbclid=IwAR3ksZ-2iwKaLJ1H0U6bybWbX_BSSh3Om40yc0Azhh-dTf6sTEq29W5qBPu

One of the iconic images, taken on August 16, shows a mass gathering of protesters in front of the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, where they wrapped a white-red-white flag bronze statue “Motherland Calls”. The photograph captures more than just a moment of unprecedented scale of protest mobilization but conveys the essence of changes in cultural symbols and their historical ideas that make up the collective memory of Belarusians. According to Bekus, two originally contradictory symbols appear in this captured act – the museum as a symbol of the “glorious Soviet past” and the flag as a symbol of the anti-Soviet opposition, which until then were assumed to be a narrative of two mutually contrasting ideological projects (official and alternative discourses). At the same time, it shows us that the memory of the Second World War remains relevant in Belarus, while in a modified version it provides a symbolic means to represent the identity of the protesters and to strengthen the bonds of solidarity with the wider society. These historical and cultural references, which were used to create an assertive and powerful image of the protester against Lukashenko’s regime, bring new potential in terms of outreach as they expand the field of the symbolic and rhetorical arsenal for waging a discursive war with their opponents (Bekus 2021: 6–11).

Anticipating further mass protests, the authorities deployed law enforcement and military patrols around the museum and Victory Square the following Sunday, the buildings were surrounded by barbed wire, and an old Soviet song played over loudspeakers in the background. Lukashenko tried to regain control by addressing carefully assembled crowds of his own supporters and threatening his opponents. Ahead of the next march, the Ministry of Defense said it had now assumed responsibility for the protection of the said monuments and that any disturbances near them would trigger a military response. «Категорически предупреждаю, в случае нарушения порядка и спокойствия в этих местах вы дело будете иметь не с милицией, а с армией»⁴⁷ (БЕЛТА 2020). At the same time, it called the protesters “fascists” and said that memorials, specifically to the victims of the Second World War, are holy places that must not be desecrated (Walker 2020b).

⁴⁷ “I categorically warn you that if order and peace in these places are violated, you will have to deal not with the police, but with the army”.

A campaign to eradicate the White-Red-White symbolism of the protest

During the protests in 2020, war-inspired rhetorical weapons were actively used on both sides, with war memory serving the regime to legitimize Lukashenko's policies towards his opponents, who were often depicted as descendants of fascists or portrayed as minions of the fifth column. «Закономерно и символично, что символика тех, кто пытался это сделать, – это символика не просто коллаборантов, а – надо вещи называть своими именами – предателей. Это 'внес этот вопрос на референдум – ваш покорный слуга, когда у нас были БЧБ-флаги, которые националисты продавили. Я категорически возражал. Но избрали, я стал Президентом и мгновенно внес вам на референдум: решите, вот – одна символика, вот – вторая. Подавляющее большинство поддержало нынешнюю государственную символику»⁴⁸ (Лукашенко 2020). Even before the elections, the authorities considered the white-red-white flag exclusively an attribute of alternative candidates, which accompanied their political meetings. After the election, the rhetorical focus of the state's discourse shifted radically to stigmatizing its opponents as enemies of the people, and the flag became a central motive for portraying opponents of the regime as adherents and collaborators with Nazism. «Я же не хожу под фашистскими БЧБ-флагами. И открыто говорю, что это фашистская символика»⁴⁹ (Лукашенко 2020). It became a symbol of absolute evil in official jargon, used by Belarusian Nazi collaborators during World War II when they marched with portraits of Hitler. «И потом, портретов Лукашенко под БЧБ-флагами не было, а Гитлера – были. И мы показываем это. (...) Мы уберем эту фашистскую символику из нашего общества, сделаем это красиво. И прежде всего разъясняя, что этого нельзя делать. Наша страна больше всех потерпела от войны»⁵⁰ (Лукашенко 2020).

⁴⁸ "I don't walk under the fascist white-red-white flags. And I openly say that this is a fascist symbolism. And who introduced this issue to the referendum is your humble servant, when we had white-red-white flags that the nationalists pushed through. I categorically objected. But they elected, I became President and instantly submitted to you for a referendum: decide, here is one symbolism, here is the second. The overwhelming majority supported the current state symbols".

⁴⁹ "I don't walk under the fascist white-red-white flags. And I openly say that this is a fascist symbolism".

⁵⁰ "And then, there were no portraits of Lukashenko under the white-red-white flags, but there were (portraits of) Hitler. And we show it. (...) We will remove this fascist symbolism from our society, we will do it beautifully. And above all, explaining that this cannot be done. Our country has suffered the most from the war".

This particular hostility to the white-red-white flag was nothing new to Lukashenko, but already during the 1995 referendum campaign, he used similar narrative examples of the flag's association with Nazi collaborators to gain public support for a change in state symbols (Silitski and Zaprudnik 2010: 35; Kascian and Denisenko 2021: 129–131). On the eve of the referendum, the documentary film “Hate: Children of Lies” by the novice director Yuri Azarenok was published, which is still available on YouTube. The propaganda documentary is an attempt to symbolically bridge the gap between the collaborators in Belarus during the Second World War and the nationally oriented opposition around the BPF at the time. Belarusian viewers were told in detail in the film what monsters lead the Belarusian opposition and what awaits the hapless republic if, God forbid, Western-oriented and nationalist-minded oppositionists come to power. The film contained a whole set of familiar propaganda clichés: the West funds nationalist militants for coups, the NKVD and KGB did not punish the innocent, Belarusian nationalists are the descendants of collaborators, fascist minions, and “compromising lackeys”. The white-red-white flag is the fascist flag; footage of a Belarusian People's Front (BPF) rally was interspersed with footage of Nazi marches and parades in captured Minsk, and police officers danced to the background music of the 90's Belarusian protest. In the course of 2020, the director's son Gregory appeared in the state media in the role of moderator, who assured the audience that a mystical war was being waged against Lukashenko, praised the courage of the security forces, and regularly insulted and ridiculed the opponents in the ranks of the protesters (Скляревська 2021; Stulov 2000: 21–22).

The state institutions and pro-government media followed this communication strategy and were accusing protesters of “historical amnesia”. «Плоды такой фальсификации проявились на улицах белорусских городов в виде протестующих, окутанных бчб-символикой. Часть этих людей, у которых деды и прадеды сражались с фашизмом, предавались коллаборационистами и погибали от рук фашистских палачей, оказалась под символикой коллаборационистов, не поняв, что использована Западом в его геополитических интересах и является инструментом гибридной войны против Беларуси и России»⁵¹ (Исаенок 2021).

⁵¹ “The fruits of such falsification appeared on the streets of Belarusian cities in the form of protesters shrouded in black and white symbols. Some of these people, whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought against fascism, were betrayed by collaborators, and died at the hands of fascist executioners, ended up under the symbols of collaborators, not realizing that they were used by the West in its geopolitical interests and were an instrument of a hybrid war against Belarus and Russia.”

By suggesting a direct relationship between the past and current use of the white-red-white flag, the Belarusian president ruled out reinterpretations and reappropriations that have occurred in recent decades. However, it is most obvious that in this respect he ignored its longer history, in which the combination of similar colors appears as early as the turn of the 20th century in the first Belarusian national circles (Krawatzek and Weller 2022: 27-28).

«Я обращаюсь ко всем, кто убежден, что фашизм «нес на нашу землю цивилизацию»; кто героизирует убийц; кто поклоняется бчб-флагам, под которыми проводился геноцид белорусского народа. Мы занялись этой проблемой, и мы докажем и покажем всему миру, что такое геноцид и что те, кто сегодня нас пытаются поучать, как жить, как минимум не имеют на это права»⁵² (Умпирович and Захаров 2021).

During the protests, the government made tremendous efforts to keep the flag out of public view. In everyday practice this meant constantly removing flags and erasing drawings. The police confiscated the clothes and curtains of the protesters that were displayed on balconies arranged in the WRW color combination. The authorities threatened prison sentences for those who carried the flag, but people subsequently developed new creative ways to display these symbols of resistance. They adjusted their balcony lights to represent the historic BPR flag in innovative ways. Instead of flags, they even used underwear in the respective combination, or hundreds of white and red ribbons, making it difficult to remove the national symbol of change for Belarus. In the weeks after the presidential election on August 9th, every Sunday, protesters wearing these colors came out to express their opposition to Lukashenko's regime in Minsk and across the country (Kulakevich and Kubik 2022: 6-8).

«Главе государства доложено, что собраны новые бесспорные объективные данные о том, что так называемая бэчебэшная символика в виде полотна бело-красно-белых цветов использовалась как обязательный элемент униформы ряда карательных батальонов. Мы завершаем подготовку материалов для обращения в Верховный Суд с целью признания этого полотна экстремистской символикой»⁵³ (Демешенко and Умпирович 2021).

⁵² "I appeal to all who are convinced that fascism "brought civilization to our land"; who glorifies murderers; who worship the bchb-flags (white-red-white) under which the genocide of the Belarusian people was carried out. We have tackled this problem, and we will prove and show the whole world what genocide is and that those who today are trying to teach us how to live, at least do not have the right to do so."

⁵³ "The head of state was informed that new indisputable objective data had been collected that the so-called bechebesh symbolism in the form of a canvas of white-red-white colors

The Belarusian authorities used all the instruments of state pressure at their disposal to demobilize and criminalize all opposition activities. The constant persecution of the display of the white-red-white symbol was a manifestation of it. Systemic machinery was set in motion of censoring ethno-national references used in protest activities for two decades of protest actions. In previous years, the WRW flag had not been registered, but at the same time, nor was it included on the list of extremist and banned symbols, rather it was in the grey area and its understanding depended on the wider socio-political and contextual developments in the country (Kotljarchuk 2020: 53).

Towards regime consolidation and the intensified institutionalization of memory

Following the suppression of mass protest actions, however, we see a continuation of the struggle for discrediting old national symbols. In mid-2021, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs sent a document with a list of Nazi symbols and paraphernalia for approval by the State Security Committee (KGB), in which the list included the WRW flag and the slogan “Long Live Belarus!” (Krawatzek and Weller 2022: 27). Even before that, television channels began to overwhelm their news time with a selection of “contrite” citizen confessions, where everyone from schoolchildren to old pensioners turned into “zmagars” (“Змагары”) who have underdeveloped intellects, are easily manipulated and prone to terrorism⁵⁴ By December 2020, the state media further intensified broadcasting of content containing painful associations of the Second World War to further discredit the WRW flag. Plots concerning the so-called national patriotic event “Memory of the Heart”, dedicated to the victims of the Nazi occupation, spilled over into offensive comments by “concerned citizens” about the WRW flag (Yeliseyeu and Aleshko-Lessels 2021).

When Raman Bandarenka was beaten to death by Belarusian security forces on November 11th for protecting the white-red-white symbols of the protests in his courtyard, the phase of coalescence and mobilization culminated.⁵⁵ The

was used as an obligatory element of the uniform of a number of punitive battalions. We are completing the preparation of materials for applying to the Supreme Court in order to recognize this canvas as extremist symbols.”

⁵⁴ The negative label in the state media lexicon “zmagar” corresponded in meaning to the use of the word “Bandera” in the context of the anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign. All those who disagreed with the state’s policy became “Змагары” (Yeliseyeu and Aleshko-Lessels 2021).

⁵⁵ Raman Bandarenka was attacked by a group of “тихари” (people in civilian clothes with

massive organized crowds of protesters who adopted the white-red-white colors on an unprecedented scale asserted their membership in an imagined community that was separate from Lukashenko's vision of Belarusian identity, speaking out against the terror unleashed by his security forces and rejecting his claims of legitimacy (Kulakevich and Kubik 2022: 7). The central position of the white-red-white flag in the visual expression of protest sparked a surge in Lukashenko's verbal attacks of it after the election. It became a symbol of those who wanted to revise or end the existing social contract between Lukashenko and Belarusian society. The flag embodied a symbolic threat to the regime and distorted the image of a unifying paternalistic leader and therefore had to be removed from the public space (Kascian and Denisenko 2021: 130).

The efforts of the Belarusian authorities were to re-appropriate the monopoly in a symbolic discursive narrative focused on promoting their own interpretation of the protest movement and its supporters, who, as a "fifth column," supposed to serve primarily the interests of foreign puppeteers living in exile and supported by the West. Regime practices were not limited to the amplification of media and symbolic outputs (concrete examples given above or in previous subchapters), but there were also shifts in the instrumentalization of historical memory at the legislative level, where several legislative amendments to laws were adopted in a relatively short period of time, which they mark the central interest and effort of the Belarusian state to strengthen this area. In the middle of 2021, an amendment to the law "On the fight against extremism" and "On the prevention and rehabilitation of Nazism" was approved in this sense, while this set of "memory" legislation further expanded the law "On the genocide of the Belarusian people", which took effect at the beginning of 2022. The remaining power structures form a new ideological platform and legislative framework that provides them with the means for further political persecution and symbolic confrontation with opponents of the regime. The official narrative of the Great Patriotic War is beginning to be re-actualized and instrumentalized into a conceptual framework about the course of the "genocide of the Belarusian people", which is the responsibility of the Prosecutor General's Office (Bratachkin 2022: 199–202). Prosecutor General Andrei Shved became the main representative and interpreter of this launched

the support of the security forces) in the so-called "Square of Changes", a courtyard of a street in the center of Minsk festooned with red and white symbols and very popular among opposition supporters. Bandarenka tried to prevent the removal of a red and white ribbon, for which he was subsequently brutally beaten, and the assault was captured on camera. Around midnight, he was hospitalized with severe brain injuries and died later. His death sparked a series of protests and solidarity actions in his honor (Цыбульский 2020)

initiative, according to whom “Nazism did not go away, but took on new forms in the 21st century”, which was served in the official media as a continuation of the descendants of the punishers and fascists active in the ranks of the protest movement of 2020, which is coordinated and used by the “collective West” in these terrorist actions. «Мы воочию наблюдали за тем, как два года назад на белорусской земле хотели повторить события прошлого, но уже с новыми идейными вдохновителями и в новой обработке. Это стало возможным исключительно из-за того, что мы не говорили о нашей истории так, как должны были это делать. Мы замалчивали как на международном уровне, так и внутри своей страны трагедию нашего народа»⁵⁶ (БЕЛТА 2021a).

At the Independence Palace on January 3, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree declaring 2022 the Year of Historical Memory (БЕЛТА 2022b), while the previous year, 2021, was marked by national unity and programmatic efforts by the authorities to consolidate society and promote the importance of state sovereignty (БЕЛТА 2021b). In turn, the Year of Historical Remembrance was declared with the aim of forming an objective public attitude to the historical past and strengthening the unity of the Belarusian people. In the incriminated post-protest period, a radical institutionalization of the state politics of memory takes place. In its actions, the Belarusian regime confirms that the history and culture of remembrance have been declared unprecedented “zones of national security”, which leads to constant and even obsessive efforts to interfere with the interpretation of some historical events, symbols, and personalities. In particular, it is about protecting the mnemonic heritage and confirming the inviolability of this unique paradigmatic narrative of the Second World War. Opponents of the authorities inside the country, who have gradually been deprived of the possibility to resist these initiatives, serve as subversive elements threatening national memory and unity. At the same time, against the background of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the pro-government discourse is increasingly louder and more often resorting to blaming the hostile “collective West” (mainly Poland, Lithuania, and Germany), which is supposed to cover up the “genocidal crimes” committed against the Belarusian people and continue as the successor of this historical policy aimed at defaming and diminishing the merits of the Soviet Red Army in defeating Nazism (Bratachkin 2022). «Многим на Западе хотелось бы забыть о зверствах,

⁵⁶ “We witnessed firsthand how two years ago, on Belarusian soil, they wanted to repeat the events of the past, but with new ideological inspirers and in a new treatment. This became possible solely because we didn’t talk about our history the way we should have. We hushed up the tragedy of our people both at the international level and within our country.”

которые чинили их отцы и деды на нашей земле. Они уже переписали историю войны в своих учебниках, предали забвению великий подвиг советского солдата, кровью заплатившего за свободу и жизнь народов Европы. Теперь посягнули на нашу историческую память (...) Но мы знаем, набат правды пробьется сквозь стену молчания и лжи. Преступлениям нацистов на белорусской земле будет дана должная правовая оценка, а результаты расследования представлены мировому сообществу. Беларусь помнит всех героев и безвинных жертв той войны. Помнит она и имена тех, кто сотрудничал с военными преступниками и участвовал в кровавых расправах с населением»⁵⁷ (БЕЛТА 2022с).

The failure of the protest movement after 2020 led to increasingly obvious signs of lethargy in society, where in parallel, the authorities intensified political actions directed at any signs of resistance, as can be seen, for example, in the memory laws described above, which were hastily adopted and discussed. Belarus has joined this current of mnemonic constitutionalism, memory laws, and memocratic governance that is evident in a number of countries in the region (see, e.g., Russia, Poland, and Ukraine). According to Uladzislau Belavusau, this specific kind of mnemonic constitutionalism, along with memory laws in the country, serves primarily as a Russifying and re-Sovietizing ideological sword against the pro-European, democratic and nationally oriented Belarusian opposition in the country. It is a useful tool for the regime to attack independent media, leaders of the Polish minority in Belarus, neighboring states, and historians. It provides a normative and legislative basis that allows individual propagandists to frame debates linking the “genocide of the Belarusian people” with the image of the Belarusian opposition seeking the “rehabilitation of Nazi collaboration” by the democratic opposition. Part of the newly adopted legislation also serves the regime to justify the war in Ukraine and more a more pronounced transition to the Russian memory discourse, which is no longer limited to the re-Sovietization of historical policies, but increasingly refers to Russian historiographical myths (Belavusau 2022).

⁵⁷ “Many in the West would like to forget about the atrocities committed by their fathers and grandfathers on our land. They have already rewritten the war history in their textbooks, have forgotten the great feat of Soviet soldiers who paid with blood for the freedom and life of the peoples of Europe. Now they have encroached on our historical memory (...) However, we know that the alarm of truth will break through the wall of silence and lies. The Nazis’ crimes on the Belarusian land will receive a proper legal assessment, and the results of the investigation will be presented to the world community. Belarus remembers all the heroes and innocent victims of that war. It also remembers the names of those who collaborated with war criminals and participated in massacres.”

Conclusion

Within the symbolic repertoire, the social movement and its individual protagonists make various connections between the past and the present, between the present as a result of the past and the present as a way to an imaginary project in the future. The meanings that emerge from these connections and disconnections are a fundamental element in the local expression of systemic social reproduction. They create both solidarity and divisions that create new identity discourses and help redefine the conflicts that should be resolved. They create a particular field of forces that brings about the conditions for the possibility of engaging in transformative and confrontational struggles, and thus sets up a field of social reproduction (Narotzky 2011: 110). Collective memory is thus not only about the past, but also about present and future political actions. Collective memories then manifest as accumulated, shared historical experiences, which are symbolic resources for activists to appropriate for protest claims (Farthing and Kohl 2013). The way in which movements select and interpret the past is largely guided by strategic action, but as Schudson (1989) points out, there are factors that limit the ability of individuals to arbitrarily shape the past, and this is also true of group memories. Social movements are therefore not entirely spontaneous, but instead depend on past events and experiences and are rooted in specific contexts.

In my paper, I examine the memories the protest movement used to construct itself, but primarily I focus on the ways in which Belarusian activists used memories of past conflicts to fight the enemy. Using several examples, I seek to capture the repertoire of actions in which the movement sought to disrupt and reframe the dominant practice of the official narrative of the Great Patriotic War, which is central in the symbolic canon of the contemporary Belarusian regime. The memory of the Great Patriotic War and the founding myth of the partisan republic, which for many years were the exclusive domain of the neo-Soviet identity, were transformed during the protests into a potent symbolic and rhetorical arsenal for mobilizing opponents of the regime. In the updated context, the understanding of what happened in history was changing, there were confrontational delineation and redrawing of moral boundaries between villains and heroes, which played out in shifts in the re-appropriation of language and symbols associated with World War II. Here, memory represents a symbolic weapon used far beyond historical preservation and commemoration.

The protagonists of the “old opposition”, who are traditionally associated in the general consciousness with the original “revivalist” entity of the Belarusian People’s Front (BPF) and its “irreconcilable” promotion of the ethno-cultural and anti-communist agenda from the early nineties, have long been unable to break

down the traditional uniform myth of to a narrow group of radical nationalists and eternal troublemakers. The nationally oriented rhetoric of a part of the elites from the early 1990s took root in the memory of Belarusian society and, in the following years, had a rather demobilizing potential for mass acceptance. Lukashenko's regime, on the other hand, was able to actively use this narrative of "the main enemies of the people" for years, who come under the white-red-white fascist symbolism of collaborators and try to create chaos again in favor of their Western puppet masters. During the protest actions of 2020, however, we could observe a different development in terms of the choice of the repertoire of mnemonic practice and the strategy of narrating the past, which included new forms of discrediting the regime as absolute evil, but also the invention of new symbolic expressions disrupting the official monopoly on the sacred war narrative. Based on incoming reports of brutal political violence behind the curtain of the regime, the protest movement gained even more pronounced moral credit and began to transform the contemporary experience of the protests into its own referential symbolic tropes and references originating from the substratum of group and collective memories of the protest movement. The Belarusian case of the 2020 protest movement is unique in that it deviated from the template of previous anti-Soviet mobilizations during the formation of symbolic discursive frames, but in its commemorative repertoire it was able to claim both the traditional heritage of national emancipation in oppositional discourse and to incorporate heroic the partisan narrative, which for many years was associated only with official narrative practice and neo-Soviet identity.

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