**Anti-Authoritarian Learning: an Examination of the Prospects for Democratization in Belarus Based on a Study of Polish Solidarity.[1]**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the anti-Lukashenka protest movement in Belarus by comparing it to the Solidarity movement in Poland. We organize our analysis around the concept of four stages identifiable in the development of social movements: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. We argue that protests in Belarus reached the bureaucratization stage, but their transformation into a more durable movement was slowed down by the brutal repressions unleashed by the Lukashenka regime propped up by Putin's Russia. However, the spectacular changes in people's conceptions of national identity built around symbols different from those associated with the officialdom may sustain emotional mobilization necessary for formation of higher levels of organizations in the oppressive context of today's Belarus. The contours of this process are brought into sharp relief when compared with the long, cumulative trajectory of the 1956-89 anti-authoritarian Polish revolts. This opens the way for cautious prognostication.

**Keywords**: Polish Solidarity; anti-Lukashenka mobilization; stages of social movements; comparative study of mobilization; protests

## Introduction

The 2020 presidential election generated the largest protests in the history of independent Belarus. Masses of Belarusian citizens took to the streets to protest what they considered to be a corrupt and fraudulent election. Nonviolent struggle against the authoritarian government has been ongoing with varying tactics and degrees of intensity since August 2020.

It took the neighboring Poles over three decades of both violent (in the early period of regime consolidation) and non-violent resistance to force the Soviet-supported regime to make major concessions. In August 1980, 35 years after the imposition of the communist system in 1944–47, the Solidarity Trade Union, an organization at the helm of a massive movement, was accepted as an autonomous element of the socio-political system. It took nearly another decade for Solidarity to effectively challenge the communist regime and become the dominant force behind a peaceful transfer of power in 1989.

Without negating the differences between the two countries and their distinct historical, political, and cultural contexts, we believe a comparison is possible and can shed light on the dilemmas social movements face while fighting for power in non-democratic states. In both cases we observe nonviolent struggle against authoritarian regimes, delegitimization of the government, massive arrests of protesters, and a deteriorating economic situation. This comparison raises important questions: What do we learn from these two cases to shed light on the challenges people trying to organize social movements must overcome to have meaningful impact on the distribution of power in a polity? What determines whether social movements succeed?

What were the conditions of Solidarity's success, and can they be repeated in today's Belarus? Will the ongoing protests in Belarus result in the transfer of power in that country?

We rely on a specific version of comparative analysis – introduced below – and employ the concept of four stages of development of social movements to understand how movements form, grow, and dissipate after achieving success or sliding into irrelevance. The four stages we examine are emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. We examine each stage by focusing on organization (mobilizing structures), cultural frames (vehicles of ideology that motivates people), repertoire of protest, and political opportunity structure (POS). The model of four stages should help to unearth the logic of anti-authoritarian mobilizations, because the studied events are approached as stages in an accumulative process, rather than separate occurrences.

Our key argument is that the 2020 anti-regime mobilization in Belarus reached the bureaucratization stage, but in 2021 its progress stalled as the chances of winning power or at least gaining some foothold in the official system diminished due to the brutal repressions and the lifeline provided to Lukashenka by Putin. However, we also observe the transformative effects of these events on the (political) culture of the country. Initially incremental changes in the conceptions of national identity, accelerated during the subsequent protest waves. They were signaled by the pervasive use of symbols signifying the concept of national identity sharply opposed to the one promoted by the Lukashenka regime. Moreover, they seem to be powerful enough to sustain emotional mobilization that is necessary, though not sufficient, for achieving ultimate success: the regime change.

The remainder of this paper has three sections. Section one introduces our method and model as well as explains each of the four stages of development of social movement. In section two we compare the developments in Poland and Belarus, relying on this model and some other concepts that are common in the literature on social movements. We conclude with the discussion of the usefulness of the Polish experience for assessing the chances of success of the Belarusian protest movement, summarize our key conceptual and theoretical findings, and offer some general thought on protest in non-democratic regimes.

**Method of Comparative Analysis and Key Concepts**

The whole family of comparative methods has recently become a subject of intense debate among methodologists and practitioners. While some scholars, including some of the best known practitioners of the method of paired comparison (Tarrow 2010) or the method of controlled comparison (Slater and Ziblatt 2013) have continued advocating for these methods analytical usefulness rooted in their Millean – albeit critically reassessed – pedigree, others have called for a major overhaul of all comparative methods either within the positivistic tradition (see, for example Seawright 2021) or some version of the interpretivist paradigm (Simmons and Smith 2021; Boswell, Corbet, and Rhodes 2019).

We are using the method of paired comparison, belonging to a broader family of comparative methods, which has a long and illustrious tradition in political science (particularly in comparative politics), as it "offers a balanced combination of descriptive depth and analytical challenge that progressively declines as more cases are added" (Tarrow 2010, 246). As Seawright 2021, 38–9) argues, "the value of comparison [including paired comparison] arises from goals other than direct causal inference" and it comes from: (1) sharpening conceptualizations, (2) deepening understanding of "causal capacities," and (3) "causal moderation," that is an acknowledgment that a given factor's causal "power" varies from one context to another and in some may be minimal or non-existent. These remarks apply to our project, so we forgo a controlled

paired comparison that would allow us to employ the Millean methods of "difference" or "agreement;" there are too many dimensions of both cases (Poland and Belarus) that cannot be "held constant."

We assume that even if the stringent conditions required for an effective application of the Millean controlled qualitative comparison are not met in our two cases, comparison is possible and productive because one can study systematically how people deal with "common dilemmas" (Boswell, Corbett, and Rhodes 2019, 1; see also Simmons and Smith 2019, 3). In our case, we compare how the challengers (dissidents, increasingly mobilized publics, etc.) in both countries face *the same dilemma*: how to get rid of an oppressive, undemocratic government? We attempt to reconstruct the context within which they live and act, sketch the courses of actions they take, enumerate obstacles they face, and assess the results. We pay attention to the explanatory relevance of the contextual environment for social movement outcomes to understand how the systemic context shape the protests paths differently in different settings. The research is based on the assumption that different parameters of political systems differentially foster or constrain behaviors of actors within those systems.

The Polish case is relatively well-understood, thoroughly described and analyzed in several ways. Since it was the country that was most "rebellious" under state socialism and had the most successful anti-communist mobilization the Soviet Bloc had ever seen, we treat Poland as a paradigmatic or crucial (Levy 2008, 12) case of success under a non-democratic regime and analyze the developments in Belarus from the perspective of what we know about Poland,[2] although we are wary of treating Poland as an easily applicable model for Belarus.[3]

The political and economic context in both cases is different, but comparable exactly in the sense specified above: challengers attempt to get rid of an unwanted system and they face different types of constraints. The protests in Poland, particularly in the 1970s, were unfolding within hybrid authoritarian communism or communist authoritarianism, intertwined with some elements of (post)totalitarianism (Linz and Stepan 1996, 261). No other Soviet Bloc country had such a system. Its uniqueness stemmed principally from the limited sovereignty of the Catholic Church, relatively independent private agriculture, and the comparatively robust ethical civil society, often the site of protest actions we are examining in this essay. Moreover, the society harbored memories of WWII heroism and extensive resistance to the Nazi occupiers, as well as of armed opposition to the early years of Soviet dominance (late 1940s – early 1950s).

Belarusian mobilization against Lukashenka, by contrast, was emerging and coalescing while his regime was evolving from competitive authoritarianism in the early 1990s (Levitsky and Way 2010) to a hybrid authoritarian-sultanistic regime in 2006 to classical sultanism in 2010 (Rouda 2012). According to Linz and Stepan (1996), "a leader in a sultanistic regime demands unconditional administrative compliance, for the official loyalty to his office is not an impersonal commitment to impersonal tasks that define the extent and content of his office, but rather a servant's loyalty based on strictly personal relationships with the ruler and an obligation that in principle permits no limitation" (45, 52–54).

We are trying to develop preliminary insights towards building a theory and – in particular – analyze mechanisms in order to identify those that promise success and those that spell trouble for the Belarusian challengers. Our goal is to study "diverse contexts to explore ideas rather than cases to test ideas" (Htun and Jensenius 2021,191). To impose some contextual rigor on our work, we have made three choices.

First, we assume that mobilization is best studied as a series of interactions between incumbents and challengers (Tilly 1978, 53–5; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 43–5) and thus

observe two series of interactions between incumbents and challengers in order to identify relevant similarities and differences between the two countries.

Second, we decided to use the four-stage model created by Herbert Blumer (1969, see also Christiansen 2009), adjusting it somewhat for non-democratic contexts. It allows the researcher to take a disciplined look at the accumulative process of movement-building, isolate the factors responsible for a movement's growth, stagnation or decline, and aid comparisons needed to assess its chances of success or failure. The opportunities that a movement faces at each stage are to a large degree determined by the achievements (or failures) of earlier stages. For example, the chances of successful bureaucratization increase if the stage of coalescence leads to at least a partial absorption of the movement's goals into the broader (political) culture of the society or its organizations into the society's political system.

Third, following the precepts of the (revised) political process approach, we hold that the sequence of four stages is dependent on the context-sensitive constellation of social, cultural, and political factors that are usefully grouped into four categories: (1) organization (mobilizing structures), (2) cultural frames (vehicles of ideology that motivate people), (3) repertoire of protest, and (4) political opportunities structure (POS). The latter concept, central to the political process approach, is designed to capture a range of factors that are external to mobilization and emerging movements but play a huge role in determining their timing as well as success or failure.[4] Goldstone, for example argues that the timing of success of protest groups is "substantially independent of the organization and tactics of the protest group" (1980, 1017).

**Comparisons**

***Emergence***

*Poland (1956–1976)/ Belarus (1996–2020)*
The emergence stage in both Poland and Belarus unfolded in different political and economic contexts, but had many striking similarities, most prominently in the duration of this phase and in the repertoire of protest. As in Poland, everyday resistance, mobilizing efforts, and protests against the Lukashenka regime were erupting with varying intensity for over two decades.

The emergence stage in Belarus began when Lukashenka (who became president in 1994) started increasing his grip on power in 1996. He avoided any serious market reforms and proposed the second referendum to amend the constitution, extended his term in office till 2001, and gained more control over the parliament and the Constitutional Court.

Poland, on the other hand, started accumulating its culture of rebellion during the 1956 "October Thaw," a period of relative relaxation of the Stalinist grip on the cultural, political, and economic life. Preventive censorship was relaxed, and an explosion of artistic and intellectual activity followed. It set Poland on the course that eventually made it one of the most, if not the most intellectually and artistically open country in the Soviet Bloc.

Interestingly, in this phase both countries experienced similar processes of social movement formation. Falling short of constituting a frontal challenge to their respective regimes, all varied activities that lasted for two decades in each country, sometimes openly rebellious, at other times clandestine or semi-official, were eroding the legitimacy of the respective systems.

The bulk of anti-systemic activity in Poland was concentrated in the domain of culture, in which several social milieus offered ideas that eventually proved resonant as protest frames in 1968 and 1970. There were no sustained anti-regime organizations during this period in Poland.

Public expressions of grievances were dominated by letters, with two outbursts of demonstrations in 1968 and the tragically suppressed workers strikes and demonstrations in December 1970.

It is hard to estimate the number of people "sitting on the fence" in Poland during this period. They refrained from frontally challenging the unwanted system, but lived, more or less secretly, in alternative cultural worlds fueled by the officially forbidden Radio Free Europe broadcasts, some traveler accounts, the increasingly accessible world of underground or emigree publishing, and even some liberal elements of the official culture. The protests of 1968 and 1970 were the most spectacular challenges to the power of communists during this period, but the mostly low-key disapproval of the system, ranging from small acts of Scottian "everyday resistance" (1985) to several efforts to organize underground groups, was constant and more widespread in Poland that in other countries of the Soviet Bloc.

In a similar manner, Belarusian opposition worked mostly underground and used yearly events – the so-called Chernobyl Way (April 26)[5] and the Freedom Day (March 25)[6] – to demonstrate cyclically their grievances with the existing Government. Many people participated in demonstrations organized to protest the results of the rigged – as was widely believed – presidential elections in 2001 (estimated 1,000 protesters), 2006 (estimated 10,000 protesters), 2010 (estimated 40,000 protesters), and 2015 (estimated 200 protesters) (Ash 2015). All presidential elections in Belarus, starting in 2001, failed to meet the OSCE standards and were not recognized as free or fair.

In the spring of 1996, the country experienced one of the largest demonstrations in the period between 1991 and 2020. According to various estimates, between sixty and one hundred thousand people took to the streets in Minsk, the capital of Belarus ("Belarusian Spring" 2018). The authorities brutally dispersed the protests and used a wide range of repressive measures to punish the protesters, including fines, administrative arrests, expulsions of students from universities, and forcing employers to dismiss their employees. The constitutional changes in November 1996 consolidated Lukashenka's rule and since then the Belarusian political system has been careening down a path of intensifying authoritarianism (Wilson 2021).

The Belarusian authorities used all tools of state coercion at their disposal to demobilize and criminalize all oppositional activities, persecuting displays of historic white-red-white symbols,[7] and censoring out ethno-national references used in protest activities for the duration of the two decades of protests.

In Poland, as the sixties progressed, the Party reasserted itself and its censorship became more intrusive, which led to a rebellion of 1968. The workers were increasingly unhappy and their mounting grievances, combined with a triggering event of price increases, eventually produced a strike in December 1970 that eventually ended up in the tragedy when soldiers fired on protesting workers. At least 40 people lost their lives and about 1300 were wounded.[8]

By contrast, in Belarus the key trigger was non-economic. The COVID-19 pandemic became a catalyst for civil society activism after Lukashenka chose to disregard the coronavirus threat and labeled it a "psychosis." While Lukashenka and his government lacked the resources to contain and mitigate the virus, Belarusian people experienced a disconnect between their experience of insecurity and their expectations shaped by the years of the government's heavy emphasis on political stability and guarantees of security (Kulakevich and Augsburger 2021). Lacking a national lockdown, Belarus became the only country in the region with open borders during the first wave of the pandemic. As a result, neglected Belarusian citizens had to adapt to the new situation and protect themselves on their own by creating structures of self-help, a quintessential

mechanism of civil society building. For example, the #ByCovid19 fundraising campaign raised over \$360,000 for doctors. Many civil leaders, Belarusian opposition members, and doctors called for a "People's Quarantine,"[9] asking everybody to stay home and minimize all social contacts. They also reported on the rising number of Covid-19 cases and criticized the official underreporting of fatalities (Kulakevich 2020a).

During the election campaign preceding the presidential vote on August 9, hundreds of volunteers joined the alternative candidates' teams, as people stood in lines for hours to sign petitions required to put alternative candidates on the ballot. A series of street protests against Lukashenka, labeled the "Slipper Revolution,"[10] occurred in at least 35 regional centers, including Minsk. The intense solidarity many people experienced while dealing with the epidemic on their own and engaging in the pre-election mobilization signaled the beginning of the coalescence stage.

The key finding is that the emergence stage, both in Poland (1956–76) and Belarus (1996–2020) was dominated by largely isolated outbursts of protests before the people in both countries became "aware of each other" and created institutional vehicles for a more organized mobilization during the coalescence stage.

### *Coalescence*

*Poland (1976-1980)/ Belarus (July - August 2020)*

Stage two, known as coalescence, or the "popular stage," is the time when individuals unhappy with their situation become unified and more strategic in their outlook. According to Hopper, "this is the stage when individuals participating in the mass behavior of the preceding stage become aware of each other" (1950, 273). Both social movements in Poland and Belarus successfully used the relatively open political opportunity to proceed from isolated outbursts of protest into more systematically coordinated and durable collective actions.

The comparison of the coalescence stages revealed a consequential difference between the two cases, in the role of communication technology in mobilization. Relying on vastly different technologies, both Poles and Belarusians successfully achieved "mobilization of consensus," the central goal of the coalescence stage. But the media technologies of both anti-regime mobilizations differed greatly, resulting in very different timeframes and thus dynamics of protest.

Between June 1976 and August 1980, in just over four years, a Poland increasingly suffering from the communist economy of shortages was transformed from a rebellious albeit controlled Soviet satellite into an island of relative freedom. It was possible due to the indefatigable and creative efforts of many people who set up and ran several organizations, heeding a call by Jacek Kuroń, one of the most respected dissident leaders, "to form their own committees, not to burn the existing ones."[11] These efforts eventually culminated in the massive mobilization of August 1980 that was presaged, in both cultural and organizational terms, by the huge Papal masses of 1979. The Pope's 1979 visit to his native country was a "psychological earthquake" to use an apt phrase of the Viennese Cardinal König (Kubik 1994, 139). His enormous masses, attended by millions, combining religious themes with the presentation of an attractive philosophy of work and espousing basic human and political rights, constituted a mighty blow to the ideological façade of the communist state. All of this was broadcast on state TV and radio (although in a censored form), so for the first time in the history of the Soviet Bloc, millions of people were exposed, either in person or via various media, to a message delivered by a charismatic religious leader: "These gigantic events were not interrupted by the police or the state's security forces.

For decades, Poles referred to their government as 'they' without defining what 'us' meant. But as Adam Michnik [arguably the most influential dissident], observed, Poles could finally visualize 'us.' People realized that their strength was in numbers, and this helped to break a collective barrier of fear" (Bartkowski 2009). As a result, by the end of the 1970s, a broad coalition of workers, peasants, intellectuals, and students, most of them Catholics, became an organized movement for change.

The cultural frames that played a crucial role in generating a powerful *alternative culture* were organized around such themes as respecting universal human and political rights, reclaiming national independence, restoring workers' social rights, renewing the dignity of the human person and human work, and establishing religious freedom. Eventually, all these themes found expression in Solidarity's twenty-one demands. The repertoire of protest evolved from outburst of strike activity and street demonstrations to a massive, coordinate national strike. This dramatic transformation of the situation of the country, however, was also possible because of the far-reaching change in the structure of political opportunities. Two events need to be noted here: the 1975 Helsinki Agreements and Cardinal Wojtyła's ascent to the papal throne in 1978. Suddenly, the Polish communists were facing a well-organized, non-violent challenge.

The coalescence stage in Belarus was much shorter than in Poland. In Poland, this stage lasted about four years, in Belarus, two months. This shockingly short length in the latter country can be explained by the availability of a new technology – Telegram – operational despite internet blackouts and allowing for dissemination of information to millions of people at once. In contrast to Poland, where the Workers Defense Committee (KOR), for example, had to rely on time-consuming and dangerous underground printing techniques to produce and disseminate dissident materials, Belarusian news were spread out immediately without the need for complex organizational structures.

Belarusians became aware of each other on a national scale within two months after Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was registered as a presidential candidate on July 14, 2020, three and a half weeks before the presidential vote, and immediately started attracting large crowds of supporters to her campaign events across the country.

Belarusian "mobilization of consensus" peaked on August 9, 2020, right after the presidential election, when hundreds of thousands of people poured to the streets to protest what they perceived as a fraudulent attempt to steal the election.[12] As in the previous presidential elections within his 26-year-old rule, Lukashenka did not hesitate to use force to disperse the protesters. This time, however, was different. The Belarusian authorities unleashed unprecedented violence. Heavily armed riot police used tear gas, flash grenades, rubber bullets, and water cannons to crackdown on the protesters. Hundreds were jailed, tortured, and hospitalized after confrontations throughout the night. The human rights center "Viasna" reported 3,633[13] politically motivated incidents, including 998[14] arrests and thousands of protocols, fines, searches, and more, on August 9 alone. The Belarusian government complemented this brutal crackdown with an internet blackout. Telegram's technology, founded by a Russian-born entrepreneur Pavel Durov, who had programmed the application to withstand the blackout, became the key source of information on the protests for Belarusians. The Nexta Telegram channel, founded by a 22-year-old opposition blogger Stsiapan Putsila, which he had run in exile from Poland since 2018, provided an opportunity for Belarusians to connect in the vacuum during the internet blackouts. Nexta subscribers were able to share photos and videos of violence unfolding around them to the audience of around two million fellow Nexta members. Nexta laid the government's savagery bare while the state media tried to cover it up. With the help of evidence gathered during the first few days of

violence, the UN experts reported on at least 450[15] documented cases of torture and mistreatment of people, including sexual abuse and rape with rubber batons.

The violent crackdown on the protesters triggered much bigger mobilization. The protests started taking place daily. Sunday gatherings in Minsk were attracting hundreds of thousands of people. Historic white-red-white flag took on the new life and became the most visible and unifying symbol, inspiring Belarusian people across the country to protest the regime's violence (Kulakevich 2020b). Already in August, the pictures of hundreds of thousands of people under white-red-white colors had been featured by the media outlets across the world.

Belarusians displayed white-red-white flags on buildings and used the tri-color scheme on curtains, clothing, and lighting displays on their balconies. Musicians from such bands as Tor, Pomidor/OFF, Stary Olsa and many others wrote songs and produced video clips featuring white and red symbols. For example, the Nizkiz released a video clip for the song "Rules" that later had over one million of views, in which they described how Belarusians suddenly became aware of each other in the streets after someone raised a historic white-red-white flag. While the authorities were doing their best to tear down the red and white symbols, Belarusians kept coming up with new, ingenious forms of display. For example, they would replace flags with hundreds of white and red ribbons tied to fences, making it difficult for the authorities to remove them. Thousands of people connected through courtyard Telegram chats and would gather daily for tea and pastries (often in white and red colors). On November 11, Raman Bandarenka was beaten to death by Belarusian security forces for protecting white-red-white symbols of protests in his courtyard from the people taking down the white-red-white ribbons.

In sum, the mobilization's coalescence stage peaked when the massive and organized crowds of protesters, who embraced white-red-white colors on an unprecedented scale, asserted their membership in an imagined community that was separate from Lukashenka's vision of Belarusian identity, and in doing so condemned the terror unleashed by his security forces and rejected his claims to legitimacy.

The comparison of the coalescence stages in Belarus and Poland showed that digital technology, even if it is subjected to brutal interventions, not only facilitates effective organization of protests, but also contributes to the radical acceleration of the whole mobilization process, dramatically shortening the coalescence stage.

### *Bureaucratization*

*Poland (1980–1988)/ Belarus (August – October 2020)*

The third stage of movement formation, bureaucratization, is characterized by a higher level of organization. At this stage, the movement transitions from the primary dependence on mass demonstrations or symbolic leaders to an organization-driven and thus more sustainable mobilization.

Examination of the bureaucratization stages revealed most significant and telling differences between the two cases. While in Poland during the bureaucratization phase the opposition to the regime was eventually forced underground, in Belarus it was forced mostly abroad, with some members of the budding organizations going underground. External bureaucratization was thus dominant, while internal bureaucratization was also taking place, though the development of worker and student unions inside of the country has been slow due to the increasingly brutal

crackdown on the opposition. Despite the intensifying sanctions from the West, repeatedly requested by the exiled "bureaucracy" of the pro-democratic movement, Lukashenka – with Putin's backing – has been enjoying impunity while suppressing all forms of discontent with his rule.

Another interesting finding is that Lukashenka, always prone to rely on the strategy of preemption (Silitski 2005), employed it with extraordinary brutality, eliminating potential democratic rivals before the presidential election. He forced them into exile as the protests were progressing. His preemption was timely, while in Poland in 1980-81 it was belated, as the Martial Law was introduced only after the democratic movement had achieved not only a high level of operational capacity, but also official recognition, both unprecedented in the history of the Soviet Bloc. Moreover, the authorities never forced the leaders to leave the country, although they exerted a lot of pressure on some of them and several did emigrate, but most stayed in Poland, served their sentences, and resumed oppositional activity as soon as they had a chance.

The massive bureaucracy of Solidarity proved to be resilient, although initially all the organizational activities had to go underground. Some leaders escaped arrest, others were released after serving relatively short time, while thousands of members sprang to action, creating underground cells of the movement. Gradually, the central governing structures of the clandestine union were restored. The underground Interim Coordinating Commission (TKK) was created on April 22, 1982. Wałęsa, released from internment on November 14, 1982, returned to his position as the movement's leader. An ingenious power-sharing arrangement emerged: Wałęsa represented Solidarity in open dealings with the authorities, while the TKK coordinated the union's clandestine activities. On September 30, 1986, the formation of the Interim Solidarity Council was publicly announced. Several prominent activists emerged from underground to join Wałęsa in this "bureaucracy" whose formation sent a signal that the movement was regaining its position in the Polish public life.

During its bureaucratization stage, the Solidarity movement not only developed a massive organizational structure, but it also managed to transform it into a durable and extensive underground network able to exert so much pressure on the communist authorities that they eventually engaged in negotiating regime transformation. This success was undoubtedly made possible by the robust and multi-faceted alternative culture build around the myriads of fully or partially independent artistic and cultural initiatives, Roman Catholic symbolism, revived independence aspirations, and a dose of realism (the idea of "self-limiting revolution").
Solidarity's success would have not been possible, however, without an extraordinarily advantageous (open) political opportunity structure. In 1980–81, the Soviets, weakened by the failing military intervention in Afghanistan, warned by the US President Carter, reassured by the Polish authorities of their ability to control the situation, and fearful of the expected fierceness of Polish resistance, gave up the idea of intervention (Paczkowski and Byrne 2007; Paczkowski 2003, 418; Modzelewski 2013, 286–7; Garthoff 1998).[16] In 1988–89, the Soviet Communist Party had a new Secretary General, open to cultural (*glasnost*) and political (*perestroika*) experimentation, who eventually rejected the Brezhnev Doctrine. As is demonstrated by his published correspondence with Jaruzelski and the accounts of his visit to Poland in 1988, Gorbachev observed the Polish experiment with interest and a dose of sympathy and refrained from "lecturing" or threatening Poles with sanctions or military intervention (Stępień-Kuczyńska 2020).[17]

In Belarus, Lukashenka preemptively attacked potential protest leaders by either imprisoning them or forcing them to flee the country, as they feared for their lives. Initially three men geared up to challenge Lukashenka's presidential bid. But he jailed the banker Viktar Babaryka

and blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski and forced the former diplomat Valery Tsapkala into exile. When millions of people united around the seemingly implausible candidacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenka forced her into exile as well. The Belarusian government also did not give a chance to Maria Kalesnikava, who was imprisoned after refusing to leave the country under pressure, or Pavel Latushka, former Minister of Culture, who had to leave the country under the threat of imprisonment. As a result, when factory workers joined mass protests calling for Lukashenka to step down, Tsikhanouskaya had already fled the country in fear for her life and moved to neighboring Vilnius, Lithuania. This is in a stark contrast to the situation of Lech Wałęsa, who became the leader of massive strikes in the summer of 1980 and chairman of an independent labor union. Tsikhanouskaya was in the position to call the massive strike only at the end of October 2020, but by then the Belarusian authorities had already managed to recover from the initial shock of unexpected mass rebellion.

On August 14, in Vilnius, Tsikhanouskaya founded the Coordination Council of Belarus to work on a peaceful transfer of power and overcome the political crisis in the country. The Council consists of several working groups focused on supporting the Belarusian language and culture, developing education initiatives, documenting human rights abuses, helping to organize elections to collective bodies of territorial public self-government (COTOS), informing about the possibilities of receiving assistance for those who lost jobs, exchanging information and analysis of the processes taking place within church communities and religious organizations, and analyzing economic processes in Belarus. The Council claims to be the single representative body of the democratic Belarusian society. The office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is a separate entity and consists of her and eight advisors on domestic and international affairs, as well as communications staff.

Besides the Coordination Council, there are several other organizational initiatives run by the exiled leaders. At the end of October 2020, Pavel Latushka, who is a member of the executive committee of the Coordination Council, founded National Anti-Crisis Management with the purpose to ensure stability in Belarus for the time when Lukashenka resigns. National Anti-Crisis Management cooperates with the Coordination Council and the office of Tsikhanouskaya. It is active in several fields, including economy and finance, foreign policy and trade, justice, security, social policy, and regional development. Many initiatives representing specific professions, including ByPol created by former security forces and BySol created by sports officials and athletes, cooperate with the National Anti-Crisis Management and the Coordination Council.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka does not recognize the Coordination Council and refuses to conduct a dialogue with it. In turn, Tsikhanouskaya and her team have been actively meeting with the leaders of many EU countries, keeping them informed about the violations of human rights in Belarus and lobbying to apply pressure on the Lukashenka regime. However, the "bureaucracy" of Belarusian oppositional movement seemed to be hesitant to ask the West to eliminate or weaken the main Lukashenka's lifeline – Moscow's support – in hopes of convincing Putin to change his mind and facilitate the roundtable talks that would lead to the removal of Lukashenka from power. Also, while the bureaucratization stage matured and an extensive organizational structure was formed, its main mode of operation inside of the country had to be mass rallies. Trained staff were able to carry out their organizational work mostly abroad and thus their effectiveness inside of the country was limited.

In another sharp contrast to the Polish situation in 1988–89, when Gorbachev was ready to experiment, Putin has so far[18] remained steadfast in his support for the sultanistic leader of Belarus. The Kremlin provided a crucial lifeline to Lukashenka when mass protests following the

presidential vote initially caught him off guard, which, in turn, provided him with an opportunity to demonstrate to his apparatus and security forces that he was not alone and was able to sustain his grip on power. According to the data provided by the human rights center "Viasna," after the major violent crackdown during the first three days immediately following the presidential election on August 9, 2020, the repression ceased for two weeks and then resumed on a massive scale on August 27, 2020, when Lukashenka announced that the prime ministers of Belarus and Russia would hold talks on refinancing the Belarusian state debt based on his agreement with Putin. In addition to verbal support for the Belarusian ruler recognizing him as the legitimate president, the Russian leader promised Belarus a US $1.5 billion emergency loan. Russia also has promised to protect Belarus from external military threats and warned foreign powers not to interfere in Belarus' affairs.

Having secured the Kremlin's support, Lukashenka started eliminating all potential challengers by forcing them into exile or throwing them in jail and unleashed brutal force on everyone expressing disapproval of his rule, thus raising the cost of open mobilization.

### Decline (of movement mobilization)

*Poland (1989–present?)*

In August 1989, the region's first noncommunist prime minister since the 1940s, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was appointed by the Polish parliament to head a new government. It was dominated by Solidarity representatives and received the broad popular mandate to implement wide ranging economic, political, and social reforms to stabilize the country's crumbling economy and democratize its politics.

Soon afterwards, Solidarity split into two institutional vehicles: a labor union and a party playing a key role both in the Parliament and the executive. Solidarity-union, through its frequent strikes and demonstrations, became a major corrective force during the early years of instituting far-reaching economic reforms designed to take the country from the brink of hyperinflation to a viable capitalist economy (Ekiert and Kubik 1999). But eventually it started losing members, ideologically turned sharply to the right (Ost 2005), and its "heroic phase" (1980–89) became an object of intense mnemonic battles (Kubik 2015). From a consequential protagonist of history, it morphed into a divisive and controversial protagonist (hero or villain?) in writing history.

The 1989–2021 period in Polish history is already a subject of intense debates, strongly colored by the ideology of participants. But most observers agree that Poland achieved spectacular economic successes and despite the recent turn toward right-wing populism, has managed to build one of the most successful democratic polities in postcommunist Europe. The Polish case shows that a non-violent social movement can be a power force driving massive, and by and large successful, cultural, social, economic, and politically broadly pro-democratic transformations.

*Belarus (Present Day)*

The events in Belarus are still unfolding. With the movement bureaucracy operating predominantly outside the country's borders, Lukashenka has unleashed brutal force on the protesters, suppressing any signs of protest activities in desire to avoid another wave of mass mobiliza-

tion. Since the beginning of the presidential election campaign in May 2020, the number of political prisoners in Belarus has increased from three to 927 as of December 18, 2021.[19] The Human Rights Center "Viasna" reported 167 political prisoners in December 2020; this number increased by 555% since the beginning of 2021. The liquidation of over 270 NGOs since July 2021 shows the unprecedented scale of the crackdown on the civil society in Belarus.

Another unprecedented act, demonstrating Lukashenka's impunity, came on May 23, 2021, with the interception of a Ryanair flight carrying Belarusian opposition journalist and former editor-in-chief of the Telegram Nexta channel Raman Pratasevich and 132 other passengers. The forced landing of a civilian aircraft, traveling between two EU capitals, in order to execute a political arrest, demonstrated that Lukashenka is serious about getting rid of everyone who disagrees with the official line by using any means. Lukashenka continued flaunting his impunity by encouraging a humanitarian crisis on its own border, which appears to be a ploy to flood the EU members of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia with large numbers of migrants in retaliation for a series of sanctions against the Lukashenka government (Kulakevich 2021b).

A bundle of international sanctions was imposed on the Belarusian authorities following the August 2020 crackdown. In September 2020, the United States and the European Union refused to recognize Lukashenka's legitimacy and imposed a series of sanctions, targeting Belarusian officials with asset freezes and travel bans. In December 2020, the U.S. Government adopted the Belarus Democracy Act, which authorized the White House to pressure Minsk with sanctions. In April 2021, the U.S. announced the resumption of sanctions against large petrochemical enterprises: Belarusian Oil Trade House, Belneftekhim, Belneftekhim USA Inc, Belshina, Grodno Azot, Grodno Khimvolokno, Lakokraska, Naftan, and Polotsk Steklovolokno. The U.S. reimposed full sanctions on these enterprises on June 3, 2021, prohibiting U.S. people and businesses from conducting financial transactions with them. By June 2021, the EU imposed four rounds of sanctions, punishing a total of 166 individuals and 15 entities. On June 21, 2021, the United States, the EU, the UK, and Canada introduced coordinated sanctions following the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk and the detention of journalist Raman Pratasevich. On August 9, 2021, the one-year anniversary of the presidential election that set off months of massive protests in Belarus, the U.S., coinciding with parallel sanctions packages by the United Kingdom and Canada, broadened its sanctions in response to the regime's ongoing political repression and corruption. The European Union imposed the fifth package of sanctions against Belarus, impacting 17 people and 12 entities, over the migration crisis along the Belarusian border with the EU members.

The fact that Lukashenka, already a subject of Western sanctions, decided to hijack a civilian passenger plane and force it to land in Minsk to capture a political opponent as well as to manufacture a humanitarian crisis on the border with the European Union shows that he does not feel the need to respect borders, diplomatic protocols, or international objections to his actions, as long as he can count on Putin's support. Moscow not only provided a crucial lifeline to Lukashenka amid the largest wave of protests in the history of independent Belarus, but its support did not waver after the plane hijacking and the unfolding migration crisis. In August 2020, the Kremlin promised the $1.5 billion loan, recognized Lukashenka as Belarus' legitimate president – unlike at least 33 countries worldwide – and promised military protection in case of a foreign aggression. Days after the act of air piracy, on May 29–30, Putin hosted Lukashenka in Sochi, a Russian resort city, where they spent five hours talking and then went on a yacht trip on the Black Sea. After the meeting between Putin and Lukashenka, the Kremlin announced that it would soon release a delayed $500 million loan installment to Belarus and agreed to increase the

number of flights between Belarus and Russia (Kulakevich 2021a). Amid the migration crisis, Lukashenka demonstrated his loyalty to Putin by declaring that the Crimean Peninsula, annexed by Moscow from Ukraine in 2014, was legally Russian territory.

As of September 2021, the struggle to remove Lukashenka was carried out on two stages: inside and outside Belarus. In Belarus, the Lukashenka regime relied on physical force, preventing the emergence of a "bureaucratized" democratic movement whose efforts to grow and mature he had been skillfully undermining for decades (Silitski 2005; Kulakevich 2020c; Wilson 2021). On the other side were the Belarusian people, heavily suppressed by the law-enforcement but equipped with their newly reinvigorated sense of national identity, who refuse to remain under the 27-year-old Lukashenka oppression. Outside Belarus, there were various Western national and transnational institutions relentlessly lobbied by the "bureaucracy" of the Belarusian democratic movement headed by Tsikhanouskaya and the Russian "black knight,"[20] equally relentlessly lobbied by Lukashenka.

**What does Polish experience tell us about the prospects for democratization in Belarus and the mechanisms of protest in authoritarian contexts more generally?**

An examination of the interactions between the challengers and the incumbents (non-democratic governments) in Poland (1956–1989) and Belarus (1996–today) conducted in the spirit of non-controlled (in the Millean sense), perspectival comparison led us to several conclusions concerning both the role of popular mobilization in non-democratic systems and the prospects of the anti-Lukashenka mobilization in Belarus. The Polish challenge to communism, a paradigmatic case extensively studied and well understood, provided a useful perspective on the chain of events in Belarus, while the whole paired comparison exercise helped to sharpening concepts and improve the understanding of causal capacities of various factors in different contexts (Seawright 2021).

First, sultanism and communist authoritarianism (a specific form of post-totalitarianism that emerged in Poland after 1956), analyzed side-by-side via our disciplined (four stages) paired comparison, have both come into a sharper focus. It has become clearer that each regime needs to be examined as a continuum, for whether a regime is more or less oppressive affects the chances of regime change. Our comparative analysis shows that while Polish post-totalitarianism was evolving towards less oppressive communist authoritarianism, Lukashenka's sultanism has been becoming more oppressive. With the gradual disappearance of autonomy of business organizations and civil society associations in Belarus, a regime change via the classic "four-player game" of democratization, in which moderate figures from the regime and opposition work together to overthrow the regime, is virtually impossible (Linz and Stepan 2013). Even with the pressure of powerful pro-democratic forces from abroad (say a large neighbor or an international body), a sultanistic regime is far less likely than an authoritarian regime to enter a transition through a "pact." The presence of a sultan makes negotiations too difficult. This helps to see even more clearly that that democratization of sultanism in Belarus is highly unlikely.

Second, the comparison of bureaucratization of opposition in different contexts helped to advance the concept of bureaucratization (anti-authoritarian challenger). It revealed a new dimension of formation of opposition forces during the social movement process – external and inter-

nal. Paying attention to this distinction helps to improve the understanding not only of the relative power of various types of domestic challengers ("insiders" and "exiles"), but also of various external actors ("exiles" and "foreigners"). The Belarusian regime is heavily depended on external support – Putin's Russia. At the same time, the externally organized Belarusian democratic movement matters, as it has a high chance of preventing Lukashenka from effective balancing between the West and Russia. This is accomplished by the relentless signaling to potential foreign allies, particularly by organized (bureaucratized) exiles that the domestic opposition is not giving up and is looking for assistance. However, as long as Lukashenka maintains Russia's backing and the West is unwilling to engage Putin and his protégé in a frontal confrontation, political or military, the West's power to curb him will remain limited.

Third, we gained a deeper understanding of the causal capacity of media technology employed in mobilization and coordination of challengers' actions. Examining the coordination of collective action in Poland and Belarus highlighted the major role of technology not only in the speed of mobilization process and effective organization of protests, but also in facilitating civic engagement and strengthening people's ability to understand one another. The revolutionary new media technology made it possible to accelerate the dissemination of the anti-regime vision of national identity under the revived white-red-white symbols and to accomplish in months what in Poland took years. People were protesting in the streets under a set of "their" symbols, but their images were instantly shared by hundreds of thousands of not millions via social media multiplying the effect of street actions. The initially limited causal capacity of the symbolic system itself, a result of its relative prior cultural isolation, was enhanced manifold by the new technology.

We want to close with an expression of restrained optimism. We hypothesize that a new ethno-national identity that emerged in Belarus under historic white-red-white symbols, rather than the official red and green colors associated with the regime, drew Belarusian people together in their fight against the injustices of the Lukashenka regime and instilled in them a sense of honor and pride in their country. The moral power of this mobilization comes also from the steadfast commitment to non-violent methods that have proven historically their superiority to violence (Chenoweth and Stephan 2012). This new "awakening" (Kulakevich 2020b) and a culture built around it cannot be unlearned and should keep people ready to strike when the international political opportunity structure finally opens.

**Disclosures.** None.

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**1** The title is inspired by the growing literature on authoritarian learning. See, for example, Hall and Ambrosio 2017.

2 According to Schaffer, "to compare perspectivally is to draw an analogy between different kind of thing as a way to establish an outside vantage point from which to view one in terms of the other" (2021, 49).

**3** As James Bryce observed, "The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies." Quoted in Jan-Werner Müller (2021, 5).

4 This dimension of analysis is of particular interest to the approach known as the political process theory. Tarrow defines political opportunity as "consistent - but not necessarily formal or permanent - dimensions of the political environment or of change in this environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting expectations" (2011, 163).

5 Chernobyl Way has been devoted to commemorating the 1986 nuclear accident and criticizing the Lukashenka regime for agricultural exploitation of the contaminated territories.

6 Freedom Day's goal has been to commemorate the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic, symbolically represented by the white-red-white flag, quickly emerging as a symbol of resistance to the Lukashenka rule.

7 The regime vilified the white-red-white flag as a fascist symbol used by the Belarusian nationalist organizations that collaborated with the Nazi occupation forces during WWII, attempting to associate it with fascism in order to delegitimize the opposition.

8 The fallen workers achieved the status of martyrs in collective memory and were eventually honored by the Gdańsk monument unveiled in an unprecedented ceremony in December 1980, when Solidarity had a partial control over the public space.

9 "People's Quarantine" referred to online grassroots campaigns to advocate for self-quarantine.

10 The protests in the lead up to the presidential election in August 2020 in Belarus were nicknamed the "Slipper Revolution" calling for slippers to stop the cockroach referring to Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has been in power in Belarus since 1994.

11 Kuroń was referring to the actions of an angry mob, such as the one that set on fire the headquarters of the PZPR Regional Committee in Radom in 1976.

12 Lukashenka was declared president with 76% of the vote in 2001, 83% in 2006, 80% in 2010, and 83% in 2015.

13 Human Rights Center "Viasna." https://spring96.org. The figure is current as of June 9, 2021.

14 Ibid.

15 UN News, September 1, 2020. Please cite in references if possible.

16 The evidence is still coming in and many details of the story have been revised. See for example, CWP Bulletin 11, with a useful, short introduction by Byrne 1998. But the most important element of the story has not changed: regardless of their initial intentions, the Soviets decided not to intervene.

17 The enthusiasm many people expressed during this visit, a Polish version of "Gorbymania," is captured in the following account: https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/30-lat-temu-rozpoczela-sie-wizyta-michaila-gorbaczowa-w-polsce. See also Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Wojciech Jaruzelski, April 13, 1990.

https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB504/docs/1990.04.13%20Record%20of%20Conversation%20be-tween%20Mikhail%20Gorbachev%20and%20Wojciech%20Jaruzelski.pdf (Accessed June 7, 2021.)

[18] In June 2021, at the moment of completing this text.

[19] Human Rights Center "Viasna." https://spring96.org. The figure is current as of October 3, 2021.

[20] The concept of "black night" refers to "external actors, be they democratic or authoritarian, great powers or regional powers, states or international organizations, that act as guardians of autocracy or challengers of democracy in specific contexts" (Seeberg and Tolstrup n.d, 3). See also Tolstrup 2009, 2014, and Levitsky and Way 2010, 41.