Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice
Issue 44.2 (2023)
Special Issue: Formations of Feminist Strike
Research

The Poetics and Politics of Interruption in the 2020-21 Belarus Uprising

by Olia Sosnovskaya

Abstract: The paper addresses the notions of interruption and exhaustion in relation to the 2020–21 anti-governmental uprising in Belarus. It examines various forms of protesting, such as marches, neighbourhood gatherings and strikes from a feminist perspective. It focuses on the dynamics of visibility and opacity, social reproduction and politicization of mundane gestures, and on questioning the notion of revolutionary event and its temporalities.

Keywords: 2020-21 protest in Belarus; care strike; choreographies of protest; exhaustion; interruption; rhythms of resistance

Author: Olia Sosnovskaya is an artist and writer based in Vienna and Minsk. She works with text, performance, and visual arts around the notions of festivity, collective choreographies and politics. She is a member of the self-organized platform Work Hard! Play Hard! and the artistic-research group Problem Collective, and is currently a PhD-in-Practice Candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

Introduction

This article focuses on the 2020–21 post-election uprising in Belarus against the authoritarian regime that has been in power since 1994. The national referendum of 2004—whose results are claimed to be falsified as well—legalized the unlimited reelection of the president, so the first and current president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, has now been in power for twenty-nine years. Though the period of his rule has been marked by regular protests, the scale and endurance of the 2020–21 uprising proved to be the largest in the country's contemporary history. Despite the continuous state repressions—with 1,476 political prisoners as of March 2023 (Viasna 2023) and several thousand politically motivated criminal cases, dozens of closed independent media and over 1250 closed NGOs (Lawtrend 2023)—the resistance is still ongoing. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which has been happening with the support of the Belarusian government and the use of Belarusian territory and infrastructure, most of the solidarity platforms and networks that originated during the protests have been transformed into an infrastructure of antiwar resistance, fighting state propaganda, assisting refugees, and sabotaging Russian troops on Belarusian territory.

The article addresses the 2020–21 protest in Belarus focusing in particular on the politics of movement, i.e., bodily movements or protest choreographies. The complexities of political agency, and specifically of women's political participation in eastern Europe has been extensively analyzed: from post-communist alienation from politics (Wolchik and Chiva 2021) to the problematics of translating Western gender discourse in post-Soviet contexts (Gapova 2016) to the issues of NGOization, the multiple modes of feminist activism and its intersectionality in postsocialist civil societies (Grabowska 2021). There has also been an ongoing discussion on whether the 2020–21 protest in Belarus could be called feminist (Paulovich 2021; Solomatina 2020). Analyzing women's engagement in this protest is not, in a strict sense, the subject of this article; rather, I examine the main strategies or choreographies of protest—the protest marches and strikes, along with other gestures of disruption—from a feminist perspective. This reading also aims

to articulate how the specificities of those protest choreographies, their dynamics and temporalities—whether chosen or conditional—shift the notion of political action.

The focus on the choreographies of the protest in this research is conditioned not only by the unprecedented scale of these protest actions, or by the fact that, within the severely restricted public space, mass protest gatherings reshaped social relations. Since 1997 the government introduced very strict rules for organizing demonstrations, and it has been extremely difficult to hold a legal protest action. In 2011, after the so-called silent protests triggered by the country's economic stagnation, the amendment to the 1997 law on mass events was accepted, so that one would need to register a "joint mass presence of citizens" in public space not only for a collective action, but also for collective inaction (Kodeksyby 2021), i.e. any public gathering could be considered a protest. What is more crucial in the case of the 2020–21 uprising is that, amid the corruption of political institutes and legal systems, along with the state monopoly on media and public speech, bodily engagement seemed to be the major means of struggle, also guiding political imaginations regarding the strategies and prospects of resistance. Thus, the dynamic of the uprising, which often responded to the repressive actions of the government, most vividly manifested itself through the emergence and development of various forms of protest choreographies, particular collective gestures and forms of collective movement, both symbolic and physical.

Focusing on embodied protest gestures and movements allows us to approach the complexity of the political struggle. Among the most common choreographies were processions (protest marches, walks or solidarity chains), and various forms of disruption or refusal (strikes, labour unrest, withdrawals, walkouts, etc.). These practices bear two essential characteristics that I further develop as key concepts for this research: exhaustion and interruption. I believe that these characteristics are crucial for understanding the dynamics and potentialities of the 2020–21 post-election uprising in Belarus as they provide a different perspective on political action and temporality of revolutionary event. Within this action, not only political movement, but also stuttering and interruption of linear revolutionary time, often imagined as driving either to a definite failure or victory, becomes a political practice.

In my exploration of these issues, I begin by referring to the most common practice of disruption—a strike. During the 2020–21 protests strikes appeared to be the most widespread form of protest and the most endangering for the state. At the same time, strikes faced certain limits and impossibilities; as a consequence, they took different nonconventional forms (Artiukh 2020; Shparaga 2021). Furthermore, this article analyzes some particular choreographies of protest, such as marches, drawing on dance theory. In particular, I use the notion of *choreopolitics*—redistribution and reinvention of bodies and affects, which enables one to move politically, i.e., against prescribed power regimes (Lepecki 2013), and *movement exhaustion*, understood as an ontological critique of a political project of modernity as being based on constant and progressive movement (colonial expansion, economic growth, etc.) with its consequent regimes of oppression (Lepecki 2006). I proceed by considering how the characteristics of strikes and protest choreographies, whose dynamics fluctuate between disruption of power regimes and constitution of alternative networks of care or care strike (Lorey 2019; Shparaga 2021), and between the continuous movements of the marches and their exhaustion, are related to the specifics of an uprising in general. Finally, this article approaches interruption and exhaustion within the 2020–21 protests in Belarus as particular modes of thinking about political movements and revolutionary time, shifting from conventional patriarchal readings of revolutionary events as a series of spectacular and singular heroic acts, with a demand to establish a rapid and abrupt political change, towards a feminist reading of political agency as a set of horizontal, continuous, mundane, and often invisible practices.

Workers' Strikes and Their Limits

In previous years, the opposition in Belarus mostly called for a boycott of the elections and for street protests but mostly due to its conservatism and emphasis on direct confrontation with the regime it didn't manage to mobilize a great amount of support. In 2020–21, however, several factors led to quite a different scenario. One factor was the COVID-19 pandemic, which was ignored by the state and lead to the emergence of self-organized medical aid initiatives. Another factor was that teams of the new, alternative candidates united behind Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in a joint election campaign urging people to vote. Furthermore, there was the creation of multiple self-organized civic initiatives and digital platforms aimed at revealing electoral fraud, as well as the effect of it being summer, when due to pandemic-related travel restrictions many active citizens had to remain in

the country. The new opposition's focus on legal mechanisms instead of physical confrontation with the regime, absence of a clear political program and focus on the general change of the repressive political system, and finally their encouragement for horizontal participation and self-organization allowed them to attract many diverse social groups (Shparaga 2021, 48).

Already, before the presidential elections of August 9, 2020, people started to protest numerous violations during the campaign and the detentions of the alternative candidates (first Siarhei Tsikhanouski and later Viktar Babaryka), so the first detentions of protestors started taking place. This growing social mobilization, self-organization, and outrage led thousands of people to gather at the voting stations in the evening of election day to observe the results, and later—after the first falsifications became evident—on the streets to protest all over the country. This was met by extreme police and state violence with over 6000 people being detained, at least 2 killed, and about 450 who were tortured in the first few days after the election (United Nations 2020). This, however, caused even greater public outrage. One of the most efficient tools of pressuring the state during the uprising was the mobilization of workers and employees, generally referred in public discourse as a strike. It started already on August 10 and peaked on August 13–14 (Artiukh 2020, 54). However there were only twelve occasions of proper strikes that involved partial shutdown of plant divisions, namely two departments of the chemical plant Hrodna Azot and at most of the mines of the Belaruskali potash company in Salihorsk (Artiukh 2020, 55).

Contemporary Belarusian legislation makes classical strikes almost impossible due to a lengthy bureaucratic procedure and the state's power to forbid them. Besides, official labour unions do not protect the workers, but represent the state and serve its interests. While independent unions did exist, they were experiencing pressure from the state and were not very popular among the workers. In 2020, however, many people left state-supported trade unions to become members of independent ones, or to form new ones, and a special online platform Labour Union Online was created to simplify that procedure. For instance, in 2020, 940 workers left the trade union of Hrodna Azot (with remaining 6321), so the amount of independent trade union members multiplied by 20 times; at Naftan oil refinery 2500 people left the state labour union; at some smaller factories, like Conte in Hrodna, all employees left the state labour union and created independent ones (Shparaga 2021, 218).

Trying to avoid the intensifying state repressions, during the 2020-21 uprising labour unrest took a variety of forms which Volodymyr Artiukh calls "an expression of workers' discontent in a wider range of forms, including spontaneous or organized demonstrations, walkouts, absenteeism, slowdown, riots, and work disruption" (2020, 52). That wave of labour unrest was the largest since Belarus's independence in 1991, by the geographic spread, the number of involved workers and companies or organizations, and the range of professional spheres (from industrial to educational, medical and cultural organizations). This degree of unrest was also quite surprising for the post-Soviet working class in general, and unprecedented for the political protests in the region (Artiukh 2020). The peculiarity of those strikes or acts of labour unrest lie also in the fact that the workers mostly posed political and not economic demands, which would be illegal if the strikes were officially organized by trade unions. Among these were the demand for prosecution of cases of police violence, calls for new fair elections, and Lukashenka's resignation. In some of the cases, they were joined by economic demands concerning low wages and poor working conditions (Artiukh 2020). Thus, strikes emerged as part of the broader protest movement whose agenda was vague and general enough to include diverse actors within them, and this very fact, according to Artiukh, also made such a scale of strikes possible (2020).

Those acts of labour unrest were often expressed through the similar choreographies as the general protest, such as marches or gatherings, happening both on the enterprise grounds or outside of them, including factories, offices, hospitals, universities, theatres, media, and other cultural institutions. Not all strikers were officially employed, so, for example, many contemporary artists were not officially affiliated with any institution, but they gathered outside the Palace of Art, the exhibition space of Belarusian Union of Artists on August 13 for the action "Don't Draw — Strike!" Workers also formed separate columns during general protests marches, like the workers of the Minsk Tractor Plant during the Sunday general march on August 14. Some employees refused to perform their duties in the institutions, but continued their activities by forming independent collectives, such as the "Free Choir" of which many participants used to work in the National Philharmonic, or "Kupalautsy" made up of former actors at the National Academy Theatre Janka

Kupala.[1] Other collective actions included open statements and appeals, collective dismissals, such as the case of miners who refused to leave the mines, and IT workers who gave substantial donations to the fired workers and free development of various software and platforms for the protest movement. Also around 300 employees of the National State TV and Radio Company resigned. Thus, instead of a complete disruption of work, the strike developed into multiple, constantly changing activities, which often happened in parallel, beyond, or in-between the primary production process.

This process of fast mobilization and organization of workers, alongside other participants of the 2020–21 uprising, could serve as a basis for future and more sustainable organizing, even despite the immediate and ongoing repressions (Artiukh 2020; Shparaga 2021). At the same time, due to the lack of a concrete and nuanced economic agenda and intertwinement of labour unrest with a general protest, there is an absence of structure and programming for an organized labour protest (Artiukh 2020, 58) that would provide security for the workers in case of state persecution or dismissal (Shparaga 2021, 219). This issue could already be seen in the failure of the general national strike announced by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on October 26, 2020.

As Olga Shparaga writes, before 2020 there was a lack of horizontal networks and their institutionalization in Belarusian society, since there had been no place for political expression of various interests, and civil society was repressed (Shparaga 2021, 220). However, she believes that since the new scenarios of social development are possible from inside the active political processes, this could become an alternative to the frightening uncertainty of the possible political change (Shparaga 2021, 220).

Rhythms of Resistances

On August 6, 2020, before the election, one of the most memorable and inspiring gestures of anti-government resistance that operated as disruption took place. The final and largest pre-election rally of the presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the united team of alternative candidates was scheduled in Minsk. But the authorities tried to block the event by organizing a last-minute concert. Opposition supporters started to gather anyway, when two sound engineers from the Minsk State Palace of Children and Youth, Uladzislau Sakalouski and Kiryl Halanau, who had to work on that day, interrupted the official concert by playing a song called "Peremen" ("Changes") and raising their arms in common protest gestures.[2] This gesture of refusal was perhaps particularly striking as it emerged from inside the system, out of a seemingly powerless position as state employees, and thus to some degree bore the similar potentiality of the upcoming wave of strikes. "Peremen," a late Soviet post-punk song (1986) by the band KINO, although never being explicitly political, had become a symbol of political transformation at this time, and consequently became one of the major protest anthems. That gesture made by the "DJs of Changes," as they were later called, is crucial in several ways.

First, it is important because rather than being a singular event of resistance, enacted by two male figures, this gesture continued and developed during a series of events and activities, which can't be inscribed into the logic of a singular heroic action. Soon after the event, this act of resistance was commemorated in the mural in a Minsk neighbourhood that further became one of the most active places for neighbourhood self-organization and got the unofficial name the Square of Changes.

The mural depicting the gesture was regularly removed and vandalized by state officials and each time re-created by local residents. On one such occasion, on November 11, 2020, unknown masked people, believed to be security forces in civilian clothes, kidnapped and beat to death Raman Bandarenka, a 31-year-old who attempted to protect the mural. His murderers are still not prosecuted, while the doctor and a journalist who published information regarding his condition were imprisoned. After Raman's death people started gathering at the Square of Changes and created a public memorial. In the following days, people mourned Raman's death by holding a minute of silence in the streets and inside institutions, and on November 15 a commemorating march took place, which ended with a crackdown on the Square of Changes and dismantling of the memorial. Journalists of the independent channel, Belsat Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova, who created a video stream from the square, were imprisoned.

Addressing the gesture of disruption by the DJs of Changes can be done through a critique of approaches to political change, which in social sciences is often believed to be possible only after marginalized communities record and prove the harm in order to achieve assumed political or material gains. However, by doing so

and perpetuating narratives of pain they are seen as ruined and hopeless (Tuck, 2009). Thus, paradoxically, unprivileged communities must position themselves as powerless to make change, and thus this theory of change bears colonial logic (Tuck and Yang, 2014). The work of decolonial scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014) addresses the systems of racialized colonial violence towards indigenous communities that are imprinted into the systems of knowledge production within the Western academia.

However, I deal with a different context and framework: I am not researching indigenous communities and am not writing from a position of a colonized subject, even though the events described in this article are inscribed into the relations of imperialist domination between Russia and other post-Soviet states, which I briefly outline in the postscript. These are not settler-colonial relations. However, Tuck and Yang's writing on the theory of change and on the refusal of academic research which extracts indigenous knowledge and perpetuates pain narratives to represent subaltern subjects is crucial for my approach to writing about anti-governmental resistance in Belarus, during which the protestors faced unprecedented levels of police and state violence. I chose, therefore, not to focus on violence in order to acknowledge the agency of the protest movement not solely as a gesture of defense, and to approach political change critically. I am drawing on Judith Butler's (2015) proposition to think vulnerability and agency together as well as Tuck and Yang's (2014) idea of desire-centered research that "does not deny the experience of tragedy, trauma, and pain, but positions the knowing derived from such experiences as wise", thus acknowledging the complexity of lived experience (Tuck and Yang 2014, 231).

After the history of failed protests in contemporary Belarus, the popular opinion circulating in the media and on social networks assumed that the state system would change as soon as a sufficient number of people gathered in the streets. But instead of a triumphant rupture—the way in which a revolutionary event is often imagined—the political moment has been ongoing for several years. The rigged presidential elections on August 9, 2020, were followed by several days and nights of revolt and unprecedented police violence, and then by peaceful women's actions and multiple acts of labour unrest all over the country. These actions culminated in the first general protest march in Minsk on Sunday, August 16, 2020, which, however, did not mark the end or the victory of the protest, but established a new revolutionary rhythm that interrupted daily life and finally merged with it, for the months to come. A general march on Sundays, a women's march on Saturdays, a march of the retired people on Mondays, a march of the people with disabilities on Thursdays, and later, neighbourhood marches and various solidarity gestures on any day, along with the multiple decentralized solidarity support networks, acts of labour unrest, self-organized yard gatherings and so on. These events comprised the temporality of the *everyday*—the popular protest slogan that called people to gather for protesting daily. The regularity of protest was intended to resist the mundanity of social life in a time of political crisis, to disrupt not only the labour regimes, as one of the most efficient and direct ways to affect the state, but the daily life itself.

Choreographies of Marches

In Minsk one central spot became a significant site of the uprising, serving as a place of gathering or a point on the route of the protest marches, probably mostly due to its convenient location. This was the Minsk Hero City obelisk, erected in 1985 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War or World War Two and Minsk residents' resistance during the Nazi occupation. With the official state ideology grounding in a heroic narrative of victory over fascism in World War Two, this memorial is a particularly important place, where official celebrations and military parades are regularly held. During 2020–21 uprising it became the site of anti-state resistance, of re-interpretation and re-appropriation of the historical legacies of resistance. After the protestors unfolded a huge red-white-red flag—an old opposition protest symbol—on the monument, the police and Special Forces started to encircle the memorial, protecting it from the people. This symbolic spatial confrontation is also meaningful in the context of the state and the protest's struggle over the discourse of fascism, of which both sides have been accusing each other—the state by copying the pro-Russian anti-Maidan rhetoric, labelling the uprising as nationalist, the protest by accusing the state of unlawfulness and brutality. Thus, the space of the monument was re-signified through the protesters' bodies and the choreographies of protest marches, and through their subversion of the common official choreography of military parades.

The concept of choreopolitics introduced by the dance scholar André Lepecki provides a useful lens for understanding these protest practices. Choreopolitics, he writes, "requires a redistribution and reinvention of bod-

ies, affects, and senses through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom" (Lepecki 2013, 20). Lepecki opposes choreopolitics—a movement of dissent—to choreopolicing, a movement of conformity, of moving along, circulation that "produce[s] nothing other than a mere spectacle of its own consensual mobility" (2013, 19). He draws this distinction from Jacques Rancière's opposition between politics and the police. For Rancière the essence of the police is a certain way of "dividing up the sensible," of defining and ascribing particular modes of doing and perception to certain groups and places (2010, 36). The essence of politics lies in the manifestation of dissensus, in transforming the space of circulation into "a space for the appearance of a subject," in "re-figuring space" for what is to be done, seen, and named in the space (Rancière, 2010, 37). Thus, choreopolitical movement disrupts this continuous circulation of conformity. The political experience of collective movements and gatherings, their inventiveness, commitment, and repetition, indeed transformed social relations and led to the appearance of political subjects. Quite literally, this could be traced by looking at how the most common official choreography of state parades—the procession—was transformed into the protest choreography of the march. It could be also traced in how routine practices of queueing, walking, or stillness became protest gestures and how the labour and educational regimes were disrupted by strikes.

The choice of the march as major protest choreography was rather pragmatic, conditioned by the relative safety of constant mobility, which made police crackdown more complicated. But soon, not just a march, but a walk as such, with its fluidity, endurance and dispersion, became one of the basic protest gestures. As Judith Butler writes, "sometimes to walk the street (…) poses a challenge to a certain regime, a minor performative disruption, enacted by a kind of motion, that is at once a movement, in that double sense, bodily and political" (2015, 139). One could be arrested before or after joining the protest, or just walking on the street not far from the site of the protest gathering, or even at a random time and place, so physical presence in a public space could be read as a political gesture. At the same time, some protestors, in particular women, started to disguise their protest by claiming that they just went for a walk. They followed the example of the famous 76-year-old activist Nina Baginskaya, who claimed this to avoid arrest, which of course didn't necessarily prevent one. Or later, when organized marches became too dangerous, women's marches were deliberately set up as walks, titled "Women's démarche," when protesting women walked along the central avenue alone or in couples, mixed with passersby and sometimes marking themselves by holding flowers. Thus, not limited by the dynamics of continuous movement of the marches, the ongoing political struggle trespassed into daily practices and movement of ordinary bodies, with their fragility and irregular rhythms.

There has been an ongoing effort to redefine the dominant understanding of political movement and agency as exceptional and heroic action of individual leaders or organized groups (Bayat 2010; Butler 2015; Hedva 2020; Majewska 2021) and to challenge the division between the public and private (Hedva, 2020; Terlinden, 2003) as a space of politics. Addressing the particularity of political struggles in the Middle East, Asef Bayat (2010) introduces the concept of social non-movements, that is, "collective actions of noncollective actors." The concept describes fragmented but similar activities and common practices of subaltern groups merged into daily life that can trigger social change, while not being part of organized resistance or extraordinary protest events that exceed the routine of daily life. Ewa Majewska (2021) analyses political mobilization in Poland, such as early Solidarność (1980–81) and recent feminist protests (#BlackProtest and the Women's Strike, from 2016 onward), using the notion of the "counterpublics of the common" that draws on theories of counterpublics and the common (2021, 10). She proposes to view these mobilizations as "weak resistance," that is, "the unheroic and common forms of protest and persistence that led to a redefinition of the most general notions of political agency in feminist and minoritarian ways" (2021, 13). These notions challenge the patriarchal, heroic, and exceptional modes of political agency in favour of the "experienced, embodied and contextualized collective agency" of marginalized groups or counterpublics, that overcomes the public/private divide and whose collective agency and resistance embraces not only organized structures but also lived experience with its chaotic and affective realms (Majewska, 2021). Reflecting on the chronic health condition that prevented her from joining BLM protests, Johanna Hedva develops "Sick Woman Theory" to challenge the notions of political agency and public/private divide, in particular addressing Hannah Arendt's definition of the political "as being any action that is performed in public," that would exclude from politics anyone who is "not physically able to get their bodies into

the street" (2020, 1). Hedva formulates the Sick Woman Theory as "an insistence that most modes of political protest are internalized, lived, embodied, suffering, and no doubt invisible" (2020) and, in the same text, refers to Judith Butler's 2014 lecture "Vulnerability and Resistance" which claims that bodies are defined by vulnerability as their intrinsic quality, and thus any resistance is continuously reliant on infrastructures of support and care (2020).

The study of 2020–21 protests in Belarus contributes to this framework by critically viewing the dynamics of political resistance that did not lead to a change of political regime, but did lead to a change of social relationships. This view focuses on the exercise of particular choreographies of political movement, within which exhaustion and vulnerability were not failures but crucial parts of the movement. As previously mentioned, soon after the practice of regular general marches was established, many marginalized groups, whose health condition or social position made them much more vulnerable in the face of police violence and less capable to escape, untied in order to set their own regular marches with shorter routes and specific points of gathering: a women's and LGBTQ march on Saturdays, a march of the retired people on Mondays and a march of the people with disabilities on Thursdays. These practices were not exceptional. Tatsiana Shchurko points out how grassroots organizing in post-Soviet histories, and in particular in the Belarusian uprising, was largely rooted in and mobilized by the long experience of multiple feminist grassroots initiatives built by women and queer people (Shchurko 2022, 36). Thus, the political mobilization of particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups under the conditions of authoritarianism was a significant practice within these protests, foregrounding exhaustion as a characteristic of political struggle.

Exhaustion, Interruption and Rethinking Revolutionary Time

The continuity and decentralized character of protest practices were intertwined with exhaustion. On one hand, the protesters responded to escalating repressions and the exhaustion of previous protest techniques by inventing new ones: street clashes were replaced by women's peaceful actions, general marches by decentralized irregular yard gatherings and marches, conventional strikes by acts of labour unrest. On the other hand, the exhaustion of continuous movement is a crucial quality of political struggle, allowing a questioning of the linear temporality of a revolutionary event. André Lepecki theorizes movement exhaustion in contemporary dance in terms of an ontological critique of the political project of modernity as "being-toward-movement," that is, the modern logic of constant progress, colonial expansion, economic growth, etc., with corresponding regimes of oppression (2006, 14).

I suggest that in relation to political movements and protest choreographies, exhaustion (in a double sense, both political and physical) allows us to critically address the revolutionary dynamics and temporality with its demand of rapid and abrupt political change. Lepecki suggests rethinking "action and mobility through the performance of still-acts, rather than continuous movement" (2006, 15). "Still-act," a concept suggested by anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, describes a subject's productive and critical interruption of a historical flow. It thus interrupts not only motion but also the course of historical time, subverting its linear logic and revealing the meaningful lags and pauses (Lepecki 2006, 16).

The 2020–21 strikes, which didn't follow the conventional logic of withdrawal and interruption of labour regimes, and that had to adjust to the conditions of state repressions and the lack of experience of social organizing in a repressive state, took various shapes and often intertwined with other protest practices. This underscores the importance of thinking about the specificity of an uprising in relation to imaginaries of revolutionary time and event.

Precisely because a march has an end point, resistance continues alongside public manifestations, within self-organized infrastructures and employing mundane and intimate gestures. They are part of the politics of prefiguration, which subverts hierarchies in political action, and the idea of the future as its absolute horizon (Graziano, 2017). As Valeria Graziano writes, the specific performativity of prefiguration underscores how social reproduction, networks of care, processes of politicization of collective experiences and imaginations can persist beyond the event that generated them (2017). Bojana Cvejić states, "Care replaces militancy in that it features reproductive labour in the self-organized activities in which people maintain social life […] during protests (food, sleep, medical help, etc.), which is transformed in the aftermath of protests into a regular practice of self-organization" (2019, 48).

Such politicization of the everyday, along with the widespread networks of care, such as volunteer initiatives to support political prisoners and their families or neighbourhood self-organizing, shifts the dynamics of the 2020–21 protests from the conventional patriarchal reading of a revolutionary event as a series of spectacular heroic acts towards feminist practices—horizontal, continuous, mundane and often invisible. From the very start, the protest was decentralized, unlike the previous anti-governmental protests, when occupation of central squares was the main practice, as, for example, the 2017 protests against the so-called "social parasitism law" obliging the unemployed to pay a special tax to the state, as well as "Ploshcha [Square] 2010" and the 2006 "Jeans Revolution" protests after the rigged elections, and the 2011 silent protests triggered by the economic crisis (Lysenko and Desouza, 2015; Shchyttsova 2011; Sarna, 2011; Shparaga, 2021)). This time it was happening in multiple places, involving a variety of practices and not having a single leader. Since in the first post-election nights and days the Internet connection was blocked and the riot police pre-emptively encircled the city centre, people gathered in their neighbourhoods and near the election pools to communicate and organize. In most Belarusian cities today, residents are atomized and often neighbours do not even know each other. During the protests, however, they established new relationships, through regular gatherings to coordinate collective protest actions, discuss the political situation as well as everyday issues, arrange festive yard events as a form of protest, and provide mutual aid. This communication was also held through specially created local Telegram chats and channels.

The prefiguration of the anti-government protests in Belarus could be traced in how, for instance, one of the biggest solidarity funds, ByHelp, that collected money to support victims of state repressions, started their activity already during the 2017 protests. Another big fund, BYSOL, that mostly supported dismissed and persecuted workers was launched by the team who had previously organized at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, called ByCovid-19, to assist doctors who did not have sufficient medical equipment. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 this initiative launched a fundraising campaign to help women in Ukraine who survived sexual violence. In fact, many self-organization platforms, from neighbourhood chats to fundraising campaigns or anti-propaganda informational platforms that originated during the 2020–21 uprising were transformed into platforms for anti-war resistance after the 2022 invasion.

Olga Shparaga writes that feminist practices of care and solidarity in protests united vulnerability and activism. She understands vulnerability as "both exposure to violence and a shared agentic act standing against it" (2022). Being exposed to violence and searching for ways to avoid it, through the fluidity of marches or merging daily life practices with protests, protesters established new networks of care, from mutual aid in prison cells to yard gatherings. As one of the tools of putting pressure on political prisoners, the state limited and then prohibited them from receiving parcels with food and personal belongings, while also limiting or completely depriving them of hygiene products, bed linen etc. that the detained would normally get in prisons. Thus, in acts of solidarity and mutual support, the prisoners would share any belongings they would get, not just food, but even toothbrushes or underwear. Yard gatherings did not look like protest actions or occupations, but rather took the form of celebrations, collective meals, concerts, and neighbours' meetings. However, their agenda and the grounds for the residents to gather were precisely their participation in the protest and the desire to keep resistance alive beyond regular street manifestations, through collective activity, both directly and indirectly political.

Shparaga (2022) relates these practices to the practice of care strike, which does not suggest a suspension of work, but rather makes care visible and thus creates new relationships (Lorey 2020, 194). Shparaga claims that "strike-and-protest-as-care" in the Belarusian protest meant a new form of political subjectification — an attempt to create new spaces of freedom, equality, and care inside the existing institutions and outside them (Shparaga 2021, 241). That feeling of care and certain responsibility for still existing institutions, such as universities, that on one hand were subjected to the state and thus not free and not functioning properly, and on the other hand remained a certain space of possibility thanks to some people who worked there, probably also conditioned the specificity of strikes which took place inside these domains, intertwined with the regimes of work and education, rather than completely withdrawing from them. Such logic had also been common for social organizing in Belarus in the previous years, when direct political activity was persecuted, so people got used to indirect participation in social and political life, mostly in civic organizations and cultural initiatives, independent parties and movements. In 2020–21 these be-

came crucial mediators of the revolutionary process in Belarus (Shparaga 2021, 221).

While state repressions condition the impossibility of proper organization and the exhaustion of classical forms of protest, such as strikes or public demonstrations, the dispersed and fluid forms of protesting and organizing, such as care strikes and other prefigurative practices of mutual support, became the main forms of protest. Though they might be emerging out of certain limitations, in fact they bring new potentialities and are able to establish a new revolutionary temporality that is more complex and enduring than a revolutionary break or suspension of strikes (Shparaga 2021, 241). As Isabell Lorey puts it, the present time of prefigurative political practices is not simply in-between or before, but is the profound and lasting temporal break, the break for rehearsing and exercising the future now "an event of […] enduring unfolding of affective connections, an 'affect virus' through which new socialites emerge" (2019, 38).

This complicated relationship to time and future characterizes post-socialism in general. Post-socialism could be seen as a failed promise of the future, constantly haunted by its past—socialism. However, I follow decolonial feminist thinkers Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora who address post-socialisms in the plural as a queer, non-linear time propelled by multiple political desires, imaginaries, and uncertainties, being non-unified and associated with multiple places, times, and possibilities (2018). This perspective challenges the neoliberal and imperialist view of postsocialist spaces and their struggles, including the 2020–21 uprising in Belarus, as a "standstill time-space, contaminated by the socialist past" in a constant and unresolvable need to catch up with progressive Western democracies (Schurko, 2022).

Conclusion

The major protest gestures and choreographies of the 2020–21 post-election uprising in Belarus—strikes and demonstrations—had to adjust to the conditions of the repressive state apparatus. They took forms of labour unrest and protest marches (and even walks), characterized by fluidity, irregularity, and incorporation of protest into daily activities. The necessity to rethink modes of political participation having to adjust to the repressive state apparatus has been common for social organizing in Belarus in previous years. I would state that 2020–21 uprising in Belarus highlighted that this fluidity of protest techniques is not a sign of weakness or defeat of the resistance, but rather, its significant quality which brings new possibilities and agency. It allows for a rethinking of political change, not just as a change of political regime, but through the establishing and transformation of social relationships, with all their potentially, instability, and fragility. The exhaustion of traditional forms of protest led to the emergence of new social relations and networks that sustained beyond the space and time of the uprising, shifting the dynamic of protest from its reading as a singular heroic event of disruption towards horizontal, often invisible and continuous feminist practices of care, that also established new, non-linear revolutionary temporality. Thus, reading the 2020–21 uprising in Belarus as a strike would mean seeing it not as a singular, linear event that merely disrupts the historical time or political regime, but rather as a care strike, that creates lasting and fluid support structures and is always interconnected with other struggles.

In that sense exhaustion and interruption as essential characteristics of the 2020–21 protest choreographies are crucial for understanding the dynamics and potentialities of the uprising as they provide a different perspective on political action and temporality. Within these protests, not only political movement, but also stuttering and the interruption of linearity of revolutionary time became, quoting Lepecki, an "ever evolving commitment," an "intersubjective action that moreover must be learned, rehearsed, nurtured, and above all experimented with, practiced, and experienced. Again and again, and again and again, and in every repetition, through every repetition, renewed." (2013, 15)

Highlighting exhaustion as a crucial characteristic of political movement is also linked to the notion of vulnerability and its relation to political agency (Shchurko, 2022; Stebur 2021). This perspective on political dissent can also potentially reconfigure relationships between different geographies and subaltern struggles, such as feminist strikes, anti-imperialist, anti-racist and anti-authoritarian struggles (Shchurko 2022). This also underscores that the 2020–21 post-election uprising in Belarus could not be seen isolated from other power regimes and resistances in the region, such as resistance to Russia's imperialism.

Postscript

This paper is part of the on-going research that started before the Russian 2022 invasion in Ukraine, which is taking place with the support of the Belarusian govern-

ment and the use of Belarusian territory and infrastructure. The war, which has been waged since 2014, after Russia's occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, is not just a Ukrainian issue, as Olexii Kuchansky (2022) puts it. It certainly shakes the whole region and beyond, and affects our perspectives on the recent political events, such as the 2020–21 uprising in Belarus, which is the focus of this article. Providing the detailed analysis of these effects requires its own research beyond the scope of this article, but it is clear that today we cannot address the post-elections uprising in Belarus without the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, which further complicates the notion of political agency and highlights the effects of Russia's imperialist powers in the region, that could be traced back to the history of the USSR and the Russian Empire, which both Ukraine and Belarus were part of. Those policies take the shape of political and economic domination and support of pro-Russian parties and political movements in post-Soviet states (such as Armenia or Kazakhstan), or of direct and indirect military invasion and backing up separatist movements (as in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Chechnya or eastern Ukraine). The imperialist and militarist politics of the Russian Federation has played a significant role in supporting the repressive political systems and suppressing anti-authoritarian movements in many post-socialist states, and Belarus is one of such cases.

On December 8, 1999 the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation signed the Union State Treaty (President of the Republic of Belarus 2023). Though currently the treaty mostly considers the establishment of the common economic space and claims preservation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states, the details of its provisions and the road maps, which are still in development (President of the Republic of Belarus 2023), are not always made public, and some of them include drafts of joint legislation and governance. This raises concerns regarding Belarusian sovereignty and integrity, which might be lost to Russia, either in the case of a complete merging of the two states or as a result of total economic dependency, while only 37 percent of the Belarusian population support a union with Russia (Belaruspolls 2022). Those public concerns in Belarus resulted in protests against integration with Russia that erupted in Minsk and Polotsk in December 2019, after two more road maps had been signed (notably, no protests against integration happened in Russia). In 2022 Belarus was the largest debtor of Russia, its debt reached 8.5 billion USD (World Bank 2022). In mid-August 2020, after the post-elections protests, Lukashenka got a $1.5 billion loan from Russia (Shparaga 2021, 210). And since, after the start of the protests Belarusian citizens took over $1 billion from the banks, the Russian government has also supported Belarusian banking sector (Shparaga 2021, 211), thus directly supporting the Belarusian regime and helping it to remain in power despite mass public dissent.

The specific geographic position of Belarus between Russia and the EU has been a ground for political and economic speculation for the Belarusian government, that also gave the regime a certain stability (Shparaga 2021, 234). After the start of the war in eastern Ukraine, Lukashenka also supposed the position of a peacemaker, for example organizing the Minsk agreements on Donbass—an international summit with politicians from Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine in February 2015. This position has been completely discredited by the regime's complicity in Russia's invasion.

Apart from economic dependency, there are also concerns regarding Russia's military interference. Belarus is a member of another treaty with Russia—the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), established on May 15, 1992, by the heads of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and joined by Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia in 1993. Key Article 4 of the treaty states:

> If one of the States Parties is subjected to aggression by any state or group of states, then this will be considered as aggression against all States Parties to this Treaty. In the event of an act of aggression against any of the participating States, all other participating States will provide him with the necessary assistance, including military, and will also provide support at their disposal in exercising the right to collective defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. (Collective Security Treaty Organization, n.d.)

Since the beginning of the post-election protests in 2020, there have been fears in Belarusian society of Russia's military intervention, that could happen either by sending additional police forces or its troops, justifying this by the CSTO Article 4. This actually happened on January 6, 2021, when Russian troops were sent to Kazakhstan as 'peacemakers' in response to the continuing anti-governmental protests. It could be that Russia

would enact a hybrid invasion scenario disguised as support for separatist movements, similar to the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. On August 15, 2020 Belarusian authorities announced, "At the first request, Russia will provide comprehensive assistance to ensure the safety of Belarus in the event of external military threats"(Belta 2020). Given that Belarusian government claimed that the protests were initiated and supported by the foreign powers, and constantly speculated about the military threat posed by Poland and the Baltic states, it was clear that no actual "external military threat" have been necessary for it to call for Russia's military aid.

After the suppression of the uprising by the Belarusian government and the continuous state repressions, Russian troops entered the territory of Belarus under the guise of joint military training in February 2022 and attacked Ukraine from its territory. Until now some troops continue to be deployed, at times launching air missiles on Ukrainian territory. According to the independent sociological survey conducted by Chatham House between June 6 and June 17, 2023, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not supported by the majority of the Belarusian population. Only 14 percent supports the invasion, and only 5 percent want the Belarusian army to join the war on Russia's side (Belaruspolls 2022). Moreover 43 percent are against a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus (Belaruspolls 2022).

In the current political situation, of suppressed revolution, state repressions, and political crises, any mass antiwar movement is hardly possible. However, since the start of the invasion there have been actions of protest and railroad sabotage, including the drone attack on a Russian military plane in February 2023. It is believed that this attack slowed down, at least to some extent, the invasion from the Belarusian territory and also led to a new wave of mass arrests. However most people from Belarus believe that today any change in the political regime in Belarus is not possible without Russia's defeat in the war in Ukraine.

Endnotes

1. Those theatre employees were dismissed after they supported director Pavel Latushka who was fired after the theater collective demanded to stop state violence. Later, Latushka joined the Coordination Council, a non-governmental body, to facilitate the democratic transfer of power.

2. Hands forming a heart, a fist and V shape were the symbols of the united team of alternative candidates—Dzmitry Babryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Valery Tsepkala. The team also called people to wear white ribbons and/or white clothes as a sign of voting against the current government. This call was part of their campaign against falsified elections. After their action, Sakalouski and Halanau were arrested for ten days, beaten, and later, after being threatened with more severe accusations, they fled to Lithuania.

Works Cited

Artiukh, Volodymyr. 2020. "The Anatomy of Impatience: Exploring Factors behind 2020 Labour Unrest in Belarus." Slavic Review 80(1): 52–60.

Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. 2018. "Postsocialist politics and the ends of revolution." *Social Identities* 24(2): 139–54.

Belaruspolls. 2022. "Tenth survey wave." How Russia's war against Ukraine has changed Belarusians' views on foreign affairs. Accessed March 30, 2023 https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-10.

Belta. 2020. "President." Лукашенко договорился с Путиным: Россия при первом запросе окажет помощь по обеспечению безопасности Беларуси [Lukashenka agreed with Putin: Russia at the first request will provide assistance to ensure the security of Belarus]. Last modified August 15, 2020.

https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-dogovorilsja-s-putinym-rossija-pri-pervom-zaprose-okazhet-pomosch-po-obespecheniju-402964-2020/.

Butler, Judith. 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Collective Security Treaty Organization. n.d. "From the Treaty to the Organisation." *History of Creation, Fundamentals of Activity, Organizational Structure*. Accessed March 30, 2023.https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/

Gapova, Elena. 2016. Классы наций: феминистская критика нациостроительства. [The Classes of Nations: the Feminist Critique of Nationbuilding]. Moscow: НЛО.

Graziano, Valeria. 2017. "Towards a theory of prefigurative practices." In *Post-Dance*, edited by Danjel Andersson, Mette Edvarsdsen and Mårten Spångberg, 176-203. Stockholm: MDT.

Grabowska, Magdalena. 2021. “From Soviet Feminism to the European Union.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, edited by Katalin Fábián, Janet Elise Johnson, Mara Lazda, 145-153. New York: Routledge.

Hedva, Johanna. 2020. “Sick Woman Theory.” Accessed September 30, 2023. https://www.kunstverein-hildesheim.de/assets/bilder/caring-structures-ausstellung-digital/Johanna-Hedva/cb6ec5c75f/AUSSTELLUNG_1110_Hedva_SWT_e.pdf

Kodeksy-by. 2021. “Законы Беларуси [Belarusian Laws].” Закон РБ О массовых мероприятиях [Law of Republic of Belarus on Mass Events]. Accessed March 30, 2023. https://kodeksy-by.com/zakon_rb_o_massovyh_meropriyatiyah.htm.

Kuchanskyi, Olexii. 2022. “It is Not a ‘Ukrainian Issue’: A Letter from a Civil Body on Activism and Cultural Production at War.” *Transversal disarm**. Updated January 29, 2023. https://transversal.at/transversal/0422/kuchanskyi/en

Lawtrend. 2023. “Monitoring the situation of freedom of association and civil society organisations in the Republic of Belarus.” Last modified January 2023. https://www.lawtrend.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/monitoring_situatsii_s_polozheniem_OGO_yanvar_23_en_GB.pdf

Lepecki, André. 2013. “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics or, the task of the dancer.” *The Drama Review* 57(4): 13–27.

Lepecki, André. 2006. *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge.

Lorey, Isabell. 2020. *Demokratie im Präsens. Eine Theorie der politischen Gegenwart*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Lorey, Isabell. 2019. “The Power of the Presentist-Performative: on Current Democracy Movements.” In *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe*, edited by Ana Vujanovic and Livia Piazza, 26-38. Berlin: b_books.

Lysenko, Volodymyr V., and Kevin C. Desouza. 2015. “The Use of Information and Communication Technologies by Protesters and the Authorities in the Attempts at Colour Revolutions in Belarus 2001–2010.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(4): 624–51.

Majewska, Ewa. 2021. *Feminist Antifascism. Counterpublics of the Common*. New York: Verso.

Paulovich, Natallia. 2021. “How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution? Female Agency and Participation in the 2020 Post-Election Protests.” *Slavic Review* 80(1): 38-44.

President of the Republic of Belarus. 2023. “Economy.” Union State. Accessed March 30, 2023. https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/economics/economic-integration/union-state.

Rancière, Jacques. 2010. *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum.

Sarna, Aleksandr. 2011. “Vehicle without Brakes. Information Policy of the Belarusian State during the Election Campaign.” ТоПос 2: 122–137.

Shchyttsova, Tatsiana. 2011. “Sovereign Power and the Joy of Life.” ТоПос 2: 61–74.

Shchurko, Tatsiana. 2022. “From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking protests in Belarus through a transnational feminist perspective.” *Intersections EEJSP* 8(4): 25–41.

Shparaga, Olga. 2022. “A Feminist Framework for Understanding of the Role of Women in the Belarusian Revolution: Domestic Violence, Care, and Sisterhood.” IWM. Updated January 29, 2023. https://www.iwm.at/blog/a-feminist-framework-for-understanding-of-the-role-of-women-in-the-belarusian-revolution.

Shparaga, Olga. 2021. У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси. [The Face of the Revolution is Female. The Case of Belarus]. Vilnius: Petro Ofsetas.

Solomatina, Irina. 2020. Interview by Luba Fein. “Women and Feminism in Belarus: The Truth behind the ‘Flower Power.’” *Filia*. Accessed September 30, 2023. https://www.filia.org.uk/latest-news/2020/9/21/women-and-feminism-in-belarus-the-truth-behind-the-flower-power

Stebur, Antonina. 2021. “The body is an instrument of struggle and a source of hope.” *Tranzit*. Accessed September 30, 2023. https://at.tranzit.org/en/news/0/2021-09-28/the-body-is-an-instrument-of-struggle-and-a-source-of-hope.

Terlinden, Ulla. 2003. “‘Public Man’ and ‘Private Woman’: Discourse and Practice in Western Societies.” In *City and Gender: International Discourse on Gender, Urbanism, and Architecture*, edited by Ulla Terlinden, 41-56. Opladen : Leske + Budrich.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2014. “R-words: Refusing research.” In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, edited by D. Paris & M. T. Winn. Los Angeles, 223–48. CA: Sage Publications.

Tuck, Eve. 2009. “Suspending damage: A letter to communities.” *Harvard Educational Review* 79(3): 409–27.

United Nations. 2020. “UN human rights experts: Belarus must stop torturing protesters and prevent enforced disappearances.” Last modified September 1, 2020. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/09/un-human-rights-experts-belarus-must-stop-torturing-protesters-and-prevent.

Viasna. 2023. Last modified March 30, 2023. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/.

Wolchik, Sharon, and Cristina Chiva. 2021. “Women’s Representation in Politics.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, edited by Katalin Fábián, Janet Elise Johnson, Mara Lazda, 441-450. New York: Routledge.

World Bank. 2022. “International Debt Report 2022: Updated International Debt Statistics.” Accessed March 30, 2023. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/47f55cbf-ee14-531a-8acb-8e2406f4354d.