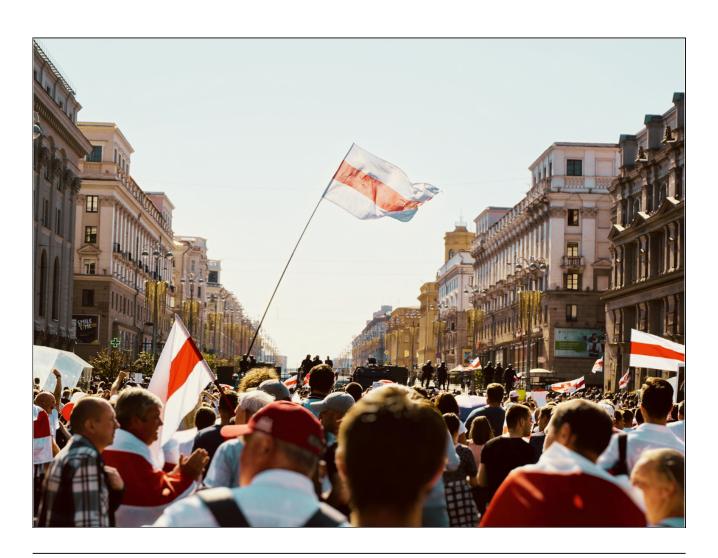# To be called human!

An ethnosymbolic approach to Belarusian national identity mobilization

**MASTER'S THESIS**

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# Abstract

The re-election of Alyaksandar Lukashenka as President of Belarus in the summer of 2020 sparked large nation-wide protests. The scope and speed of the mass mobilization process were unprecedented, with protesters facing harsh repressions by the regime. One of the elements that was closely tied to the mobilization process was the protester's understanding of national identity. In Belarus, identity development has been highly politicized since the 1990s, with official state lines on identity changing systematically. This complex identity environment was visible in the protest movement, often portrayed in the media as largely homogenous and using similar sets of identity symbols and elements during the protests.

This Thesis utilizes the Theory of ethnonationalism to understand the identity policy changes in Belarus with regard to their impact on identity construction. The Theory considers the role of symbolic elements as key for identity construction, with additional focus on the role of elites, geography, language or historical narratives. Additionally, theoretical descriptions of the connection between mass mobilization and identity are portrayed. The Thesis finds that in its formulation, the 2020 mass mobilization and national identity construction cannot be fully understood through an ethnosymbolist lens. Even though the protest movement used various symbolic elements that had been pre-developed as ethnonational, their meaning in 2020 was changed by the protesters in light of new sets of protest demands, changes in social cohesion and dissociation from previous identity narratives. Additionally, some elements of regime-perpetrated identity were appropriated by the protest movement with the aim of detaching them from their connection to the regime. Through this process of symbolic combining, the 2020 protest movement synthesized specific identity elements and used them to construct a new civic identity largely devoid of ethnic notions.

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# List of Abbreviations

BCC          Belarusian Central Council

BOC          Belarusian Orthodox Church

BPF          Belarusian Popular Front

BPR          Belarusian People's Republic

CC           Coordination Council

CSO          Civil Society Organization

GPW          Great Patriotic War

NGO          Non-Governmental Organization

PLC          Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth

RCC          Roman Catholic Church

USSR         Union of Soviet Socialist Republics


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# Introduction

In the summer of 2020, Belarus saw the largest anti-regime protests since gaining independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Bekus 2021). In response to fraudulent elections that further conserved the power of President Alyaksandar Lukashenka, who was first elected in 1994, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in protest (Onuch and Sasse 2022a; Glushakov 2020; Peleschuk 2020). This mass mobilization was extensively documented by an array of Western and local media, putting a focus on a country that has often been identified as the last European dictatorship (Wilson 2021). Through the media coverage, one could not overlook the homogenous appearance of the protesters as they gathered, marched, and sang on the streets, wearing white and red clothing and waving white and red flags. From an outside perspective, these elements seemed to unify and define the movement as a whole, especially when reproduced by its leaders like Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Marya Kalesnikava and Veranika Tsapkala (Foltynova 2020; Maliauskaya 2022).

Such displays presented an intriguing opportunity for the study of political mobilization, symbolic use, and the understanding of national identity. The formation of national identity is a complex and nuanced topic that is influenced by country-specific modalities such as historical tradition, social cohesion, and political influence (Almagro and Andrés-Cerezo 2020). Notably, the media coverage showed the protesters not using official state paraphernalia in protests against the government, which is a common practice in other CEE countries (de Goeij and Santora 2019; Walker 2023; Koren 2021), but a non-official set of flags, crests, and colors.

Initially, I was intrigued by this choice, seeing the scale and perceived importance of national symbols for the protesters. I wanted to examine what influenced their choice, how it was made in relation to social action, and if such decisions were connected to domestic identity policy. In the post-Soviet spaces (Isaacs and Polese 2016), studying contemporary developments of national identity usually begins from a similar standpoint in the early 1990s. With newly gained independence, the path taken by various post-Soviet countries differs vastly, however, as the literature points to the importance of ethnic identities in post-Soviet policies (A. S. Leoussi 2006; Ilyin, Meleshkina, and Stukal 2012; Meleshkina 2010; Neuberger 2010; Gaber 2006), researching if the emphasis on ethnic rather than civic identity is still prevalent in the region can help explain deeper socio-political tendencies. With regard to

Belarus, and in connection with geopolitical and socio-economic modalities that influence it, I specifically wanted to understand if the historical identity narratives combined with contemporary policy could help explain the choices made by the protesters in 2020.

The title of this Thesis references an early 20th-century poem *Khto tam idze?* (Who goes there?) by Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala, considered by many a 'national' verse of independent Belarus (Lewis 2017). Its message of calling for dignity and the right to be called people resonates even after more than 100 years, which is why it has been reproduced frequently by the protesters. Even though some authors have already tried to portray the role of identity (Kazharski 2021; Jachovic 2022; Kulakevich 2021) and cultural representations (Lidski 2023) of the 2020 protests, to my knowledge, none approached the development of national identity through a theoretical lens. For this reason, this Thesis uses the theory of ethnosymbolism as a frame to understand the identity construction with regard to symbolism, myths, and social cohesion. Studying these elements is beneficial, as it might lead to an increased understanding of protester motivations and dispositions, possibly applying the findings to future protest movements. Based on the above, this Thesis's problem formulation reads as follows:

*"How did identity policy development in Belarus contribute to the mobilization and construction of national identity of the 2020 anti-regime protest movement?"*

First, a Literature Review is presented with a focus on identity construction in the post-Soviet spaces, followed by a Theory section where the theoretical frames on national identity, as well as the theory of ethnosymbolism, are presented in depth. Following a methodological section, the analysis of this Thesis focuses on the mobilization aspects of the protest movement and their connection to identity, as well as a detailed analysis of symbolic elements of the protest movement, ending with the identity construction process of the movement and the regime's response.

# Literature Review

To contextualize Belarusian approaches to forming a national identity, one should first understand the national identity-building process of countries in the region that have shared a similar historical experience in the modern era (Bremmer 1997; Pawłusz and Seliverstova 2016; Isaacs and Polese 2015; Abdelal 2002; Kolossov 1999). Such an approach can be beneficial for understanding the differences and similarities with the Belarusian case and can help us understand the direction of its present-day identity construction (Ilyin, Meleshkina, and Stukal 2012). This literature review will focus on studies aimed at researching the post-Soviet spaces (Prazauskas 1996) as the unifying socio-historical element where shared post-colonial political and geographic reconsolidation affected socio-ethnic basis of identity reconstruction through similarities of "territory [and] the cultural landscape which was formed under the influence of Soviet ideology and influenced by the general history" (Kholova 2020, 523).

With the dissolution of the USSR and the end of state socialism came a revival of nation-states and their identities in the EEC region (Brubaker 1996; Abdelal 2002; Isaacs and Polese 2016). This process was often spearheaded by three main factors - a turn to liberal democracy (in some of them), the introduction of a free-market economy, and national and civic identity reconstruction (Offe 1994), which often clashed with complex and re-emerging notions of ethnic identities influenced by "language policy, creation of the national informational space, invention of national myths and stereotypes, and economic leverages" (Kolossov 1999, 71). The formation of the last factor has varied significantly given complex historical developments and the measure of connection of national identities to the USSR, as well as the Soviet majority policy of superimposing 'Soviet identity' over pre-conceived, pre-Soviet identities. The result was a 'Soviet-Russian' or just purely 'Russian' (especially during and after World War 2) identity, aiming at nations within the USSR to understand the polity as one entity with a shared Soviet identity, often through shared character traits such as the *'Hommo Sovieticus'* (Kholova 2020).

Post-Soviet countries' identity reconstructions were largely influenced by pre-Soviet identities, myths, symbols, and historical tracing (Bremmer 1997; Kolossov 1999). For example, Kazakhstan followed a slow-onset reconstruction of identity due to the large ethnic Russian minority influence, with language reforms implemented only recently (Burkhanov 2017; Aydingun 2016), while in the Caucasus, the process was shaped largely by ties to the

West and geopolitical proximity to Russia in mainly economic terms (Chkhaidze 2022; Saparov 2003).

In the Baltics, this process focused on language reforms, anti-Russian policies, and pro-Western orientation (Bremmer 1997; Tsygankov 2000; Fabrykant 2018) as the Baltic states largely reconnected with close pre-Soviet ties, especially to Northern and Central Europe. Smith (1998, 94) argued that especially in Latvia and Estonia, which he called "ethnic democracies", the process was largely aided by the exclusion of the then numerous Russian ethnic minorities from the nation-building and policy-making process. This exclusion led to rising tensions between the Russian minorities and national governments that, in some form, continue to this day (Halicka 2023).

Lithuania already had developed narratives of the 'golden past' through the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) (Gaber 2006, 48). Clark (2006, 182) argued that in Lithuania, "nationalism has successfully been transformed from one concerned with territorial defense against internal threats to one largely focused on a strategy of building civic consciousness among all of the country's citizens". In the early 1990s, identity policy focused on a strong Lithuanian state able to withstand security threats from Russia and a reorientation towards European integration. These policies were appropriated in 1992 by the re-elected communist party, with a focus on the legacy of the interwar Lithuanian state and an anti-imperial stance towards Russia (Abdelal 2002, 464).

In 1990s Russia, democratic and liberal elites failed to connect Russian identity to democratic principles due to "their preoccupation with devising political, and especially economic, alternatives to the Soviet model" (Brudny and Finkel 2011, 829), enabling the growth of a non-democratic Russian national identity. In contrast, Ukrainian elites in the early 1990s focused less on economic issues and rather developed the identity narratives first, linking them to democratic values and positioning Ukraine as part of the European sphere.

The Ukrainian national identity-building process was eased by not having a connection to a hegemonic imperial identity and a developed consensus among the elites on the rightfulness of connection to the West (Brudny and Finkel 2011, 829). The reorientation to the past worked with well-developed memories of pre-Soviet identities, mainly through "the memory of older Ukrainian states of 1917 and 1921" (Abdelal 2002, 469), and through

reconstructing Ukrainian historiography symbols of the proto-Ukrainian state, the Cossack identity, Kyivan Rus, the Tryzub or the yellow-blue flag (Kiryukhin 2015; Surwillo and Slakaityte 2022).

Way (2006) argued that even though there were many similarities between Belarus and Ukraine at the beginning of the 1990s, the Ukrainian civil society and pro-democratic movement were more successful in their identity reconstruction, largely due to better-organized social mobilization and a developed political understanding of political resistance. The Ukrainian civil society also used its largely divided national identity as a remnant of the past and a mobilization tool against post-Soviet legacies in a time when Belarus was considered a "denationalized nation" (Way 2006, 10).

However, due to issues of ethnic composition, complicated historical ties to Russia, and ethnocultural understanding of identity, unlike in other post-Soviet spaces, Ukrainian and Belarussian national identities "had to be reinvented rather than merely resurrected" (Green 2011, 2). In this group, Belarus was also an outlier when it came to the impacts of national identity on democracy and the only country in the region where national identity seemed to work for the current regime consolidation (Karatnycky, Motyl, and Schnetzer 2001; Gaber 2006).

# Context

In order to analyze the development of Belarusian national identity during and after the 2020 anti-government protests, the historical and social aspects of how it came to be will be explained. This chapter will present the main historical and political events shaping today's identity debate in Belarus, discussing the main streams of thought and symbols on which it is built. Analyzing Belarusian identity through a socio-historical context is beneficial, as it connects to the Thesis' problem formulation and serves as a background for understanding the choices made by the protest movement in 2020 in relation to identity mobilization and construction.

## Origins of Belarusian Identity

The term 'Belarus' or 'White Rus' started appearing in local chronicles in the 14th century, and even though its origin is not known, some Russian historians claim its connection to 'Velikya Rus', the original and great Rus, signifying the connection between the modern-day countries (Ioffe 2003, 1244). Today's territory of Belarus was part of the Kyivan Rus and, until 1397, part of the Principality of Polotsk, an early medieval state situated in the central and northern part of today's Belarus. Incorporating the Principality was the GDL, where the symbol of Pahonia originated (Belarusian Rada 2021), which was later transformed into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC).

Today's territory of Belarus was incorporated into the Russian Empire after the Third Partition of Poland in 1795 (Abdelal 2002). It is during this time that Ioffe (Ioffe 2021) argues for the birth of the two main streams of Belarusian national identity - 'russo-centric' (later also known as 'east-centric' or 'Soviet-centric'), originating in the West Ruscism movement and 'west-centric' (later also known as 'nationalist'), oriented more towards Polish and Lithuanian heritage.

In 1839, the Ruthenian Greek Catholic church's unification with the Eastern Orthodox Church resulted in a transfer of over 1 million believers of mainly Belarusian origin closer to the Russian Orthodox tradition (Ioffe 2021). During the January Uprising in the Russian-controlled Kingdom of Poland in 1863, Kastus Kalinouski led an uprising in Belarus and Lithuania against Russia, aiming at re-establishing the Commonwealth with a more pronounced position of Belarus. The uprising was defeated, and Kalinouski was executed by

the Russians, yet his legacy has inspired contemporary debates and played a major role in the historiography of west-centric academics (Ioffe 2003).

Throughout much of the 19th century, Belarus found itself between Polish and Russian narratives, each attempting to include the Belarusian ethnicity into their own national building projects, and it was also during this time when the Belarusian language usage decreased and moved to rural areas (Bekus 2014). However, national revival movements of the late 19th century synthesized the modern Belarusian language precisely thanks to its continuous use in the rural areas, allowing for preservation and subsequent alleviation into upper classes later on (Bekus 2014).

## 20th Century Awakening and the Belarusian People's Republic

For the majority of people who lived in the land of today's Belarus, the concept of Belarus and its identity only appeared in the late 19th century (Ioffe 2003). This identity construction happened disproportionately due to linguistic ability, geography, and social capital. Members of the Belarusian intelligentsia claimed their Belarusian ancestry from the Polish and Lithuanian traditions posited against the Russian tradition (Abdelal 2002), but peasants predominantly identified themselves according to regional, not national, belonging. There would not exist a cohesive national identity for the whole region known today as Belarus, at least until the 20th century (Ioffe 2003). The first notions of modern Belarusian west-centric identity were created by Polish-speaking intellectuals of peasant origin in cities such as Vilna (today Vilnius), shaped by Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian ethnocultural influence. Historical works such as "Кароткая гісторыя Беларусі" (A short history of Belarus), written by Vaclau Lastouski in 1910, made connection between Belarusian statehood and the legacy of the Polotsk principality and the GDL, the latter considered "the first fully independent Belarusian state" (Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023, 5).

## Belarusian People's Republic & Byelarussian Soviet Socialist Republic

During World War 1, Belarus was occupied by the German Imperial Army from 1914 to 1918. After the October Revolution of 1917, the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) was founded in March 1918 (Abdelal 2002). During its foundation, Belarusian nationalists introduced the white-red-white flag and Pahonia as a national symbol, an "emblem of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus' and Samogitia, the latter representing a link to a proud period' in Belarusian

history" (Zaprudnik 1993, 164). BPR's founders have proclaimed the revival of independent Belarusian identity, refusing both appeals of the USSR as well as unitary polity opportunities with tsarist Russia or Poland. Even though BPR's foundation depended on German authority, it was considered a success for the west-centric nationalist movement, given the influence of Russian ethnolinguistic policies in the decades prior and the weakness of the Belarusian nationalist movement in the 1890s (Ioffe 2003).

After the withdrawal of the German Army in the winter of 1918, the Red Army annexed the territory and, during the Lithuanian-Soviet and Polish-Soviet wars of 1918-1920, established the brief Socialist Soviet Republic of Lithuania and Belorussia, and in 1920, the Bolsheviks founded the Byelarussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). In 1921, today's Belarus was partitioned between the USSR and Poland through the Treaty of Riga (Bekus 2010). This political change meant a definite stabilization of Soviet influence over Belarus. After the Bolsheviks took power, the influence of west-centric nationalists briefly rose again, aided by Polish immigration, but was later diminished by the influence of the russo-centric side as rural Belarusians with inclination to the east were en-masse being promoted to positions of power. The remains of the west-centric narratives were finally dismantled during Stalin's purges in the 1930s (Ioffe 2003; Bekus 2010).

The founding of BSSR served, in turn, as a brief moment of self-identification as the Belarusians were allowed their own state at the behest of merging their own nationalist attempts with the common revolutionary forces of the USSR (Bekus 2014). Ioffe (2003, 1229) writes that only during the formation of the BSSR did most Belarusians in the area start to attribute the terms 'Belarus' and 'Belarusian' as their own, accepting personal identification symbols such as the Belarusian language for the first time. Prior to this, most people would introduce themselves simply as '*tuteyshia*', meaning 'local or from here' in Polish, due to a lack of formed idea of national identity.

In the first years of BSSR, strict policies led to a declaration of Belarusian identity predominance through official status and obligatory education in Belarusian, with almost 94% of schools being primarily Belarusian by 1929. Through these policies, Belarusian "was no longer a language of peasants but a language of the state" (Bekus 2014, 46). Even though later Sovietization and Russification policies damaged independent Belarusian identity, their socio-

economic development was impactful - as Leshchenko (2004, 337) argued, "Belarus entered modernity as a Soviet state".

## Great Patriotic War, Reformative Years & Dissolution of the Soviet Union

Belarus suffered greatly during World War 2 (Bekus 2014). During the war, the Jewish population was practically exterminated, along with members of the intelligence and Soviet POWs, with casualties numbering above 2 million (Snyder 2020). The partisan movement grew in importance in mid-1942, at almost 375 thousand, the largest partisan organization in Europe, and even though its operations were often countered by mass exterminations of the civilian population, its legacy was carried to the 21st century. Important military victories such as the defense of Brest fortress, the defense of Mogilev, the sabotage of Osipovichi, and the battle of Polotsk all became a part of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) memory, which has shaped Belarusian national identity since (T. Snyder 2020).

The short-lived Belarusian Central Council, a Nazi-backed collaborationist movement existing between 1943 and 1944, was a staunchly anti-Soviet puppet administration body. However, its usage of symbols, mainly the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia symbol, is notable (Alexander 2015). Marples (2003) argued that the period of post-WW2 reconstruction is considered a 'golden age' by the russo-centric stream as it brought elevated quality of life for ordinary Belarusians through restoration, modernization, and industrialization.

The official narrative for Soviet Byelarussian identity was developed in 1948, claiming the BSSR as the first official Belarusian state and describing the GDL as exploitative while considering the BPR a "bourgeois-nationalistic project supported by the German Empire" (Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023, 7). In the 1950s to 1970s, the Belarusian language started vanishing from schools, textbooks, and journals, and the influence of Soviet Russian culture dominated (Bekus 2014). The Belarusian language was again seen as 'rural and uneducated', whereas Russian was the language of opportunity used mainly by educated upper classes. In this period, the country experienced large-scale industrial transformation and achieved the highest standard of living of any of the Soviet Republics (Mihalisko 1997).

During the late 1980s and through the *Perestroika* period, the Belarusian independence movement mobilized earlier than in neighboring countries, aided by the popularization of the

re-discovery of a mass grave from Stalin-era killings of Belarussians by the NKVD in Kurapaty Forest. The galvanization of civil society quickly led to demonstrations (Abdelal 2002). In 1988, the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), also known as *Adradzhenne* (Rebirth), was formed. Belarus declared sovereignty in July 1990 and, following the dissolution of the USSR, gained independence in August 1991.

## Belarusian Popular Front & West-Centric Identity Approach

In the early 1990s, Belarus underwent a period of de-Sovietization during which attempts were made to restore 'Belarusianism' (Bekus 2014, 43). National identity restoration was primarily guided by west-centric elites who aimed to detach the country from its Soviet past, claiming the heritage of older Belarusian states. The white-red-white flag and the Pahonia symbol were reintroduced by the BPF, which was the main driving force behind new policies (Ioffe 2003). Leshchenko (2008, 334) argued that its national building practices were part of a "classic repertoire … for countries recently liberated from imperial dominion".

These changes included the reintroduction of myths, change of language focus, flag and coat of arms, respelling of official names and titles, and replacement of national days and religious holidays. A new series of academic books and encyclopedias were published, focused on perpetrating the identity policies of the time (Leshchenko 2008, 336). Perhaps the most important sign of change was the new language policy, which aimed at the replacement of Russian with Belarusian in both public and private spheres until 2000. In historiography, the main focus was on portraying Belarusians as a European nation through strong anti-Russian, anti-imperial rhetoric that celebrated specific events and states, such as the GDL. This was at least to a point supported by domestic academia (Leshchenko 2004), pointing out the freedom of the Belarusian nation under the rule of the GDL and its multiethnic principles. The legacy of the BPR, whose independence from Russia was of such significance that its existence "left an indelible impression on the Belorussian mind [and] has grown into a historic legend" (Abdelal 2002, 473), was also reclaimed.

However, the BPF reforms have not materialized, and their shortcomings were analyzed substantially (Burkhardt 2016; Bekus 2010; Ioffe 2003). Leshchenko (2008, 337) argued that its elites "failed to account for the historical and social context of the country to which they applied their theoretically feasible policies". This misunderstanding was visible through an

underdeveloped 'national consciousness' separated from a Soviet identity (Marples 2003, 28). For the majority of Belarusians, the Soviet era equaled a time during which Belarus was 'promoted' to a position of a highly literate, industrialized country with an advanced education system, and even though this was done largely through suppression of dissent and intelligentsia, most Belarusians did not accept the 'rural' ideas of life promoted by the BPF (Eke and Kuzio 2000). Its identity policies were considered by many as "coercive, and as a by-product" (Leshchenko 2008, 338), largely through a mistake of the BPF in framing the Soviet past as something to be forgotten while misunderstanding that in the early 1990s, a Soviet-Belarusian identity is all the Belarusian citizens knew.

One of the major downfalls of the language reforms was the language itself (Leshchenko 2008). Since the 1930s, Belarusian was sidelined on the periphery while Russian was used in urban areas, in science, politics, and other key areas. This led to poorly constructed neo-terminology, and the used version of the grammar system differed in the early 1990s from a Russified one introduced in the 1930s. A reverse phenomenon can be observed where the Belarusian language suddenly became one of change and opportunity, very much like Russian in the 1930s. However, for a majority of Russian-speaker urban citizens, this rapid policy change was problematic, resulting in social tension and the Belarusian language being seen by many as insufficient (Leshchenko 2008)

## Lukashenka's rule & russo-centric identity approach

Even though until 1994, the west-centric approach was dominant, the russo-centric responses were formed already during this period. Notably, supported by an organized movement of journalists, academics, and former members of the establishment, the rightfulness of usage for the Russian language was combined with one of the key themes of the russo-centric approach, unification with the Russian Federation (Lastouski 2011). Alyaksandar Lukashenka was elected in 1994, arguing that Belarus "has grown up not out of the ideas of nationalists-in-exile, but out of the truly brotherly family of the Soviet Republics, due to the common efforts of all the peoples, and, first of all, of the Russian one" (Bekus 2014, 49).

The following intense Russification of the Belarusian national identity began with the support of the majority of Belarusians (Rontoyanni 2005). Its main angle centered around a "non-ethnic form of nationalism by upholding membership in the nation on the basis of shared

values, rather than shared blood" (Kulakevich 2021, 99). Promoted especially through the GPW myth, identity formation dismissed the primary position of the Belarusian language and rather emphasized historical experiences. Leshchenko (2008, 1425) argued that through reintroducing Soviet colors, flags, emblems, or anthem and reorganizing the economy, Lukashenka appealed to a popular notion of social stability, creating an 'egalitarian' national identity that "is both ethnically inclusive and focuses on principles of collectivism and anti-liberalism, upholding Belarusian uniqueness". In 1995, a more than 80% vote in a referendum on national symbols disregarded the Pahonia symbol and white-red-white flag and readopted Soviet symbols (Lastouski 2011) (see Figure 1 for an overview).

| | *'National'* (Belarusian Popular Front) | *'Soviet'* (Lukashenka) |
|---|---|---|
| *Foundation myths* | Mixture of Balts and Slavs | Part of the Slavic family |
| *Focus of historical myths* | Polotsk Principality, Great Duchy of Lithuania | Kievan Rus |
| *Culminating moment in history* | Battles of Grunvald 1410 (v crusaders), Vorsha 1514 (v Russia) | Great Patriotic War (Second World War) |
| *Projections of the enemy* | 'Russian imperial ambitions' | Capitalist West |
| *Language* | Belarusian (old grammar system) | Russian |
| *Moral qualities endorsed* | Wisdom, devotion, independence | Hard work, endurance, patience |
| *Practices* | Observance of popular traditions, elements of dress, speaking Belarusian, ethnographic studies | Celebration of agricultural heydays, sport competitions, Slav festivities |
| *Vision of the future* | West-oriented development, membership in the EU | 'Family' of Slavic people with Russia as its head |
| *Economic orientation* | Liberal economic reforms | Preservation of state governed economy |
| *Social basis* | National intelligentsia, urban middle class, small town residents | Rural population, Chernobyl refugees in cities |

Figure 1 - Main symbols used by west-centric and russo-centric approaches (Leschenko 2004, 389)

Contrary to the west-centric approach, the claimed oppression under the GDL and PLC, along with Jesuit and Catholic policies, could have only led to an "act of salvation for the oppressed Belarusian people" (Lastouski 2011, 35), the partition of Poland in 1795 and Belarus' leap under the Russian sphere of influence. The majority of russo-centric thinkers attributed agency to the USSR on the basis of strength, warfare capability, industrialization, development of the Belarusian lands, or employment. The GPW myth was extensively used,

focusing on the bravery of the Belarusian partisan movement and the post-war resurrection (Bekus 2014). Due to its consistent framing and general social impact, Lastouski (2012, 426) called the GPW myth the "most important historical myth contributing to the construction of modern Belarusian national identity".

The russo-ethnic approach has been criticized for the organized nature of its development, as many academics and elites worked on developing russo-centric narratives since the early 1990s (Lastouski 2011; Ioffe 2003; Bekus 2010). Their efforts influenced the agency of the west-centric narratives, criticized by them often from a position of 'moral' or 'academic' superiority, with the same approach used later to justify the rightfulness of the russo-centric approach. In this spirit, the west-centric approach was considered an "immature study of the history of Belarus" (Lastouski 2011, 37), aided by the monopolization of narratives on 'truth', 'history' or 'externality' by the russo-centric academics. The most common narratives of the 1990s of 'Western enemies', 'oppressors', or 'zionists' are applied horizontally without studying specific historical narratives. In turn, they have been translated to modern vernacular through narratives of 'judeo-zionism', 'secret conspiracy in the West', or 'traitors' (Lastouski 2011). Similar rhetoric is used by the state to this day, in particular, aimed at the Western countries and the Belarusian opposition movement abroad (Bykowski and Bushuev 2020).

## 21st Century, Soft Belarusization and Pre-2020 Policy

In the 21st century, the regime has consolidated its monopoly over definitions of Belarusian identity through strategies of historical sourcing of its own identity-narrative validation and, more recently, through a turn to cultural and sporting events showcasing the 'Belarusian' spirit (Lastouski 2012). Establishing an even tighter economic partnership with Russia while reproducing pre-formed narratives of 'Belarusianness', Lukashenka has positioned himself into a role of seeming indispensability, promoting a "Soviet mentality with Belarussian allegiance" (Leshchenko 2004, 349).

These policy narratives were precursors for the dominant regime identity policy of the 2010s, soft Belarusization, which focused on appropriating some of the identity symbols of the west-centric system to increase a Belarusian identification separate from Russia (Boulegue, Lutsevych, and Marin 2018). The process of soft Belarusization became pronounced after the

2014 Russian annexation of Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas regions (Posokhin 2019). Even though the Belarusian regime played a role as a self-designated negotiator between the two parties (for example, the Minsk Agreement), on the domestic level, Lukashenka saw the annexation as a threat. The new policy allowed for slow and methodical acceptance of some specific elements of Belarusian history that the russo-centric hardliners of the early 1990s would call 'nationalist', such as the legacy of the GDL or the BPR.

Lukashenka claimed its focus was on separating Belarus from the 'Русский мир' (Russian world) understanding of identity (Hansbury 2021, 4), yet policies were only allowed insofar as they did not explicitly contradict official Russian identity narratives but rather 'embellished' them. The regime actively engaged civil society in the production and development of these policies, easing restrictions and partially allowing for more funding and business development opportunities for NGOs, CSOs, and SMEs (Astapova et al. 2022). The partial re-implementation of the 'west-centric' elements is understood as an attempt to bolster Belarusian's undeveloped identity, but especially west-centric symbols such as the Belarusian language, specific national heroes such as Kalinouski, and the white-red colors were appropriated by the regime (Posokhin 2019).

The policy has yielded ambivalent results - survey research by Rohava (2018) showed that young Belarusians are conflicted about their national identities and prefer to 'pick and choose' elements that suit them personally, often trying to disassociate themselves from political narratives in favor of social and geographic ones. The connection between the general russo-centric narrative and the official governmental policy stance exists. However, while the former is stable and clearly defined, the latter "is pragmatic (and) varies depending on the socio-political agenda" (Lastouski 2011, 32).

The lack of coherence in developing identity policy leading to increased de-identification of the population can ultimately lead to limited opportunity for political change in the country in the upcoming future (Burkhardt 2016), and as Rohava (2018, 664) predicted, the "future democratic protests in Belarus will become more issue-driven and less identity-based". As such, soft Belarusization policy arguably developed some elements of civil society and helped gather public knowledge of identity narratives that differed from the russo-centric ones, but even its scope was measured by the regime precisely not to give too much freedom

to bottom-up development, rather using it as a differentiation point from Russia (Hansbury 2021).

# Theory

In this section, the theory of national identity is presented. Relative and contemporary concepts pertaining to its creation and representations will be discussed, including a short overview of the most important theoretical directions. Furthermore, the connections between national identity and mobilization are explored. As the main theoretical framework of this Thesis, the theory of ethnosymbolism will be presented with emphasis on its understanding of identity construction, the importance of symbols and elements, and key actors. Lastly, a theory selection chapter is included to justify the selection of said theories.

## Theory of National Identity

National identity plays a central role in understanding how societies create and give a shared meaning to national belonging through history, ethnicity, social structure, geography, political views, and more (Smith 1998; Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1991; Almagro and Andrés-Cerezo 2020). As such, it is considered "the central identity in the modern world" (Greenfeld and Eastwood 2007, 271). In the field of international relations, the study of *how* national identity is created, *by whom,* and *to what effect* largely has to do with studying the nation-state (Liut and Turner 2018).

A nation-state consists of two aspects: the nation-state system and an adjacent national identity. In this sense, national identity is defined as the "identity of the citizens of a country with their own country's historical and cultural traditions, moral values, ideals, beliefs, national sovereignty, and so on" (Liu and Turner 2018, 1080). Its shared markers may include birthplace, residence, language, religion, skin colour, ancestry and other factors, but as such these are not interchangeable, nor is there a given set of markers needed to assess one's national identity.

## Types of Identity

The most common and researched types of national identity are civic and ethnic (Richards 2013; Smith 1998). While the former is concerned more with one's belonging to a particular nation through shared possessions, actions, or legal boundaries, the latter concerns one's belonging to a society that is based on ethnic and social ties, historical developments, kinship, and shared customs. National belonging in the civic sense is determined by one's citizenship,

but in the ethnic sense is determined "by the possession of ascriptive (usually phenotypic) characteristics, most often imagined to be possessed by the nation's members as a result of their genetic inheritance" (Greenfeld and Eastwood 2007, 269).

Civic nationalism revolves mainly around the ideas of statehood and nationhood, where "common rights, duties and values of citizenship" (Roshwald 2015, 1) combine to create a platform upon which statehood is created. Ethnic nationalism focuses largely on what came before statehood, i.e., shared myths, kinship, and ethnic bonds, most commonly revolving around topics such as shared language or religion. As the ethnic understanding is less abstract and more based on blood ties and identity symbols, it is also less inclusive. As such, civic nationalism is often connected with liberal democracy and cultural and political inclusivity, while ethnic nationalism is associated with authoritarian regimes, as well as separationist or autonomist movements (Roshwald 2015).

Bechhofer & Crowe (2015, 1) argue that national identity is about how "people choose to think of themselves in cultural-territorial terms". The cultural identity aspect, tied to other functions of identity in the state, differs from the 'political' sphere where citizenship is central. Tracing back to the German philosopher Herder, the ideas of cultural national identity closely tied to language prevailed during the 20th century (Hobsbawm 1995; Hutchinson 2015). Language is here understood as what we speak and write and as linguistic expressions through songs, dance, religion, art, music, and the like. Cultural aspects of identity are often molded by influences of different artistic periods and trends, such as the effect of romanticism on 18th & 19th-century Europe that, along with increased legitimization and appearance of the 'nation state', helped to "identify and revive" (Hutchinson 2015, 2) collective cultural identities. Well-developed and understood myths and folklore then contribute to the overall national identity thanks to cultural cultivation.

## Classical Theories of National Identity

While the creation, development, and concepts of national identity are continuously researched, three of the most commonly used theoretical frameworks, namely primordialism, modernism, and ethnosymbolism, are used most widely, often serving as a basis for new research directions (Richards 2013; Tierney 2005). Firstly, primordialism puts emphasis on the natural origin of social groups, blood relations, ethnicity, and genetic history (Conev 2019). While it considers

only the ethnic concept of national identity and could be useful in studying social groups bound to certain geographical locations with traceable lineages, it has been widely criticized and largely dismissed for the study of present-day societies. Primordialism was supplemented by perennialism, which is similar in focus but assigns a constant role to national identity as ever-present within mankind (Conversi 2006).

Secondly, the theory of modernism, discussed widely by thinkers such as Ernest Gellner (Gellner 1983) or Benedict Anderson (1991), conceives of a nation purely from the point of view of state modernization. Marxist in origin, the theory argues that national identity is nothing more than a construct created along with the emergence of nation-states, beginning on a larger scale with the Industrial Revolution, not present in ancient and medieval societies. A common argument is found in connection to post-revolution nation-building practice in 18th century France, where the notion of nation replaced the influence of the church. In relation to statehood, modernists argue that a nation uses a shared language, legal frameworks, and political precedents for the "sole purpose of enhancing economic and industrial development" (Conev 2019).

Gellner's argument that "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner 1964, 168) highlights its constructivist premise. A key modernist assumption is that nation-state homogenization brings with it issues of national determination - once a state tries to impose a centralized idea of identity, smaller and marginalized groups tend to form their own identities and national movements. To do so, the elites transfer the idealized low culture into the high culture to create a cultural basis for their own identity. Anderson's (1991) concept of 'imagined communities' was widely accepted in the field towards the later stages of the 20th century, explaining that the "identity of the community comes from the capacity of the members to think the nation or imagine the nation" (Tierney 2005, 43). Therefore, societies can construct and redesign their national identities in a way that sees them achieve preferred means, rendering identity into an organic, fluid idea.

## Mobilization in the Theory of National Identity

In order for nations to solidify their national identities, citizens need to be able to discern how their personal identity is constructed and perceived in relation to others. As such, both the

nation-state (Greenfeld and Eastwood 2007) and the imagined community (Anderson 1991) are created only when citizens understand that they share similar identification traits and symbols with others and can, therefore, identify together within the cohesive nation. This process often happens through mobilization (Yamamoto 2015). The most common type of mobilization with regard to socio-political action is political mobilization, which usually aims at political regime changes, often with political and social elites and social entrepreneurs leading its developments (Opp 2019).

Political mobilization is traditionally connected to elections, often with regard to voter turnout, measures of civic political satisfaction, or voter preference (Vermeersch 2011). However, current sociological approaches to political mobilization have influenced political science thinking with regard to mobilization dispositions, highlighting the increased role of social movements in the process (Amenta et al. 2010; Edelman 2001). Addressing the role of social movements in producing narratives that have an impact on policy outcomes through mobilization has brought new dimensions to it, such as increased focus on collective actions, protester dispositions and grievances, and political contexts.

As a result, the difference between 'political' and 'social' factors has been increasingly thinned, as even though social movements still reserve considerable influence with regard to socio-cultural influence, they also hold power capital as they are "inherently political" (Vermeersch 2011, 3). Thus, political mobilization through non-institutionalized social movement perspectives can bring about political outcomes. Yamamoto (2015) argued that, as well as social aspects, mobilization speed plays a role in sustaining identity. Here, rapid mobilization was found to have less of an effect on national identity than a slower process. However, rapid mobilization was found to decrease societal fragmentation on the basis of identity. Because of these effects on the development of social cohesion, mobilization "constitutes a key mechanism by which group identity is formed among people" (Yamamoto 2015, 2).

To understand the connection of national identity mobilization through or as a part of 'mass' or 'social' political mobilization, exploring the framework developed by Miroslav Hroch (1985) is beneficial. Hroch argued for a three-part national identity-building process, often observed in smaller states: 1) the gestation phase, led by elites and focusing on reclaiming and reconstructing cultural heritage for its sake; 2) the patriotic agitation, where findings from

the gestation phase combine with political demands, often facilitated by middle class and elites to be used for national awakening; and 3) mass mobilization, where the mobilization process aims to reach rural and urban citizens alike.

Especially the role of elites in this process has been studied extensively, and Hroch's model has gained importance, especially when explaining the complex identity construction process in the CEE region (Conversi 2006; Smith 1998). In this region, political mobilization can often use so-called "significant elements of a common culture" Kelman (1997, 172-3), such as oral or written histories, artifacts, and myths, leading to a prevalence of ethnic mobilization strategies based on shared ethnicity. The relative underdevelopment of specific national identities meant that countries in this region were more prone to ethnic mobilization, especially when undergoing an identity or society reconstruction process (Vermeersch 2011; Bunce 1995).

## Ethnosymbolism

Synthesising perrenialist arguments of ethnic history, myths, and belonging with modernist notions of social construction, modernity, and political action, perhaps the most complex look at how national identity can be understood in the modern day can be found in the work of Anthony D. Smith and his theory of ethnosymbolism. In Smith's (1991, 75) definition, a nation is a "named community possessing a historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs". His key argument is as follows: culture, tradition, and myth are the core of every nation, and from them, national identity is created that can later serve as the basis of a nation's existence. The presence of shared language, customs, and traditions provides the nation with historical continuity and legitimacy.

Smith summarised these conditions into five main attributes of ethnosymbolism: "historic territory or homeland; common myths and historical memories, a common and public mass culture; common legal rights and duties for all members, and a common economy with territorial mobility for members" (Smith 1991, 14). Further on, he argued that "nations must have a measure of common culture and a civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas, that bind the population together in their homeland" (Smith 1991, 11). One of the ethnosymbolist key concepts is 'ethnies', described as "named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories, and cultures, having an association with a

specific territory, and a sense of solidarity" (Guibernau 2004, 126). Drawing on Brubaker (1996), Leoussi (2006, 161) explains that ethnies concept "describes the desire of an ethnocultural community or nation for cultural self-expression through and within 'its own' national state".

A key aspect here is the idea of ethnic homogeneity, also used by modernists, that focuses on the importance of traditional connections between members of society that create cultural value characteristics for that specific nation. The main emphasis here is on sharing - the historical past, experiences, languages, collective memories, and traditions. In Conev's (2019, 13) words, "the basis of the nation lies in the ethnic structure, that is, the homogeneity of the group, and that the ethnic core, i.e. the shared historical values of the population, which together with the territory on which they live and their interests - political, economic, strategic, etc. - form the basis of the later created nation-state."

**Symbols of Identity**

As its name reveals, ethnosymbolism primarily focuses on the importance of identity symbols, myths, and other shared traits whose possession by a certain social group might influence identity construction (Smith 1998). These symbols range from language, geography, vernaculars, various forms of art, architecture, state symbols, religious beliefs, and historical myths. Because "the distinctiveness of nations lies quintessentially in their cultural heritage, above all, in their unique fund of myths, memories and traditions" (Smith 2004, 18), it is important to analyze their production, dissemination, and interpretation.

The cultural identity concept of ethnosymbolism is key for Smith (2004, 14), as he singles out the "persistence of collective cultural identities" as one of the main founding blocks of an ethnosymbolic national identity. The role of literature, drama, music, and other art forms cannot be understated here, as their presence establishes connections between history and the present times and, through narrative reconstruction, helps to connect a nation to its historical roots (Smith 2000). Therefore, these symbols help to bring about the "image of the nation" (Guibernau 2004, 140), which considers shared culture, common history and spatiality as key to its existence.

The ethnosymbolic conception of 'land' is rather specific in that its focus is more on how its ownership and belonging to it is perceived by citizens. Territorial factors can be

pronounced through other myths and symbols, particularly through historical examples. However, the simple possession of land is not enough, as it must be made clear that "our land" (Smith 2002, 9) exists, connected to heroes, myth, and ancestry. This notion of 'homeland' produces emotional ties to the territory, creating spatial bonds and notions of 'roots' that naturalize a nation's perception of belonging to a place. With regards to religion, creation myths as well as liturgy, songs, prayers, or language of prayer set different communities apart and help create a uniqueness, as priests and clergymen stand as "guardians of the tradition" (Smith 1998, 28) in its dissemination.

Regarding the historical aspects, Smith (2004) notes the need for the propagation of national myths of origin, both socially and geographically, of memories from the past and socio-historical attachments to the land and the way of life known to ancestors. Especially key here are myths of the ethnic origin of the nation, with specific emphasis on how kinship is 'felt' by the society. Additionally, myths focusing on "political foundation, liberation, migration, and election" (1991, 22) are powerful in this regard. In particular, Smith (1998) singles out the importance of warfare for myth propagation. Both Eric Hobsbawm (1990) and Smith (1998; 2002) also note the importance of the tendency to create a 'golden age' based on reinstating myths and tales, creating a focus on purity and spiritual clarity that can be considered an antidote to 'foreign' modernization attempts on the nation-state. Additionally, such 'golden age' thinking works better if supplied by artifacts that certify it in the eyes of the public. These can be "political and military, or economic and social, or religious, or artistic and intellectual" (Smith 2004, 19).

**Role of Elites**

An important aspect of ethnosymbolism is understanding the division between the elite and the masses. Smith's argument is influenced by Hobsbawm (1995), who asserted that elites can be "ambitious social engineers" who use the emotions of the masses for their own purpose by fuelling and shaping myths revolving around identity and nation. Hobsbawm's idea of the 'invention of tradition' was widely accepted, especially in modernist circles, and used onwards by other Marxist thinkers who rejected the claims of ethnic predetermination, rather focusing on attributing identity to political practice (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

Arguing that ethnicities can scarcely be created, Smith adds that they can be manipulated and formed, often precisely by the elites, for their own purpose (Conversi 2006).

This is one of the crucial assertions of ethnic national mobilization, as it often can be a result of elites' efforts to gain access to certain social and economic means. Using various means to do so, Conversi (2006, 17) calls these efforts "top-down myth-making," wherein elites shape the already created myth, albeit with limited capability of creating a myth of their own. These efforts also aim to create the nation's authenticity and distinctiveness through the return to the ethnic past.

Smith's understanding of myth can be explained using the analogy of warfare. For him, it is not so much the actual experience with a war that a nation has that is so important. Rather, it is the memory of the war, particularly one associated with the national foundation, struggle against oppression, or use of symbols of national birth, that matters most (Hutchinson 2015). From memories, the core of the mythical aspect of the ethnosymbolist identity is constructed through symbols of immortality, shared hardship, ceremonies, or other defining events.

**Identity Construction**

Ethnosymbolism puts emphasis on the importance of different social groups meant to carry out the national identity formation process. Firstly, the 'intellectuals' are seen as carriers of identity mobilization processes - creators, inventors, artists, and thinkers act as "chroniclers' of the ethnic past, elaborating those memories that can link the modern nation back to its golden age" (Conversi 2006, 22). Throughout time, other theorists added the importance of visual art, philology, ethnography, or music in carrying the ethnosymbolist idea. Their job is to popularize, shape, celebrate, and develop the ethnic identity so that it can be accepted, particularly through identity symbols (Smith 2000).

From then on, the 'intelligentsia', as a social group benefiting from higher education and social capital, needs to disseminate, educate and inform the general masses about the intellectuals' work. Smith sees this combination of 'labour' between different able-bodied groups as the backbone of the ethnosymbolist theory because bridges need to be built between the past and the present and between the educated and the non-educated to successfully mobilize the society (Conversi 2006). The means for spreading this information should be controlled by the educational systems and the mass media to ensure that they can reach the population.

Although Smith has updated his theory many times since the 1980s to explain the more

complex, globalized identities of today, it has faced criticism from academic circles. According to Connor (2006), a key flaw in his theory is the blurry line between understanding a nation and a state as entities and the confusion between nationhood and citizenship. Conversi (2006) has argued that in the 21st century and due to the influence of mass media on the success of political movements, the role of 'intellectuals' in Smith's theory has greatly diminished. Especially in authoritarian regimes, this gives the political elites more chances to manipulate and construct ethnic myths through media control, which, in combination with widely available data repositories and common means of obtaining knowledge, renders their influence very low.

## Theory Selection

The choice of theory was guided by empirical background data and evaluation of the main streams of theory on national identity. As the chapters about Belarusian identity formation above (pp. 10-17) portray, this issue is complex and based on challenging historiographic origins, which have often been constructed artificially. It is thus clear that the Belarusian national identity cannot be analyzed through perennialist assumptions of origin and is rather an example of a constructed identity. This assumption would point to a modernist perspective that can help explain the character and forms of mobilization in Belarus in recent times. However, based on Smith's (1991, 2000) assertions, modernism is less applicable in this context due to its predominant focus on identity formation itself, omitting other key factors, symbols, and elements of the process.

Rather, the ethnosymbolist approach is favorable as it confirms modernist notions of identity construction and social connection (Valdes Miyares 2019, 324), applicable here in Belarus, while at the same time attributing agency to specific identity traits such as ethnicity, symbols, language, myths, or culture. It is beneficial to analyze the impact of these motifs through the center-periphery dichotomy, both through a social and geographic narrative, to see how their impact resonates with the "various strata of the population" (O'Loughlin and Kolossov 2017, 696).

It is especially interesting to analyze the impact of these motifs through the center-periphery dichotomy, both through a social and geographic narrative, to see how their impact resonates with the different social groups (Lomonosov 2021). Ethnosymbolism recognizes the process of social mobilization as it emphasizes that "politicians and intellectuals cannot

mobilize the broad masses and achieve their goals without incorporating myths, legends, and memories of pre-existing ethnic groups" (Lomonosov 2021, 1113). Also, the emphasis on information dissemination and the role of media in facilitating identity construction processes can be useful for the analysis (Smith, 2000).

This paper will apply ethnosymbolist perspectives on the investigated problem and aim to find correlations between the theory in regard to the popularization of the 'ethnies', myths, symbols, and other aspects considered by the theory during and after the 2020 protests. Additionally, it will aim to assess the mobilization practices and usage of myths and symbols during their operation, discerning how and which kinds of symbols are propagated by the protest movements. It is beneficial to look at the distribution of narratives vis-a-vis the west-centric and russo-centric approaches to understand prevalence and preference within the protests movement and see how their specific traits have been shaped and utilized for the movement.

# Methodology

## Research Approach

The thesis uses a case study as a guiding research approach. According to Yin (2009, 13) a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". Using a case study approach allows for more in-depth analysis of data, which can result in bridging knowledge gaps and contributing to the overall body of literature. As this paper is investigating developments in only one country, it is considered a single-case study (Yin 2009). Using a case study can lead to increased depth in the level of understanding of the given phenomenon.

As Gerring (Gerring 2004, 342) argues, a single-case study should be an "intensive study of a single unit … observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time". A holistic approach to a single-case study is important as it allows research on the nature and development of a given topic (Yin 2009, 50-52). As for the choice of data in single-case studies, the approach can be complex and determined by research goals. Yin (2009, 19) argues that "case studies can include, and even be limited to, qualitative evidence". The type of evidence is then decided by the object of the study and the aims of the researcher, but can also include studies of quantifiable variables that rely on qualitative evidence. The type of case study used is also determined by the knowledge availability and specificity of the topic.

The rationale for using a single-case study must adhere to the overall research goals. Yin (2009, 47) argues that one of the possible reasons for its usage could be if the topic represents an "extreme or unique case". If applied as such, the case study can lead to contributions of the knowledge and theory development. I argue that given the politically and historically complex development of the Belarusian national identity in the last 300 years, as portrayed by the Context chapter, its position among other post-Soviet countries in its approach to nationhood, social mobilization and identity perception is specific. Especially through the lens of generation-defining social and political changes in the country from 2020, this makes the choice of this case relevant and valid for research.. Lastly, this paper's research approach is deductive as it does not synthesize a new theory from the analyzed data but uses pre-existing theoretical frameworks and applies them to the investigated topic.

## Data Selection

The thesis operates with two main analysis source bases: 1) peer-reviewed journal articles, 2) online news articles and organizational reports. To assemble the bulk of the analysis material, namely academic articles from peer-reviewed journals, this thesis utilized Hannah Snyder's (2019) 3-step method of data categorization. As this thesis aims to "summarize or evaluate a large field of research or even several research areas" (Snyder 2019, 336) that refer to the identity construction in Belarus in the period 2020-2023, this method is useful for better data organization.

Phase 1 of Snyder's method aims at creating an understanding for the author about what needs to be written, what the research needs for such a paper are, and how one should come about choosing a data-gathering system that is optimal for the research goal. Afterwards, selecting and formatting search terms for sources begins, followed by strategy development for data gathering based on applicable metrics. In Phase 2, the selection of sources found based on criteria developed in Phase 1 begins through a systematic approach to categorizing the search results, evaluating their relevance according to the investigated topic, and reading the found material. This also includes additional resource scanning and testing approaches. In Phase 3, the sources are analyzed after being sorted, while the decision on how to use them is still guided by Phase 1 principles.

A complex data set has been identified through the use of the Web of Science search engine. Three search clouds have been developed, using keywords operationalized for the engine through the string-search Boolean operators method. The keyword selection has been developed according to the theory of ethnosymbolism (pp. 24-28), a broader theoretical framework of national identity and connection to mobilization (pp. 22-24), and a geographic specification (Belarus). The time boundary for the publication date of searched data was set from 01/08/2020 to 01/08/2023 to accommodate for time accuracy in relation to the protest movement as well as to serve as an empirical boundary for the author with regards to any current events occurring after the set deadline. The related search window field 'Topic' was selected. English was selected as the only publication language. The search clouds with keywords have been summarised in Table 2 (see below).

| Search Clouds | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Geography** | **National Identity** | **Mobilization** |
| 'Belarus*', 'Byelarus*' | 'nation*', 'identit*', 'statehood', 'peoplehood' | 'protest', 'mobili*', 'social*', 'societ*', 'movement', 'mass*', 'communit*' |

Figure 2: Search Clouds for Web of Science Search Engine

The initial search resulted in 131 articles. According to Phase 2 of Snyder's (2019) method, these results were then evaluated according to the applicability to the overall thematic focus of the Thesis (for example, omitting sources that, albeit adhering to the search engine process through matching keywords, focus on different research areas, time periods, or were otherwise thematically not applicable). After establishing exclusion criteria for selected literature, 24 sources were identified as for the peer-reviewed journal article source base. To build upon this data, the 'snowball' method for enlarging the data set was used, with a particular focus on establishing a larger base for data focusing on the relationship between national identity mobilization, with additional focus on specific symbolic expressions used by the protest movement (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019).

This additional search resulted in the addition of 21 peer-reviewed journal articles to the data set. The second-wave selection of peer-reviewed articles has been made possible through the Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Aalborg University Library. The identified material is predominantly produced by relevant and established scholarly journals, such as the Slavic Review, Canadian Slavonic Papers, Nationalities Papers, Post-Soviet Affairs, Journal of Belarusian Studies, and more. An identical time boundary has been used while searching for both online news articles and organisational reports. Online news articles used are mainly published by international publishing agencies and independent newspapers, such as Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, The Guardian, BBC, Carnegie Europe, CEPA, Open Democracy etc. Reports by international monitoring and human rights agencies, such as Amnesty International were added. Survey data is founded on reputable sources such as the Chatham House and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

The author acknowledges that the paper uses primarily Western-produced data, either by nationality of the author or the affiliation of the publishing house/journal to a specific university or publisher. Based on this, this thesis must be considered an outlook on the investigated topic through the lens of Belarusian and non-Belarusian scholars who publish outside Belarus. Regarding official Belarusian sources, both academic and governmental, such as opinion polls, two reasons for their omission arised.

Firstly, data produced by Belarusian universities is scarcely translated into English. Secondly, in the 2022 Academic Freedom Index which measures academic freedom based on research and teaching freedom, university autonomy or freedom of socio-cultural expressions (Kinzelbach et al. 2023), Belarus ranks worst in Europe and 5th worst in the world with a decreasing tendency. This presents a valid argument for not choosing to analyze data produced by Belarusian universities, as compared to Western journal articles which are subject to peer reviews, it is not possible to validate the quality of their data. Furthermore, the author does not speak either Russian or the Belarusian languages, rendering usage of other potential academic productions of non-Belarusian academic origin not possible.

## Validity

For validity determination, this paper uses the three-factor approach developed by Yin (2009) in assessing research quality and reliability of the findings, namely the construct, internal and external validity. The construct validity evaluates the approach to data collection and the quality of sources. Multi-source review evaluation, reflection on personal motivations and approach to data evaluation all play a role here and are usually validated by revision strategies of data adherence to the original premise of the paper, the connection between the data set and theory, and eventually, supervisor validation.

As mentioned in the data selection chapter, the data set for this paper was guided by Snyder's (2019) approach and externally validated through multiple supervision meetings. Secondly, internal validity focuses on the relationship between claims, causes and effects of a given phenomenon. Here, the cause is understood as the election process and protest movement in Belarus, and the effect is changing attitudes and constructing modes of national identity. For internal validity, understanding causality and sequentiality during a process of research is key

as it allows for consistent analysis of a complex data set, resulting in a well-analysed and argumentative conclusion.

Lastly, for the external validity, the generalization of the study's findings is assessed. Here, the research on national identity in Belarus might contribute to an existing body of literature on national attitudes and identity perception. Especially in the countries and non-recognized states of the former USSR, the understanding of one's identity that is separate from a Soviet-based identity might be challenged by a number of factors. As such, reconstructing pre-Soviet identities can serve as a tool of resistance against authoritarian governments. Within this context, it is useful to understand how the Belarusian society mobilized and used its national identity against the backdrop of authoritarian repression. Completing the three-part validation of the research leads to enhanced reliability and objectivity of the findings.

## Limitations

Among the limitations of this thesis are data availability, potential data bias and depth limits to analyzed information. As this project only uses secondary data from a diverse source base bounded by time, the amount of available data adhering to the selection conditions is limited. Similarly, the types of data are varied in origin yet similar in content. That is largely due to the reporting structure used predominantly by international media and international political bodies whose data this paper uses for analysis. Furthermore, bias needs to be considered, both in relation to the data gathering process, which considers the potential author's bias and technical inaccuracy of the used search algorithms. In relation to data, dealing with a politically and socially polarizing issue could be challenging for its authenticity, and it can be expected that data of Western origin portrays the situation in light of specific policy or stance towards it. Even though the author uses reputable sources, the data bias needs to be kept in mind.

Another limitation of this paper is language. As I experienced, a sizable amount of data predominantly of a theoretical and historical nature is only available in Belarusian or Russian and, therefore, cannot be analyzed. Gaps might appear in data collection where only sources outside the author's language parameters are available. However, the collected data sample in English is arguably significant enough to provide a base for the paper. With secondary data, depth and measuring methods also need to be validated by the author before using them to account for possible bias or inaccuracy. Lastly, the author should keep in mind the spatiality of

data and the fact that some social groups might be more involved in its collection, production, and dissemination than others, possibly leading to underrepresentation based on social capital, regionality, and other factors.

# Analysis

## Mass Mobilization

### Precursors to the Mass Mobilization

The large-scale mobilization in August 2020 was unprecedented in organizational capacity and scale. However, its construction was in the making long before the 2020 election. The number of participants and the speed with which they organized themselves is important to highlight, as it was preceded by slow-onset social de-mobilization that began even before the 2010s (de Vogel 2022). Already in 2011, Lukashenka used extensive violence, repression, and intimidation tactics against anti-regime protests. This challenged the capacity of the civil society to mobilize in the future. As the state's repressive capacity focused on dismantling social movements and organizations that facilitated them, their capacity to mobilize diminished through lack of funding, staffing, legal hurdles, or outreach (Onuch and Sasse 2022b). Additionally, the environment of physical and psychological fear created by the regime contributed to the demobilization process. Based on these developments, the Belarusian 'opposition' movement went into 2020 with a largely fragmented, demobilized core that was only loosely based on grassroots movements and pre-developed social ties (de Vogel 2022).

Prior to the 2020 protests and largely due to the repressive political environment, Belarusian civil society was considered weak and lacking in key resources (Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023; Shelest and Kazanecki 2022). However, while CSOs largely couldn't facilitate mass protests or anti-regime movements, their roles were important in social advocacy and aid for vulnerable social groups, an area which the regime partially allowed to exist. This was particularly significant from 2015 onwards when the regime started seeing civil society as a potential bearer of its cultural and social policies of soft Belarusization (Astapova et al. 2022).

Even though some civil society organizations in Belarus were pro-EU oriented, their actions were largely monitored and allowed to focus on specific civic work, largely omitted from a political spectrum. Due to the socio-historical and economic ties, shared past and identity policy, CSO's connections to Russia "prevail in the culture domain" (Mazepus et al. 2021, 43). Before the protests, Belarusian civil society was "largely co-opted and had its energy directed into non-political activities, and Belarusian society seemed politically apathetic and

accepting of the fact that Lukashenka would remain in power for life" (Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023, 136).

The social mobilization process was, to a degree, aided by the erosion of the social contract developed by Lukashenka to stabilize his position (Glod 2021). Since his election, the President purposefully emphasized the 'fatherland' narrative when attributing Belarusians' their identity markers. Through rising economic sovereignty, a higher standard of living played a role in de-politicizing the society, which was mainly granted economic incentives in turn for political inaction. Prior to 2020, other Belarusian protests were comprised of opposition from a loosely established group of politically motivated citizens, but their numbers lacked depth as the majority of the country resorted to "political apathy and resigned acceptance" (Gel'man 2010, 56). Towards 2020, the individual presence of Lukashenka on the Belarusian political scene, combined with the diminishing appeal of 'stability', resulted in more people asking for economic and social development outside the known regime structures. In that, the demands for self-realization, freedom of speech, and personal rights challenged the old social contract sets (Glod 2021).

Prior to the August elections, the regime suppressed opposition candidates - Viktar Babaryka and Valery Tsapkala, both prominent public figures with connections to the Russian regime, and Syarhey Tsikhanouski, a prominent blogger (Maples 2021, 287). Tsikhanouski and Babaryka were arrested even prior to the elections on fabricated charges, with Tsapkala managing to flee the country to Russia. On August 9th, Lukashenka claimed victory with more than 80% of the vote, with the main opposition candidate Tsikhanouskaya allegedly gaining roughly 10% (Hansen & Ford 2022).

## The Mass Mobilization Process

One of the main mobilization triggers was the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic response by Belarusian authorities (Bekus 2021). Unlike other European countries in 2020, Belarus did not impose a quarantine or a lockdown, keeping its borders open, with the President mocking those who campaigned for stricter measures. According to the UN Statistics Division, a 40% increase in deaths in June 2020 was recorded in comparison with 2019. However, the regime only reported 245 deaths in the month (United Nations 2021). The timing of the elections in

the summer of 2020, amid a still-present threat of the pandemic, contributed to rising tensions in the society.

As a response, some Belarusian doctors and volunteers joined the worldwide #StayAtHome or the #ByCOVID19 campaign, with protest leaders using social media campaigns to appeal to the general public about the dangers of the pandemic (Kulakevich 2021). A regime that was openly claiming to protect its citizens was suddenly seen ignoring health risks to the population, prompting a citizen-organized volunteer movement of support for healthcare workers through fundraising or production of safety products. The spirit of an organized social movement working towards protecting an area of life that the state was not able to protect had a significant effect on the future confidence in the sustainability of the protests (Bedford 2021).

Another reason for mobilization was the nature of the protests themselves. Their peaceful character and inclusive atmosphere were effective as a strategic tool for growth, especially with a focus on social groups that are otherwise more reluctant to participate in social movements (Bekus 2021). The appeals to the 'peaceful' nature of Belarusians, often used by the russo-centric identity stream as one of the main identity markers, was here used by the protesters themselves. The regime then indirectly solidified the validity of the protests by juxtaposing them with its own repressive mechanisms, enhancing agency and participation.

The scale of the social mobilization in 2020 was unexpected - already in July, more than 63,000 people gathered in Minsk, 20,000 in Brest, and 10,000 in Hrodna to show their support for the candidacy of Tsikhanouskaya, and two weeks later, more than 200,000 participated in the first waves of protests following the August elections (Kulakevich and Augsburger 2021). On the first day of protests, 19 cities across the country reported protests (Gapova 2021). The most famous early-onset marches were recorded with up to 400,000 participants on August 16th (March of Freedom) and with up to 300,000 participants on August 23rd (March of the new Belarus) (Leukavets 2022; Shelest and Kazanecki 2022). Overall, the estimates went as high as 400,000 - 450,000 Belarusians taking part in a march at least once, which represents around 5% of the population (Mateo 2022a). Only in Minsk, Onuch & Sasse (2022) estimated that more than 10% of the city's population participated in the weekly marches.

**Pre-Existing Social Ties**

Even though the civil mobilization potential was diminished in Belarus pre-2020, the pre-existing ties in Belarusian society were formed long before. Korshunau (2022) argues for three levels of this process - firstly, in the post-WW2 context, slow social changes through restoration and urbanization created a base for broader social transformation and tie strengthening. In this context, a new urban civic culture grew, also thanks to increased industrialization, literacy, and labor market transformation. Secondly, the level of strategic social changes that facilitated the "organizational-motivational conditions for protest dynamics" (Korshunau 2022, 178), such as decentralization of the economy, media, and communication in the digital space in the 21st century. Lastly, ties were strengthened through sequential 'triggers' in 2020, from the COVID-19 crisis to the August elections.

The scale and speed of social mobilization in Belarus owes a lot to the communal capacity for social resiliency, strengthened in 2020 Belarus in particular through the Covid-19 crisis by bottom-up movements and volunteer organizations, uniting in the broader frame of Belarusian *supol'nasts'* (communities or neighborhoods) (E. Korosteleva and Petrova 2021). During this time, pre-existing social networks acted as the founding blocks of the subsequent mobilization. Through her extensive research on the spatial and personal characteristics of the mobilization process, Matteo (2022b, 38) argued that "pre-existing social networks were likely to be key to early-rising mobilization" as they were not a phenomenon arising directly from the election result disappointments, but a long-operating set of connections whose mobilization potential was already developed. Cities that already had such pre-developed social networks were also more than 20% more likely to mobilize within the first week of protests (Matteo 2022b, 35).

The mobilization process should also be understood through the concept of resilience and, more specifically, its components, such as identity, quality of life, or support infrastructure (Pravdivets, Markovich, and Nazaranka 2022). Prior to the protests, the Belarusian society had not been envisioned to be shaped in a communal principle but rather as a homogenous group whose characteristic traits, often exacerbated by the regime, gave way to its understanding of the political space in which it found itself. This became evident especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the run-up to the 2020 elections, when Belarusians previously characterized by 'modesty' and the notion of omitting conflict at any cost, to a degree a remnant of the post-

WW2 identity reconstruction process, started organizing themselves into cohesive communal units (E. Korosteleva & Petrova 2021). This process was not one-sided - as shown before, the protest movement on one side adopted the notion of 'quiet' and 'peace' to increase protest participation and validity. On the other hand, it largely dismissed other traits such as 'fear of change' or a 'quiet way of life' (Kazharski 2021).

This sudden shift towards Belarusian trait constructions was in part facilitated by the regime's initial response to the protest. Addressing members of his own cabinet or through speeches in the media, Lukashenka often used the rhetoric of *ovtsy* (sheep), *bydlo* (animals), *otshtepenci* (renegades), or *narkomany i prostitutki* (drug addicts and whores) to denote those who participated in the protests (Kulakevich 2021). Through these distinctions, Lukashenka denoted the opposition by portraying it not only as his personal but as a 'national' enemy (Kulakevich 2021). An act of resistance in demanding dignity and being seen as *hramada* (coherent communities) by the protesters then facilitated the development of Belarusian 'peoplehood', a "moment of being" (E. Korosteleva & Petrova 2021, 129) where citizens share their motivations and struggles to form new cohesive social units.

**Social Composition of the Protest Movement**

The protest disposition showed that the majority of the protesters were aged between 30 and 55, with age groups 18-29 and 55+ sharing about 20% of the overall number (Gapova 2021), with women making up more than 55% of the protesters. The strategies of protesters were also organized with appeal to different social groups - LGBT+ and anarchist groups were seen protesting, with women's marches on Sundays since August, marches of people with disabilities on Thursdays, and marches of pensioners, Lukashenka's core electoral group led by the now-famous geologist Nina Bakinskaia, every Monday since October 2020 (Kulakevich 2021). The role of the youth has also been highlighted, especially facilitated by the regime's treatment of strikes and protests of university students in larger cities, along with the inability of young people to organize into non-state-sponsored youth organizations (Pirtskhalava 2020).

Perhaps the most comprehensive account of protester disposition was done through the MOBILISE survey wave, running from August to December 2020, with more than 40,000 respondents, as portrayed by Onuch, Sasse and Michiels (2023). The study found the median age of the protesters to be 39, with gender participation slightly in favor of women, especially during the later months. Furthermore, prior experience with protest movements did not play a

significant role in the speed or scale of the mobilization process. Even though more than 50% of protesters reported joining the protests on the first day, with 31% joining the first week, more than 72% had no prior experience in political protests (Onuch, Sasse, and Michiels 2023, 754).

Surprisingly, data shows that the mobilization movement was largely significant in increased personal social initiative. 26% of protesters stated that they initially went to the protests alone with no intention of meeting fellow protesters, while 65% stated that they formed social ties during the protests. This trend shows that while pre-determined social ties played an important role during the mobilization, their role was mainly important in increasing protest localities in horizontal social mobilization. Only 28% of protesters belonged to a civil society organization or civil movement prior to the protests, including churches, sports clubs, or humanitarian organizations. Onuch, Sasse and Michiels (2023, 755) conclude that Belarusians are "lone wolves, and not very well networked", but state that this has changed further during the protests. However, their findings question the above-presented data on the importance of pre-existing social ties and present further debate about their social reach and effectiveness.

**Protesters' Motivations**

As the protest movement featured various demographic, gender, and vocational groups, the motivations of its participants were complex and not solely focused on the election narrative. While Lukashenka's power was arguably the key reason for mobilization, protesters utilized other modalities of reasoning, such as social belonging, religion, cultural and civic identity, or wider political preferences, all of which played roles in shaping the decisions to participate in the protests (Kulakevich 2021). One of the important dispositions was geopolitical orientation, as Belarusians found themselves encroaching between the EU and Russia, with differing strategies of support for either side coming from the regime and anti-regime side alike, often creating a rather complicated political environment (Dembinska and Smith 2021).

Tsikhanouskaya's campaign was also careful about its orientation to the West, repeatedly pointing out its focus on internal politics. This proved a "calculated decision" (Onuch and Sasse 2022a, 64) as Tsikhanouskaya and her team understood that distancing themselves from a geopolitically oriented campaign might resonate well with potential supporters and rather calling on external powers to let the country choose its own political direction. Even though Onuch, Sasse and Michiels (2023, 756) argued that political reasons

were the primary for protester motivations, confirmed by data regarding protesters' view of Lukashenka, state power, or his behavior towards them, they point out that more than 96% of the protesters also claimed that better economic future was a significant factor of motivation, with 76% strongly agreeing that the economic crisis and poverty were a crucial problem in the country.

In a large-scale survey conducted just prior to the elections, O'Loughlin & Toal (2022) found that social groups such as women, older people, frequent consumers of television, or those with an active interest in politics tend to view Russia in a friendly way. Their research showed that the Belarusian society was not polarized because of the 2020 elections but long before them, with a slight majority orienting itself to the East. There was also a staunch difference in geopolitical orientation between protesters and non-protesters, with the former preferring pro-EU and anti-Russia sentiments and the latter supporting the regime and pro-Russia sentiments (Onuch and Sasse 2022a). The link between geopolitical orientations and participation in the protest movement was, however, not found to be situational or reactionary. Rather, its developed nature resting on historical and social experience has led Onuch & Sasse (2022a, 77) to argue that it can be considered "foundational to protest participation".

Another important factor for the mobilization was the loss of fear of repressive state action (Nikolayenko 2022). A significant role in these developments was played by Tsikhanouskaya herself, as she often used strong language to indicate she was not afraid of the regime's response. The management of fear has grown in the protest movement through shared experience, resulting in the realization of many of the protesters that "moral indignation over state repression can help [them] overcome their fear of repression" (Nikolayenko 2022, 79). The police crackdowns and unprecedented levels of brutality also played an important role in protester motivation. Moral outrage brought proportionally more people to the streets despite the repressions. More than 26% of protesters also stated that their primary reason for protesting is the personal experience of their family members with state repression (Onuch, Sasse, and Michiels 2023, 755).

Tsikanouskaya's calls to the Belarusians to stop living "in fear and lies" (Kim 2020, 1) and her subsequent rhetoric of praise towards the protesters' willingness to challenge the regime also played a key role. Her focus on highlighting the spirit of 'togetherness' against being alone also enabled the protesters to become parts of a large body where their own

personas were, to a degree, 'protected' by anonymity, leading to diminished fear of repression. In the words of Alesia Rudnik from the Minsk Center for New Ideas, the brutal response of the security forces resulted in physical and psychological trauma that played a key role in reinforcing the nation-building process (Peleschuk 2020).

## Modes of Communication

### Social Media

The highly developed IT industry has played a key role in facilitating the protest movement from its early stages (Gabowitsch 2021), and according to Kazharski (2021, 74), the protests could be described as "a form of decentralized, bottom-up political activity, coordinated via social networks". *Golos* (Voice), an online platform that focused on public approval monitoring and facilitation of a re-count of the election votes, or public opinion and domestic observation groups such as *Chestnye Lyudi* (Honest People) or *Narodny Opros* (National Poll) enabled increased protest participation through data gathering (Glod 2021). In August, a social IT movement, 'Cyber Partisans of Belarus,' hacked webpages of ministries, security services, and state-run media, leaving a picture of a hacker along with the Pahonia symbol after each attack (Kulakevich 2021, 107).

The online space was also used to facilitate the artistic expression of the protesters, and specific elements of online culture, such as memes, played a visible role in enabling social cohesion and relatability. Some of the most famous ones were directly aimed at Lukashenka, such as the famous "Sasha 3%" after information circulated by Tut.by showed his election support at only 3%, or "President of the OMON", implying that Lukashenka now became as brutal as his security services (Kazharski 2021, 78). The "Pursuit" meme in which a rider on a white horse chases Lukashenka, directly related to the identity symbol of Pahonia (Chase), was widely circulated on social media (Weller 2022, 59). Other pictures or denotations of Lukashenka, such as the famous "cockroach", contributed to the delegitimation of Lukashenka's political position (Bedford 2021).

One of the key mediums of communication was the social network Telegram (Jachovic 2022). Developed by a Russian-born entrepreneur and immensely popular in the region, the Telegram app was able to withstand government censorship, and through popular channels such as NEXTA, made by a by-then exiled Belarusian journalist Scjapan Pucila, gathered a

following of more than 2 million people, aiding the mobilization process through live-data sharing and its communication and messaging options (Kulakevich 2021). However, the role of Telegram in the protests was not sudden. Already before the election, the messaging app played a key role in the mobilization and information exchange of supporters of Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the decentralization of communication enabled a larger spatial capture of the mobilization process (Mateo 2022a). Its importance in facilitating further mobilization has only grown since August 2020, and its usage for protest coordination through protesters' self-identification, safety measures through identifying higher concentrations of security services, or raising engagement levels horizontally through wide geographic availability was significant for the mobilization process.

Other social networks like Facebook also played a key role, largely thanks to its established position in society and the ability to access specific groups that focused on facilitating mobilization. A good example can be provided by the group *Khvatit boitsia!* (Enough of being afraid!), created by journalist Tatsiana Martynova (Nikolayenko 2022, 86). Khvatit boitisia is a part of a famous slogan used often by Tsikhanouskaya. The group was initially created to help facilitate volunteer aid during the COVID-19 crisis but soon evolved into a larger social online area where users were asked to post without anonymity, creating a sense of collective security that facilitated open discussion. The group grew from 27,000 users in July to over 57,000 in December 2020 (Nikolayenko 2022).

**Media Preferences**

State-controlled media play a crucial role in Lukashenka's centralized effort to hold power (Onuch and Sasse 2022a). Through main TV channels like Bel1 or Bel2, radio channels, and newspapers, the regime can successfully communicate its policies while using censorship and direct repression against opposition outlets. Thus, as a mode of communication, traditional media forms were not key for facilitating mobilization as many Belarusians turned to the internet domains (Greene 2022). A survey on data consumption among the protesters conducted in September 2020 showed the prevalence of independent media consumption (Greene 2022). Even though official state statistics show that the state-owned channels are the main source of information for the citizens, the protest movement differed in its composition from the general population, as more than 54% of participants stated that they primarily consume independent online media, with 34% preferring state-owned media and 16% consuming both (Greene 2022).

Among the most used independent websites was Tut.by, Onliner.by, Belsat or NEXTA, while the state-owned media-oriented protesters preferred stations such as ONT, Bel1, Bel2, and STV. Identity-wise, the preference for independent media is closely linked to personal identification with the Belarusian culture as opposed to the Belarusian state or Russia (Greene 2022, 99). However, the distinctions here are not black and white either, and many respondents who are more in favor of a Belarusian identity independent of Russia also reported consuming Belarusian state-owned media. The media choice of the protest movement participants is crucial for understanding its motivational tendency. As argued by Greene (2022, 102), the clearest line of division between the protesters was "associated not with citizens' socio-economic or demographic status, not with their senses of interests and identity, but with their choice of media – a choice that itself does not seem to be clearly and consistently associated with socio-economic, demographic, interest or identitarian factors".

## Centre vs. Periphery

### Class Dispositions

The composition of the protest group and its consolidation against a regime on which a number of the protesters depend has changed significantly during 2020. Ideologically, Belarusian society can be divided into two class groups based on vocational involvement - the "included" consists of the 'working class' (factory workers), state workers, and the ruling apparatus (Glushakov 2020). Here, the state-owned enterprises form the employer base. The working class holds a degree of political capital that is crucial for Lukashenka; after all, it is mostly the working-class voters who have kept him in charge since the mid-1990s (Bekus 2021). In Belarus, most factories are state-subsidized or rely in some way on the state's economic support. Therefore, blue-collar workers but also more specialized experts such as teachers or medical workers are seen as parts of Lukashenka's electorate, dependent on the regime's ability to sustain industries that would otherwise face economic scrutiny.

The second group, the "excluded", are mostly young professionals with technical skills participating more in the private sector (Gapova 2021, 48). Both of these 'groups' were created through the post-communist economic policy, where a strong connection to state production was subsidized by the rapid need for technological and production independence and innovation through the private sector. Out of this framing stands the 'middle class', whose

existence, involvement in political processes, and allegiances are a largely debated topic; however, most analysts argue that its growth and influence in Belarus are a relatively recent phenomenon (Onuch, Sasse, and Michiels 2023; Shelest and Kazanecki 2022; Vasilevich 2020). Especially the newly growing industries, such as information and digital technology or creative industry, can be characterized as forming the Belarusian middle class (Trantidis 2022).

On August 17th, factory workers in Minsk and Zhlobin factories organized themselves and demanded the release of detained prisoners, a stop to police violence, and the establishment of free elections (Matteo 2022a). In the first week of the protests, more than 70 primarily state-owned enterprises across the country staged strikes, walk-outs, and meetings to support the protest movement. In the factories, primarily younger workers initiated the strikes, with older workers, often members of the management structures, being more cautious and conservative in their approach (Glushakov 2020).

It is unclear to what degree these actions influenced the regime's decisions; however, in the following days, the persecution of the workers was halted, and the detained were released (Glushakov 2020). By the end of September, around 185 forms of protest were recorded at more than 88 industrial and trade enterprises in the country, making these the largest organized trade protests in modern Belarusian history (Artiukh 2021). These protest numbers are significant, as during the first months of the protests, factory workers were "far more likely to be threatened and reprimanded for their organization of and involvement in strikes and marches" (Onuch, Sasse, and Michiels 2023).

As the workers followed the general mobilization initiative, their effort to organize their protest as worker-oriented with clear union-based systems and job-oriented demands was not possible due to the fragmentation and institutional incapability of any union movement of that time. Rather, the workers' "self-identification as citizens" (Artiukh 2021, 60) initially resulted in higher turnouts but ultimately led to the loss of influence over the majority of the original protest-goers. The regime has largely exploited this divergence in operational approach by pointing out the class differences between the protest movement and the working class (Glushakov 2020). Politically, the regime focused mainly on the socio-economic characteristics of the 'opposition' Belarusian intelligentsia, portraying it as privatization-oriented, a topic that resonates with a significant segment of the Belarusian people who associate work in the public sector with job security and stability.

From a sociological point of view, Artiukh (2021) argued that the protests were allowed to grow to their definitive size and impact thanks to the lack of political message of the protest movement. Because its leaders did not resort to centralized populist rhetoric, the workers could state their strike demands that combined political motives, such as free elections, with economic ones aiming at increased wages and improved working conditions. This rhetorical openness enabled higher agency and validity of the workers' message. However, the scale of the workers' protests diminished in the following months in line with the increased repression of the state towards the protest movement in general. Nevertheless, the fact that many workers joined the anti-government protests represents a radical shift not only in the Belarusian protest movement as a whole but also in the usual framing of Belarusians used by the regime wherein the emphasis is on 'peacefulness' and 'hard work' as key identifying characteristics (Vasilevich 2020).

**Spatial Dispositions**

One factor that helps explain the scale of the 2020 protests is their decentralization. Unlike the 2014 Ukrainian protests that centered around Maidan Square in Kyiv, the Belarusian protesters organized themselves in many cities across the country, and even in the capital, no one place was designated as the center of the movement (Bedford 2021). The reasons for this mainly revolved around the security of the protesters, as especially in Minsk, large avenues and squares provide space for large protests, but their defense against the security services would be challenging.

Researching the early-onset mobilization in Belarusian cities, Matteo (2022) found that during the first week of protests, over 100 locations with over 5,000 inhabitants mobilized, including more than 20 smaller ones. Usually, these protests featured some variations of solidarity chains, roadblocks, collective singing, and marching in unison, often with symbolic items like the white-red-white flags. This scale was also, to a degree, helped by an intensive touring campaign of Tsikhanouskaya prior to the elections, but ultimately, it had less of an effect on the mobilization process than the bottom-up self-organized social initiatives, aided locally by pre-existing networks (Matteo 2022, 35).

Even though on a country-wide scale, the Belarusian protests were inclusive, a large number of mainly rural inhabitants were excluded from the broader mobilization process (Greene 2022). Due to different social circumstances, wealth and education gaps, political

preferences, or media consumption, rural inhabitants were more likely to reject the ulterior motives of the protest movement, showing that social fragmentation in the country played a key role in the narrative framing of the protesters as 'elite' or 'urban' (Hervouet 2021). Mateo's (2022) findings also suggest that localities where the dominant form of employment was heavy industry were not only less likely to see protests but were also more likely to see them decline over time.

## Gender Dispositions

The women's movement, inspired largely by Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala, has played a significant role in the social mobilization process (Foltynova 2020). Since August 12th, women's marches have been frequent in the general protest movement, and their symbolic nature grew in importance as the regime tried to repress them. The first marches took place in Minsk, where several hundred women held hands to form solidarity chains, wearing red and white colors and singing Belarusian lullabies (Maliauskaya 2022). On August 29th, up to 10,000 Belarusian women staged a protest in Minsk, which was met by riot police, but no arrests were made. After Marya Kalesnikava was detained by the security forces in early September, thousands of women marched again on September 12th and 19th, resulting in brutal suppression and hundreds of detainees (Foltynova 2020).

In a patriarchal country like Belarus, a protest staged purely by women was something unusual (Kim 2020). Lukashenka frequently called the trio of leaders the "three unhappy girls", adding that only a man could be the leader of Belarus on the basis of strength (Kim 2020). Active female involvement in the protests from the very first days resulted in women who were previously not oriented towards joining the protest movement being inspired by the message and joining themselves. Through a complex combination of strength, agency, and a changing understanding of social roles, the women's movement was one of the most complicated opponents for the regime, largely due to its rapid mobilization (Maliauskaya 2022).

The wider application of these gender performances also influenced the general public debate about gender in Belarus, where more women openly challenged the regime's patriarchal structures. Kalesnikava herself affirmed the important role of the women's movement, arguing that "female faces became a signal for women, and men too, that every person should take responsibility" (Walker 2020, 1). The women's movement in Belarus was widely popular abroad, especially thanks to its portrayal in Western media, and in more than 25 countries

around the world, marches in support of Belarus were organized by women's groups during the Global Women's March movement on October 10th (Kulakevich 2021, 105).

The movement also had an important symbolic and artistic role, as expressed, for example, by the Pahonia symbol of a rider being replaced by a female rider (Kazharski 2021, 77). Women's marches also became known through the 'Women in White' events, beginning on August 12th in Minsk's Kamarouski Market, when groups of women dressed in simple white clothes created solidarity chains and laid flowers during their meetings. Another symbolic item was the painting Eve, painted by Belarusian artist Chaim Soutine in 1928 in Paris (Lidski 2022, 213). The painting was purchased in an auction by Belgazprombank, which 2020 presidential candidate Viktar Babaryka is a former chairman of, for 1.8 million USD in 2013, making it the most expensive Belarusian painting. However, the authorities have removed the painting from the Palace of Art in Minsk following Babaryka's political involvement, sparking protests.

Along with challenging the status quo regarding gender roles and stereotypes, symbolic gestures such as Babaryka's heart sign, Kalesnikava's victory sign, or Tsikhanouskaya's fist sign became widely known, often portrayed in pictures and artworks (Malinouskaya 2022, 19). Especially Kalesnikava became famous for her descriptions in posters and artworks. Popularized after her arrest, perhaps the most known was a variation on a famous WW2 Soviet poster, 'The Motherland Calls' made by Anna Redko, here replaced with a portrait of Kalesnikava with the inscription *Rodina, Mash (i.e. Marya), Zovyot'* (Marya, the Motherland calls) (Kazharski 2021, 77).

## Concluding Mobilization

The sections above have analyzed the main factors behind the mass mobilization in 2020. This chapter aims to summarize these findings, considering their subsequent connection to identity creation. In 2020, the protest movement and its leaders understood that they needed to dissociate themselves from the connection to the legacy of the BPF and rather appeal to the civic identity parts of being Belarusian. This aided increased mobilization efforts and resulted in a large following for the movement, as a pragmatic rather than symbolic policy of the candidates focused on the socio-political problems of ordinary Belarusians (Bedford 2021). Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya herself is a member of the Russian-speaking community, which

arguably enhanced her following through the lens of shared attributes with the people. Unlike in Ukraine in 2014, her program largely omitted wider geopolitical debates and focused on inter-state relations (Kazharski 2021).

Glod (2021) argued for three main reasons for the facilitation of social mobilization in 2020. Firstly, most of the protesters belonged to a newer generation that, although growing up in Lukashenka's Belarus, never experienced the policies of the USSR. Combined with high literacy and the availability of foreign online platforms, younger Belarusians exhibit a higher need for civil rights and political expression. Secondly, the growth of the private sector in recent years, with almost 45% of the population working in it in 2019, means that a growing middle class gained a stronger political voice while the diminishing of the working class threatens the regime's voter base stability. Lastly, the state's monopoly over the information space has been undermined by the highly developed IT sector and the technical proficiency of the population.

As shown above, the importance of the women's movement for social mobilization was significant. Through challenging gender roles in the country, the movement's inclusive actions led to an increase in the overall protest base. The regime's violent repression of women's marches and the President's rhetoric, however, did not signify a link between social mobilization and change of state policy towards women as a social group. Feminism as a term has been largely scolded by the regime, especially because its usage by Marya Kalesnikava and other key figures of the movement was frequent. However, out of the organizational structures of 2020 came a broader women's movement that later sustained the political and social repression of late 2020 and 2021, and through utilizing their socio-political roles, "women collectively organized and identified [themselves] in the public sphere" (Malinouskaya 2022, 31).

The protests' effect on civil society was expressed through the increasing closeness between the participants of the protests and utilized by their subsequent mobilization of aid for those detained by the regime (Peleschuk 2020). Social initiatives aimed at providing food, clothes, and transportation to recently released detainees and their families or free services such as legal consultancies were created during the protest months. Organizations such as *Imena* (Names) or *Ulej* (Beehive) organized fundraising activities, *Viasna* (Spring) focused on human rights issues and repression monitoring, and *Ee Prava* (Her Rights) helped organize the

women's marches (Bedford 2021). These CSOs played an important supportive role by utilizing their own pre-determined ties to citizens and other organizations (Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023, 137).

The erosion of the social contract previously utilized by Lukashenka to stabilize his position also contributed to the scale of the mobilization process. During the COVID-19 crisis, the regime underestimated the validity of an active but strict response to the pandemic and, through mockery and inactivity, gave power to grassroots social movements and CSOs. They were the ones who significantly contributed to the development of social ties before August 2020, which subsequently aided the horizontal mobilization protest and made the protest a truly country-wide movement. This also served as an indirect rhetoric tool against the regime, which could not fully brand the protests as organized by the 'elites in the capital city' (Douglas 2020).

Precisely, the 'elite' narrative is key, as it also could not be used based on the social structure of the protest (Onuch & Sasse 2023a). As Belarusians from 'all walks of life', classes, ages, or genders participated in the protest, it was impossible to attribute one social group as the dominant one and use derogatory rhetoric to denote its impact and undermine its agency. Even though Matteo (2022) showed that the mobilization, albeit country-wide, did not reach certain areas based on complex social, economic, or demographic factors, the 2020 protests were generally signified by their horizontal nature, both socially and geographically. Finally, the unwarranted brutality of the regime's response to early protests faced a contrary reaction from the protest movement, resulting in its growth based on a complex set of personal and social grievances. This was also enabled by the decentralization and non-censorship of key social networks and communication channels.

Minchenia & Husakouskaya (2020) argued that the social bonds between protesters, formed through shared experience with grief and civic action, are now permanent in Belarusian society. The development of solidarity brought with itself a new understanding of identity, which the community was the center of. Through it, the protest movement used the appeals to 'dignity' and the 'good life' to make its demands, appealing to a civic rather than ethnic notion of identity. The mobilization process led to elevated levels of trust and solidarity amongst its participants and to the creation of a positive social self-identification with the concept of civic connection (Stykow 2022).

The result of the aforementioned processes transformed the social fabric through the idea of "becoming with others in relation, whereby a centuries-long endurance and a sense of a 'good life' have been momentarily transformed into peoplehood in response to injustice and lack of Covid-related state care" (E. Korosteleva and Petrova 2022, 152). Even though previous mobilization waves, such as in 2011 and 2017, were also characterized by decentralization and bottom-up organization (Minchenia & Husakouskaya 2020), the 2020 protests added a social cohesion and identity construction layer that differentiates them from the past. In the theory of mobilization, social movements usually sustain themselves by agreeing on a pre-determined set of beliefs that are used against the movement's adversary. In Belarus, such beliefs and symbols were "formed during the protest itself through the creative adaptation and reappropriation of ideas, values, and frames of understanding deriving from both the official and oppositional ideologies" (Bekus 2021, 7).

## Identity Developments

### Identity & Protest Movement

With knowledge of the mobilization processes, this chapter focuses on the identity aspect of the 2020 protest movement by portraying the identity symbols of the movement, their development, usage, and meaning. The symbolic repertoire utilized by the protest movement in 2020 was relatively small, revolving mainly around a binary choice of colors, red and white, and key identity symbols such as the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia crest (Astapova et al. 2022). Based on a centuries-old rider crest from the GDL, Samogia, and Ruthenia, the crest slipped into Belarusian consciousness through Maksim Bahdanovic's 1916 poem Pahonia. In 2020, the song Pahonia, with music added by Mikalaj Shchahlou-Kulikovich, became widely popular and was considered one of the unofficial anthems of the protest movement (Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023, 10).

The white-red-white flag, designed originally by Klaudzii Duzh-Dushevsky and presented for the first time in 1917 by the BPR's First Belarusian Congress, was used again in Belarus by the freedom movement in 1988 (Kotljarchuk, Radaman and Sinitsyna 2023, 11). After the brief period of usage by the BPF, Lukashenka's policies led to its replacement, as well as the Pahonia, and it became a symbol of democratic opposition and diaspora organizations used frequently on anti-regime demonstrations.

Other identity symbols such as art, language, music, film, or theatre have also undergone a turbulent treatment through the policy changes of BPF, the mid-1990s, and soft Belarusization. Their appearance in the public space before the 2020 protests could probably be described regarding the *Budzma Belarusami!* (Let's be Belarusians!) campaign (Weller 2022). Initiated by the NGO *Zhurtavanne belarusaŭ svetu 'Batskaushyna'* (Belarusians of the Fatherland), it was quickly sponsored by sports clubs, CSOs, private sector actors, and other entities, especially aiming at the promotion of the Belarusian language through literature, music, fashion, or language courses. The campaign utilized the west-centric stream's identity symbols, made famous by the music video *Belarusi* (Belarusians) by Lyavon Volski in 2011, which presented Belarusian history as connected to the legacies of the GDL, the BPR, or the BPF rather than the USSR (Weller 2022, 70). Reappropriating historical narratives, the clip dismisses the GPW myth and paints WW2 as a tragic period in Belarusian history.

The clip's alternative version of Belarusian history and portrayal of Belarusians as warriors uses "heavy emphasis on blood, struggle, sacrifice, and heroic exploits on the battlefield" (Rudling 2017, 81). Even though the campaign preceded increased soft Belarusization practices post-2014, for many, especially younger Belarusians, it was the first significant project aimed at offering an alternative version of their own identity. Its connections then translate into protest movements already before 2020. In 2017, protests against the so-called 'social parasite law' were connected to the 100-year anniversary of the BPR, suggesting that the "collective memory of alternative celebration dates, such as Dziady, and the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster'' was still present among citizens, with potential for future protest mobilization where identity could play a role (Rohava 2020, 16).

## Identity Symbols of the Protest Movement

### Flag

The iconography used by the protest movement was perhaps its most externally recognizable feature and gained significance through extensive media coverage in Belarus and abroad. The white-red-white flag, used previously by the BPR, BCC, and the BPF, made a return during the 2020 protests (Vasilevich 2020). Interestingly, while the white-red-white flag was a prevalent symbol during the protests, it was largely the only one. The nature of the protests focused on change within Belarus, mainly through calls for free elections and reforms, meaning that flags of Western political bodies, such as the EU, were scarcely used by the protesters (Vasilevich

2020). Belarusian poet Max Ščur explained that the usage of the flag points mainly to a civic, not ethnic, conception of Belarusian identity and noted that its prevalence was mostly doable through numbers, as the more protesters carried the flags to protests, the less they became targeted and scared of police repression (Noubel 2020).

Since 1994, Lukashenka's regime worked methodically on reconciling the Belarusian public with russo-centric state symbols such as the green-red flag, positioning it as a symbol of stability, peace, and prosperity (Vasilevich 2020). Therefore, many of those who took to the streets in August 2020 aimed at expressing social unity through the usage of one of the few things that all participants had in common through the majority of their lives: the green-red flag. During the early days of the protests, some protesters were observed carrying both flags at the same time (Kazharski 2021). The meaning of purposely using a regime-supported symbol on an anti-regime demonstration shows the deeper variations of understanding social identity in Belarus, through which symbols are often used more as social connection items rather than items of political expression. However, even through its relatively brief appearance in Belarusian history, the white-red-white flag became the dominant symbol of the protest movement in the following days.

The regime focused on tactical strengthening of the official Belarusian state identity by increasing displays of the green-red flags and colors (Jachovic 2022). Furthermore, the white-red-white flag was labeled extremist, validating its use and display for prosecution and detention. On the one hand, this policy led to the detention of many protesters on the basis of showcasing extremist insignia; on the other hand, the repression wave set in motion by such policy resulted in increased prevalence of the protest participants to display and identify with the white-red-white flag in spite of the regime narrative (Jachovic 2022). Even though the regime, through militias and its security services, worked hard to remove signs of the white-red-white flags from public and private properties alike, the protesters were finding new ways to display them by the day (Kulakevich 2021). Some color-coordinated their windows in white and red, put ribbons inside them so that removing them from the outside was more difficult, and used other strategies such as flower arrangements.

However, the usage of the flag in 2020 was not understood as recreating the ideological narratives of the BPR or the BPF but rather as a shift in meaning. Even though the objective design of the flag stayed the same, the political symbolism it was previously attached to has

changed, and now it has been reused by the protest movement "as an emblem of the struggle for Belarus without Lukashenka" (Bekus 2021, 9). The nature of the protest movement was not officially bound by a new set of symbols presented by the organizers but rather by re-establishing older icons and symbols, resulting in a 'symbolic fragmentation' of the movement. Some smaller groups of protesters were creating their own logos, flags, and crests to differentiate themselves from the larger protest groups (Bedford 2021, 810). For example, Tatiana Gorelchik's flag and crest designs for various Minsk neighborhoods gained rapid popularity and, through social media, spread to the Belarusian diasporas, who adopted similar practices (Kazharski 2021, 75). For her art, she has faced persecution by the regime (Voices from Belarus 2020).

**Colors**

Prior to the elections, the increased appearance of the red and white colors in everyday life in Belarus was strengthened by the notion of its dissociation from the BPR and the reforms of the early 1990s (Jachovic 2022). In the late 2010s, soft Belarusization policies gradually allowed the production of materials and artworks with this color scheme, and some businesses were allowed to scale their production substantially as long as their usage of colors did not translate into political action. Since 2014, art movements and cultural initiatives such as Artsiadziba and local Minsk brands like Honar or LSTR popularized the colors, especially through the traditional *vyshyvanka* (embroidery) motifs embroidered onto clothing (Kulakevich 2021). In 2020, it was largely thanks to these enterprises that the protest movement, with such speed and volume, acquired the white-red-white flags and other red-white symbols.

A specific cultural phenomenon, the *vyshyvanka* artworks became very popular during the early days of the protests, thanks to artists such as Rufina Bazlova (Weller 2022). Bazlova's embroidered works, based on idiomatic color schemes and depicting current events, such as protesters being rushed into a police van by members of the OMON, gained worldwide publicity and helped spread the word about the situation in Belarus. Her works depicted various social protests, artistic performances, and demonstrations outside Belarus and eventually served as a way to conserve the memory of the protests through art, for which she has been recognized by the protesters and diaspora alike (Noubel 2020).

The symbolic value of the red and white colors has been transformed into a broader socio-cultural expression of dissatisfaction with the regime. Protesters would use them for their

choice of clothing worn on the marches, as well as for decorations and other artistic expressions of political opinion in personal spaces such as windows, cars, or balconies (Vasilevich 2020). The regime strongly opposed the continued portrayal of these colors by the movement, frequently utilizing the police and communal forces to disband artistic expressions and other formats of protests across cities. In recorded incidents, the police have arrested protesters purely on the basis of wearing white and red clothes (Lidski 2022). Red and white umbrellas were also used in the protest as both a symbolic and a practical device, as protesters used them to shield themselves from projectiles, water cannons, and colored dye that the security forces used to later identify participants of the protests (Bekus 2021, 6).

**Art and Literature**

Artists started their protest campaigns already in July 2020, when a group of more than 20 musicians, writers, and actors united under the #Cultprotest movement to vocalize their dissatisfaction with the regime (Lewis 2021). Through establishing a website cultprotest.me, other artists started contributing poetry, video art, and other artistic forms in both Russian and Belarusian. In the following months, the portal became a haven for like-minded artists and a support mechanism of solidarity for those who have been detained for their verses, like Hanna Komar or Russian poet Dmitrii Strotsev (Lewis 2021).

The role of the internet was crucial for the facilitation and reach of artistic communities, as it served as a decentralized space uncontrolled by the regime's censorship. Artists would frequently present their work through online art platforms such as artcenter.by, which focuses on paintings with white and red themes, or through social media groups such as Artists with Belarus (Kulakevich 2021). In October 2020, the Belarusian Foundation for Cultural Solidarity was founded as an association coordinating and supporting artists repressed by the regime (Lidski 2023). Through it, more than 1,500 Belarusian artists signed an open letter to the government, urging it to stop violence and pressures against artists who do not subscribe to the regime's approved cultural identity narratives.

Two of the key artistic domains for conservation and innovation of identity narratives, literature, and poetry, have had an important place in the creation of Belarusian national identity, reaching back to the 1890s through poets such as Frantsishak Bahuschevich, Yakub Kolas or Yanka Kupala (Lewis 2021). Writing in Belarusian, their pioneering works' ethos has translated itself largely during the 2020 protests, with recitals and performances of especially

the Belarusian 'national' verse, Kupala's *Khto tam idze?* (Who goes there?). The role of nationalist poetry was also significant in self-naming protest movement groups or specific artistic performances and in its usage in chants, speeches, and public addresses. Events supporting literary memory were popular during late 2020, such as 'The Night of Executed Poets', organized in Kurapaty forest, which transformed historical remembrance through artistic expressions (Bekus 2021, 13).

**Music**

The usage of the Belarusian language was particularly evident through musical artistic expressions of support for the movement. The language also used to support the Belarusian Philharmony, Minsk theatres, or through the *Volny Khor* (Free Choir) initiative (Vasilevich 2020). The protests also led to the translation by Belarusian poet Andrei Khadanovich of the song *'Mury'* (Walls), which, albeit originally written in Russian, was quickly translated to Belarusian and later on served as an unofficial anthem of the protest movement, frequently used also by the Tsikhanouskaya (Kazharski 2021). Another famous song used extensively throughout 2020 was *Khochu Peremen* (I want changes) from the famous Russian band Kino. *Mury*, *Khochu Peremen,* or the French WW2 lullaby *La complainte du partisan* (The Partisan's Lament) were translated into Belarusian and often performed by street artists during the marches (Weller 2022).

During the Tsikhanouskaya rally on August 6th in Kyiv Square in Minsk, DJs Kiryl Halanau and Uladzislau Sakalouski hacked into nearby pro-regime Railway Army Day celebrations and played Khochu Peremen. Their stunt resulted in 15 days of imprisonment, leading to increased support for the musicians and inspiring local artists like Dmitriy Dmitriyev to create memorable street art pieces in Minsk (Lidski 2023, 209). Music was also important to the women's movement (Weller 2022). During the Women's Marches, musical performances and spontaneous singing of predominantly traditional songs and lullabies were done mostly in Belarusian. Additionally, songs with strong female solidarity themes, such as Belarusian NaviBand's Russian-language song *Девочка в белом* (A girl in white), became widely popular during women's marches (Lidski 2023).

Liturgical and symbolic songs of predominantly rural origin, such as *Pahonia* or *Kupalinka,* were frequently used in marches and smaller gatherings and often performed in rather mundane areas such as the Minsk underground or shopping centers (Bekus 2021). Also

popular were songs with religious subtexts, such as the hymn *Mahutny Bozha* (Mighty God), which was subsequently banned by the state (Elsner 2023). Famous Belarusian musicians also took part in the protests, and groups such as Pomidor/OFF, Stary Olsa, and Tor Band performed regularly (Kulakevich 2020). The message of their songs was often aimed at signifying the protesters' demand for dignity (Tor Band's dissociation with the russo-centric term *narodets*, a diminutive for nationalist) or at showing support for those who have been challenging the regime long before 2020 (J:Mors). The importance of music during the 2020 protests led some to argue that the "revolution in Belarus is a musical one" (Lewis 2021).

**Places/Names**

The toponymic symbolism of the protests was perhaps best expressed through the importance of urban spaces like squares and courtyards. Courtyards became somewhat symbolic of the protest movement. The word became intertwined with 'community' as it was used by anti-regime media, depicting spaces of refuge for protesters, with this nominal symbolism spreading from Minsk across the country (Matskevich 2022).

Usually situated in post-WW2 high-rise buildings, courtyards provided a sense of protection to the protesters, and in a short space of time, some Minsk neighborhoods, such as Serabranka or Kamennaya Gorka, rose to prominence through their courtyard activities (Kulakevich 2021). Perhaps the most famous was *Ploschad' Peremen* (Square of Changes), an inner yard on Charviakova Street frequently visited by artists and musicians, where daily gatherings would occur along with artistic performances. While most of these communities appeared in August and September 2020, some Minsk communities that lived around the same courtyard would use Telegram chats to discuss various topics prior to 2020. These chats were then transformed by adding the suffix 97%, depicting the voter base support for anti-regime candidates, to signify those chats that pertained to the protest movement (Matskevich 2022).

On *Ploschad' Peremen*, cultural events, concerts, and debates took place almost daily, and the yard became a place of memory and collective identity remembrance after security forces beat protester Raman Bandarenka to death inside the courtyard (Basik 2022). Before his death, security forces arrived at the yard to remove the white-red-white flags and other symbols, and their actions solidified the myth and symbolism of the place. His last words in the courtyard chat, "I am leaving", were used in protest songs by Pomidor/OFF and Tantsy Minus bands. Interestingly, the name of the square was spelled in Russian, not Belarusian, showing the

complex linguistic identity nature of the protest movement (Kazharski 2021). Even though some areas, such as *Ploshchad' Peremen,* gained importance, none was designated as the center of the movement (Basik 2022). This decision enabled more horizontal participation in the protests, especially from a geographical and a subsequent social opportunity angle, and also created obstacles for a consolidated police suppression effort.

Chulitskaya and Bindman (2023, 137) argue that the culture of inner yards performed two important functions: "mass mobilization (including the coordination and implementation of different protest activities); and community building (organizing cultural and educational events, performances, and other)". At the end of 2020, there were 958 recorded public chats that revolved around the concept of courtyards, with almost half of them located in the Minsk agglomeration; however, with increased repressions in 2021, most of them stopped their activity (Matskevich 2021).

**Religion**

Even though Belarus is considered one of the most secular of the former USSR republics, a large number of the population identifies with one of the two major churches, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) or the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) (Elsner 2022). Through state secularisation, the factual power of the churches has diminished in the country. However, religious icons and other symbols regularly appear alongside state symbols during official proceedings and similar events. Even though in 2021, more than 70% of Belarusians identified themselves with the BOC, only a fraction regularly attended places of worship (Elsner 2022). However, religious artifacts' presence in daily lives translated to a civic sphere, combining with a socio-cultural rather than a religious identity. In a survey taken between September and December 2020, about 55% of protesters identified as Orthodox, 7% as Roman Catholic, and around 30% as non-religious, which is about 10% more than the population average (Douglas et al. 2021). Even though these identifications are broadly similar to the population as a whole, it was noted that, on average, identification with the BOC makes protest participation less likely.

In Belarusian history, "no religious denomination has had strong, if any, connection to Belarusian national idea" (Elsner 2022, 772), and unlike in the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine, the churches did not play a key role in the 2020 Belarusian protests. The RCC issued statements of support to the protesters, mainly with the help of social media, but partly owing

to no support from the Vatican, the regime quickly diminished these proclamations. The BOC was very cautious in its response; however, a certain measure of fragmentation was visible. While the heads of the church, bishops, and the Patriarch supported Lukashenka and urged the protesters to stay peaceful and largely stayed on the state's side, some lower-ranked clergymen and priests, with the exception of the Archbishop Artysemi of Hrodno, voiced their support for the protests, resulting in their removal.

This fragmentation had a negative effect on the perceived leadership role of the BOC among the protesters, mainly due to the Church's lack of statements condemning state-organized violence against the protests (Vasilevich 2021). Also, priests were often the only representatives who came into direct contact with the believers, and this increased closeness arguably resulted in more direct alignment with the protest movement. In early 2021, almost 90% of Orthodox respondents said their trust in the church had diminished, and when the main voice of support for the protests in BOC, Archbishop Artysemi, was removed from his position in June 2021, the resistance within the BOC was largely thwarted (Elsner 2023).

**Language**

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the rise of soft Belarusization as a national identity policy, the Belarusian state aimed to depoliticize the west-centric identity connection to the Belarusian language and deconstruct its meaning as one of the most important identity aspects of the new Belarusian identity (Jachovic 2022). This policy was followed by more acceptance of the Belarusian language in official state communication, popularisation efforts, and the introduction of Belarusian-speaking officials into positions of power, especially when related to culture and media production.

The regime supported the creation of free Belarusian language courses *Mova Nanova* (Language Anew), and facilitated a new legal structure within the bureaucratic system that was tasked with identifying individuals and organizations who spoke dismissively about the Belarusian language (Kulakevich 2021). Additionally, in 2018, the Handbook for Protection of Linguistic Rights was published to help Belarusians against linguistic discrimination. Transliteration of geographical places, formal bureaucratic processes, and legal administration were all introduced to Belarusian, and the language was now a part of official state policy. However, gaps in Belarusian education were observed in the education sector, where private

actors and civil society often act to replenish the missing curriculum where the Russian language is still dominant (Jachovic 2022).

Based on their data by Onuch & Sasse (2022), 38.7% of protesters considered Belarusian as their native language, with 31.6% considering Russian and 15.1% considering both. However, this slight prevalence of Belarusian is not comparable to daily use. Only 1.5% of protesters stated that they use Belarusian in their jobs daily, compared to 72.7% using Russian and around 5% using both. Similarly, only 7.4% of the protesters conducted the survey in Belarusian. The divergence between considering Belarusian as a native language and actually using it in daily life shows that even in the protest movement, which largely adopted some symbolic aspects of the west-centric Belarusian identity, and through popularization practices of soft Belarusiation, language as an identity symbol was not significantly pronounced among the protesters as Russian was found to be the primary operational language.

**History**

As the Belarusian regime tried to portray the "long genealogy of Belarusian statehood" (2022, 22) through soft Belarusization efforts, state-affiliated academics started revisiting key historical symbols of the west-centric stream, such as the GDL or the Principality of Polotsk already in the mid-2010s. This appropriation of symbolic elements of the west-centric stream is evident in the regime's approach to understanding and explaining Belarussian history. However, unlike the west-centric narrative, where identity is derived from the GDL in spite of Russia, the new state approach combined both narratives in a complex set of justifications for Belarus with and without Russia at the same time (Jachovic 2022).

The clearest example of historical identity and soft Belarusization being intertwined during 2020 is the development of the GPW myth. On August 16th, the protesters organized a march at the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk. Opened only in 2014, the Museum was constructed to serve as a strong point of the aspects of Belarusian identity connected to the russo-centric lenses of the WW2 legacy (Bekus 2021, 8). A majority of the protesters held the rally in white and red colors, with the Motherland statue, a famous symbol of the Soviet win in WW2, wrapped in a white-red-white flag.

Similar incidents were recorded previously in Minsk when the famous wooden statue of a three-headed dragon was redecorated and became known as *Zmey Zmaharych* (Snake

Zmaharych), becoming a symbolic gathering urban point (Kazharski 2021). The 'Museum March' represented an important moment in the understanding of the historical identity orientation of the protest movement, in that rather than dismissing the legacy of WW2 and its appeal, the protesters simply re-appropriated previously state-developed identity symbols and used them with new meaning (Bekus 2021, 8).

Largely used within the GPW myth, the notion of the heroic actions of Belarusian Partisans has been carried through to the present day through appeals to Belarusians' personal characteristics such as 'resilience' or 'survival' (Lewis 2017). In 2020, the protest movement used the Partisan myth's legacy to denote the state security services, notably the OMON riot police units, as "fascist" due to their treatment of the protesters (Kazharski 2021, 76). The term *karniki* (punishers), used to denote OMON, is linguistically linked to a slur used during WW2 to denote Nazi raiding parties on Belarusian villages during which the whole village would often perish as a repercussion for partisan activity. Such re-shaping of national myths turned the narrative against the state ideology and positioned the protesters into the role of the 'partisans' (Bekus 2021).

The GPW myth and its deconstruction were also notable on social media, where Telegram channels such as *Karateli Belarusi* (Punishers of Belarus) focused on finding members of security services that committed crimes against the protesters through live-imaging and organic data collection (Kazharski 2021). The shifting perception of the historical belongings of Belarusians was investigated by Eberhardt et al. (2021) through a survey in November and December 2020. When asked about which historical polity Belarusians should draw their identity from, 39.7% stated the GDL, 28% the USSR, 16.2% the BPR, and 8,8% the Principality of Polotsk.

**Concluding Protest Movements Identity**

This chapter will attempt to summarize the usage and expression of national identity through symbolic means during the 2020 protests. Firstly, this process can be through perceived construction and shifts in meaning. Analyzing the complex developments of the 2020 protests, Kulakevich (2021, 97) argued that the shift "from 'nationalism as ideology' wherein national identity symbols are used mainly by elites in a politicized context, a new narrative of 'nationalization-as-practice'" was born out of the 2020 protests. Such nationalization is

signified by using identity symbols as tools of national identity, erasing their pre-determined meanings, and constructing new ones befitting the socio-political space they are being used in.

As observed, the protest movement adopted some symbols used prior by the west-centric identity stream, as well as appropriating russo-centric symbols such as the GPW myth (Kazharski 2021). Combining both identity narratives thus created a new, third approach to future identity development. As Bekus (2021, 14) explains, for the Belarusian protest movement, the formation of a "blended socio-cultural imagery" aided identity building. Even though the protest movement primarily used identity symbols of the west-centric stream, Bekus further argues that due to the juxtaposition of socio-political framing of identity by the regime, the importance of russo-centric symbols (such as the GPW myth and, in the first days, the red-green flag) is equal as its existence served as a vital competing system of social and historical reference.

The specific usage of national identity symbols underscores the re-orientation of the social movement from organizational incapability to cohesion and reflects the "tensions between the existing concepts of statehood and collective identities of those that compose a nation" (Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023, 10). However, as a December 2020 survey of Belarusian identity uncovered, even the usage of symbols is polarizing, and while participants of the protests prefer the red-white symbolism, on a country-wide scale, about "41% of respondents said that the red-green flag was most suitable, 36% chose the white-red-white standard, and 20% could not choose between the two" (Douglas et al. 2021, 16).

The decoupling, or disconnection, of identity symbols from their previous holders brought a change of narrative concerning political orientation (Zheng 2023). While the BPF used these symbols for political agendas of anti-communism, independence, and opposition through prioritization of an "ethnocultural revival" (Kazharski 2021, 75), protesters in 2020 appealed more to civic identities and demands centered around free elections, rule of law and open market economy. While during the 1990s, a largely Russian-speaking protester base using west-centric identity symbols would be unthinkable, the 2020 protest movement created its civic identity through a "Russian-speaking or bilingual political movement under a flag that was previously associated with a much more ethnoculturalist opposition" (Kazharski 2021, 76).

One social group whose understanding of identity could be important for the future is Belarusian youth, whose identity is largely formed by its understanding of Belarusian history and its symbolic meaning (Krawatzek 2022). Belarusian youth's historical knowledge and parallel association seems to be strong in the realm of the early 1990s when a lot of young people perceived as 'positive' the notion of gaining independence from another country. However, neither the west-centric nor the russo-centric streams are prevalent. Despite the regime's centralized educational approach, the "narratives of national culture, independence and autonomy, and the suffering of wartime dominate young people's historical consciousness, also indicating a higher self-identification with Europe rather than Russia" (Krawatzek and Friess 2022, 56).

Most analysts focusing on the reconstruction of identity during the 2020 protests argued that the development and strategy of the protest movement connect more to a civic rather than ethnic understanding of Belarusian identity (Jachovic 2022; Kazharski 2021; Bekus 2021; Astapova et al. 2022; Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023). On the other hand, some, like Kulakevich & Kubik (2023, 834), argued for the emergence of a "new ethnonational identity" facilitated by the consistent use of symbols during the protests and their non-violent nature. An anonymous protester explained in a protesters' Facebook group that "the old opposition was trying to give us back our rights, while the new one has given us back to ourselves" (Gapova 2021, 50). The awakening (Kulakevich 2021) of Belarusian national identity could result in social solidification, increasing social resistance and enabling new protest movements once the window of opportunity opens again.

However, the construction of a new national identity did not achieve the protest movement's political goals. Surveys on political leaning or self-identification offer polarizing results on almost every metric of socio-political identification in today's Belarus, and it is clear that there still exists a substantial 'silent majority' of Belarusians who did not take part in the 2020 protests. This was visible through a September 2020 country-wide survey, when the fragmentation of voter bases resulted in 43.3% of the protesters supporting Tsikhanouskaya, with 23.1% being more on the pro-regime side and not supporting the protests, with 33.6% not satisfied with support for either candidate and undecided about the protest movement (Chatham House 2020). Therefore, a newly found identity cannot be understood as translating into a nationwide change.

The massive emigration wave post-2020 also tilted the balance of power more into the pro-regime camp, but as government-published survey data lacks legitimacy, it is difficult to estimate how many Belarusians experienced identity changes post-2020. Way & Tolvin (2023) argue that the lack of institutional and regional support for the protest movement, precipitated by fragmentation in the understanding of identity, resulted in the protest movement's inability to enact applicable political change. This was also influenced by the bottom-up nature of the social movement itself, where protesters identified with each other rather than with the movement leadership, which led to increased social cohesion but diminished the importance of political leadership (Stykow 2022).

The most recent data on Belarusians' identity choice is provided through an extensive survey by Bikanau (2022). Social fragmentation here is evident - 14% of Belarusians consider themselves attached to the identity components used during the protests, Belarusian language, legacy of the GDL, preference for non-state media, etc. However, 29% identified more with the russo-centric stream of identity, did not oppose the Belarusian language, but opted for closeness to Russia, with a polarized preference for media consumption and a generally positive view of the USSR. The largest groups are formed by those who are neutral to all identity iterations (39%), who are more likely to subscribe to civic identity, with 13% not viewing national identity as important in daily lives. Finally, 4% of respondents strongly favored Russia, with little to no attachment to the west-centric identity stream and its symbols (Bikanau 2022).

## Regime's Identity Strategy post-2020

As a response to the protest movement's identity-building process in 2020, the Belarusian regime used a set of social, economic, and legal processes to solidify the position of symbols and narratives associated with the 'official' iteration of national identity. Using terms such as 'failed blitzkrieg', Lukashenka compared the protest movement to the legacy of WW2 and further accused protesters of using fascist symbols in the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia symbol, highlighting its usage by the collaborationist BCC during WW2. His connection between the horrors of the war, experienced by the Belarusian people in the hands of the Nazi armies, and the white-red-white flag and other identity symbols, however, partially failed in its appeal as Lukashenka's police riot units and security service forces used repressive practices and detentions on a scale not previously seen by the Belarusian opposition (Vasilevich 2020).

Similar to previous protest movements in 2006 or 2011, Lukashenka again used the framing of the 'opposition' movement as one that goes ideologically against the 'official' idea of what a Belarusian national identity is understood to be (Bedford 2021), denying the protest movement's agency. Through the connection to the BPF, Lukashenka used the unsuccessful and largely unpopular identity-building practices of the early 1990s further, painting the protest movement's leaders as elites who, such as the BPF, are not close to 'the people' (Bedford 2021). Tsikhanouskaya herself often made sure that there is no 'opposition' but rather a 'protest movement' in an attempt to distance her political narrative connection to the BPF (Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023).

The regime also began an organized campaign aimed at reinstating its understanding of the GPW myth and Belarusian role in WW2, extending into historical phenomenons such as uncovering and memory of the Kurapaty killings. Over the last years, more than ten burial sites of NKVD crimes have been uncovered across the country. The regime dismissed Professor Ihar Kuznitsou, an expert on the topic, in 2021 and detained Dzmitry Dashkevich, one of the most prominent social activists and defenders of the Kurapaty memory (Marples and Laputska 2023, 23). Furthermore, a new national holiday, the National Unity Day, was introduced in 2021 to celebrate the reunification of western and eastern Belarus following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 (Kotljarchuk, Radaman and Sinitsyna 2023, 5). A newly adopted legislature, like the Law against Nazism Rehabilitation, was introduced in May 2021, and the regime developed similar legal tools to criminalize 'opposing narratives' on the position of the GPW myth in collective Belarusian memory.

This process was finished by the adoption of the Law of the Genocide of the Belarusian People during the Great Patriotic War in January 2022, which introduced criminal liability for those "who publicly denied the genocide of the Belorussian people 'by posting relevant information in the media or on the Internet" (Marples and Laputska 2023, 23). Effectively, further victimization of Belarusians during the war, omitting Jewish casualties, and commencing a period of de-Nazification became the modus operandi for the regime identity construction vis-a-vis the GPW myth. In November 2021, the Ministry of Interior banned the use of a traditional salute, *"Zhyvie Bielarus!"* (Long live Belarus), often used by the protesters, and branded it as a part of prohibited Nazi symbols (Amnesty International 2022).

During a Meeting on Historical Politics in January 2022, Lukashenka, on the one hand, recommended further study of the Principality of Polotsk or Principality of Turov, and on the other hand dismissed any positive connection of Belarusian identity to the legacy of the GDL and mainly the PLC, which he branded as "a period of brutal occupation and ethnocide of Belarusian people by Poland" (Kotljarchuk, Radaman, and Sinitsyna 2023, 6). Post-2020, cases of vandalization of Polish soldiers' graveyards from WW2 were recorded, along with threats being issued to Polish and Lithuanian minorities, mainly in the west of Belarus (Amnesty International 2022).

All these developments effectively led to the end of the soft Belarusization policy as it was intended to work pre-2020 (Astapova et al. 2022). Since 2014, the social contract between civil society and the regime aimed at countering Russian influence. The increased connection to Russia post-2020 ultimately redrew the regime's approach to 'official' identity construction, with a return to hardline narratives of the mid-1990s, strengthened legally like in the example of the GPW development, further reversing most of the soft Belarusization policies of the last decade.

## Socio-Political Developments after 2020

The regime largely liquidated CSOs and NGOs, with 270 NGOs ceasing to exist by July 2021 (Kulakevich & Kubik 2023). This "systematic and harsh repression" (Chulitskaya and Bidman 2023, 138) targeted the social fabric that developed in late 2020 through specific attacks on the courtyards, CSO members, artists, administrators of online communication channels, and activists who initiated artistic and civic resistance performances. SMEs and online media administrators were also targeted, and most businesses associated with the pre-2020 production of material in red and white color were dismantled and labelled extremist (Jachovic 2022).

Even though some group-specific names have circulated (women's revolution, march for freedom, flower revolution), the protest movement never adopted any official title for its actions, perhaps in an attempt to inclusive involvement and political purpose statement through vague descriptions (Onuch and Sasse 2023, 738). Because of that, the regime could not attack the protests' nominal identity. However, its lack may have precipitated or enhanced the lack of a political message that could see a candidate challenge Lukashenka's position. As Stykow

(2022, 817) argued, the problem of the movement's leaders was that they "did not belong to the elites".

After the protests, the further construction of identity developed through the 2020 protests moved largely abroad. Bodies such as the Coordination Council (CC), founded by Tsikhanouskaya in Lithuania on August 14 2020, continue to act as an anti-regime actors. However, CC's influence on the identity narrative debate is relatively weak (Kulakevich & Kubik 2023; Glod 2021). Additionally, an important role is now held by the diaspora. Kulakevich (2022) claimed that more than 150,000 Belarusians have left the country by summer 2022, making it one of the largest migration waves in Europe in recent decades. This number corresponded to more than 4% of Belarus' overall workforce and follows steeply an emigration trend from the country where, since 2000, 20,000 Belarusians left the country each year. The total number of Belarusians abroad is around 1,5 million (Snihir 2022).

Since the 1990s, the Belarusian diaspora has been represented by the Backauscyna (Homeland) Public Society Organisation, which also hosts BPR's government-in-exile, with large numbers of Belarusians residing primarily in North America and Eastern Europe (Hilica 2022). Other organisation such as ByPol, or BySol, representing former security services and sports officials, respectively (Kulakevich & Kubik 2022), as well as solidarity centers, locally based NGOs, and CSOs primarily in the Baltic region and Poland continue to represent the protest movement (Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023).

Identity questions within the diaspora are persistent (Korosteleva & Petrova 2022). The diaspora often organized solidarity marches, art performances, and women's marches, during which similar identity symbolism was observed through the usage of white-red colors, with Belarusian art and music playing a key role. Especially in Poland or Lithuania, these protests were aided by the creative capacities of protesters who were forced out of Belarus during the protests, enabling them to share protest experiences with the diaspora members (Hilica 2022).

# Conclusion

This section answers the problem formulation: "How did identity policy development in Belarus contribute to the mobilization and construction of national identity of the 2020 anti-regime protest movement?". As alluded to in the introduction, the analysis structure has been organized with regard to the aspects considered by the theory, namely mass mobilization, identity symbols, the role of elites, social bonds, centre and periphery dichotomy, or the role of media. In order to answer the problem formulation, the analysis first focused on understanding the process of mass mobilization of the protest movement, focusing on social ties, communication modes and class dispositions. Connections made to national identity mobilization through political mobilization, such as the role of national 'traits', gender, geographic identity of protesters, motivations or grievances, are all important for understanding what role identity played in the mobilization process. It is clear that protester motivations and grievances were more influenced by civic, rather than ethnic, identity elements, such as dignity, political freedoms, increased quality of life and the like. Agency was given to different social groups during the protests, but even though their composition and agency attribution seems to suggest their overall inclusivity, fragmentation in mobilization throughout the country was observed, often due to complex cultural and economic issues.

Regarding the connection between identity and mass mobilization, few observations are visible. Firstly, identity was one of the factors that enabled the mobilization, along with political and economic factors, but it cannot be considered a primary factor. Rather, its role has been present in various forms of protest compositions, where new social groups developed increased solidarity through appears to the similarity between their members or to demands made by the protesters. An overall development of a sense of solidarity was observed, as well as increased ownership over symbolic self-expression. The de-facto movement leaders, Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava and Tsepkalo, rhetorically diminished their leading role in the process, giving agency to the protesters. In turn, a fragmented bottom-up process, facilitated largely by social media, partially by pre-determined social ties, and by previous protest experience, took a leading role in the mobilization of identity during the protests.

The second part of the analysis focused on the production, representation and usage of identity symbols and myths, which are key for the theoretical argument. In this sense, a partial theoretical overlap was observed. Some protest symbols were objectively connected to the BPR

and the BPF, such as the white-red-white flags. The increased freedom in the production and representation of west-centric identity symbols through soft Belarusization arguably aided the speed and scale of their distribution. However, it is unclear to what extent this was a result of a potential failure of the regime's identity narrative policy, especially given that some russo-centric symbols were also observed. The role of other symbols, such as art, literature, and music, as well as the importance of spatiality, was confirmed. Artistic expressions were largely connected to similar sets of symbols, especially visible through color choice, but instead of merely replicating older identity narratives, new ways of applications on contemporary protest contexts were observed. Probably the most complicated is the role of language, possibly pointing to its decreased importance as an identity marker of the protesters.

Confirming ethnosymbolist narratives, the media did indeed play an important role in mobilizing identity, albeit through non-traditional means, with the increased importance of social media. Media production was facilitated by its decentralized nature, allowing protesters to communicate and produce content more freely. Media choice was also shown to be one of the most significant differentiation points between protesters and non-protesters, but its consumption was complex, with some protesters admitting following state-owned media. With regard to religion, the importance of a unified church for identity creation in the ethnosymbolic understanding was not confirmed, largely due to BOC's response to the police brutality against protesters, which led to social dissatisfaction with the Church.

The production of identity and Smith's focus on the different roles of 'intellectuals' and 'elites' in the dissemination and organization of identity reconstruction fell short of assessing their relative importance. The notion of a historic homeland is highly contested and suffers from a constant narrative change of the 'official' lines. When it comes to myths, shared memories and common culture, the analysis has shown that for the protest movement, these concepts are present yet not ethnic in nature. The process of identity construction and the proposed role of elites and intelligentsia in the construction of myths is rather complex, as myth-shaping occurred mostly at the hand of the protest movement itself and not through a top-down elite approach. Regarding Hroch's (1985) identity-building process theory, Phase 1 was, to a low degree, pre-facilitated by initiatives such as Let's Be Belarusians, albeit aided by regime-organised easing of majority identity production through soft Belarusization. Phase 2, where a combination of political demands and middle-class support was observed, was more connected to the political demands of the protesters largely through a bottom-up initiative. In

Phase 3, mass mobilization occurred on a large scale but was not sustained equally when it came to regionality and ultimately did not survive the regime's response.

In conclusion, this Thesis argues that only a few aspects of the national identity mobilization and construction during the 2020 anti-regime protests could be explained through an ethnosymbolic lens. Rather, a 'synthesis' of identity occurred whereby specific traits of predominantly west-centric identity (flag, crest, art, history) were adopted by the movement, while others (language, religion) failed in this attribution. While the former BPF policies in the 1990s focused on ethnonational elements, the identity narratives created in 2020 largely omitted ethnic notions. The contextual and socio-historical analysis partly explains this, as through the increased complexity of the majority position on the issue of language, whereby some protesters were Russian-speaking yet supporting independent Belarusian identity, the protest movement aimed at making non-ethnic demands on the regime.

Through the adoption of some aspects of west-centric identity, detached from their original ethnic origin, with re-appropriation of aspects of the russo-centric identity propagated through soft Belarusization, such as the GPW myth, the protest movement created its own iteration of identity that falls out of the explanatory potential of ethnosymbolism. Lastly, the regime's long-term strategy of inciting negative memories of the identity policies of the early 1990s shaped the formation of identity in 2020, as the protest movement largely dismissed ethnonational notions and rather created an identity that is built on a civic premise.

# Discussion

In this section, alternative approaches to the research and the possible topical developments in the future will be discussed. Firstly, the most pertinent point of change has to do with theory. Ethnosymbolism was chosen for this thesis to analyze if the construction of identity during the 2020 protest would exhibit traits and processes that could be attributed to it. As mentioned in the theory section, not only ethnosymbolism, but also other theories of national identity face a differing degree of rigidity when it comes to their application to contemporary cases, which could partially be due to the nature of the field. It might prove beneficial to investigate this topic through other theoretical lenses, such as modernism. Then, less focus would be put on the importance of symbols and myths, with a focus mainly on the actual process of construction of the nation, utilizing the concept of 'imagined communities' and perceptions of what it means to 'be a Belarusian'.

Evident from the research is the complex and unique position of identity in today's Belarus. This partially confirms the observations presented in the literature review, where even though countries in the post-Soviet spaces shared specific traits related to economic, political, and social development, Belarus was seen as an outlier based on its close connection to Russian historiography, lack of separationist tendencies, language connections, quality of life and mainly an underdeveloped non-Soviet identity. This phenomenon could provide apt ground for future research, for example, as a comparative study of the 2020 protests in Belarus and the 2014 protests in Ukraine or the early 1990s independence movement in the Baltic States. Furthermore, the newly constructed identity could be researched through analyzing its influence on the democratization process. As increased "social cohesion" (Gabrielsson 2022, 504) positively influences democratization, its importance as one of the founding blocks of such process in the future offers valid research possibilities (Rustow 1970).

Future research could also benefit from methodological changes. Primary data collection through interviews with participants of the protest movement could result in an increased focus on personal protest motivations and approaches to understanding one's own national identity and offer more insights into how Belarusians evaluate the influence of identity post-2020. Arguably, future research on identity development in Belarus will be influenced by geopolitical factors. As shown in the analysis, the current socio-political climate in the country restricts new possibilities for identity development, and institutional oversight of the

production of accepted identity policy is now perhaps even stronger than before 2020. This increased environment of repression is largely facilitated by the position of Belarus in the geopolitical sense through participation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions and virtual non-existence of independent civil society. Unless the current regime's power over these factors falters, future research on independent Belarusian national identity construction will, to a significant degree, be limited to perceptions and activity of external actors, both in a political and social sense.

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