NEO-PERESTROIKA:

LABOR AND STATE CAPITALISM

UNDER BELARUSIAN PASSIVE REVOLUTION

By

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I hereby state that this dissertation contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. This thesis contains no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriately acknowledged by a bibliographic reference.

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ABSTRACT

The Belarusian working class lives under an authoritarian populist regime that combines paternalist welfarism and bureaucratic flexibilization of the labor market in a regionally unique developmental state capitalist model. Adding to the debates in the anthropology of postsocialism and of populism, this dissertation explores the interaction between the industrial working class and the state-employer on the levels of factory regimes, organizational capacities and imaginaries of power and resistance. It is based on a ten-month fieldwork that took place between December 2014 and July 2017 in three Belarusian cities.

Analyzing my informants' life-stories and the unions' organizational trajectories through a set of critical junctions within the Belarusian state-capital-labor nexus, I trace the class genesis of Belarusian populism through the lens of Gramsci's notion of the passive revolution. This analysis shows that the Belarusian working class, rather than passively suffering under post-Soviet capitalist accumulation, co-determined the political trajectory of post-soviet capitalism through populist mobilizations in the early 1990s, contributing to a passive-revolutionary process of gradual marketization that I characterize as neo-*perestroika*. Labor's structural strength in wresting economic concessions, however, dialectically coincided with the delegation of the political direction to a Caesarist leader who appropriated labor's populist energy. Thus, in Belarus' type of populism, paternalism is complemented by an expansion of quasi-feudal control over labor, as revealed in the cooptation and marginalization of trade unions on the one hand, and in the bureaucratic work flexibilization combined with what I call labor immobilization on the other.

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List of Abbreviations

ASM	Auto and Agricultural Machine-Building Workers‘ Union
BDCTU	Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions
BFTU	Belarusian Free Trade Union
BITU	Belarusian Independent Trade Union
BPF	Belarusian Popular Front
FTUB	Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus
FTUM	Free Trade Union of Metalworkers
ILO	International Labour Organization
MAZ	Minsk Car Factory (*Minskii Avtomobilnyi Zavod*)
REWU	Radio-Electronics Workers’ Union
SMOT	Free Inter-Professional Union of Laborers

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation deals with the hidden strength and the apparent weakness of the working class in illiberal state capitalism. Specifically, it shows how the Belarusian working class, rather than passively suffering under post-Soviet capitalist primitive accumulation, co-determined the trajectory of post-soviet capitalism in Belarus. Its hidden strength of wresting economic concessions, however, dialectically coincided with the apparent weakness of delegating the direction of this process to an authoritarian populist state acting as a collective exploiter of labor. To analyze this tragic labor-capital-state nexus from an anthropological perspective, I look at the histories, capabilities and imaginaries of the activists of opposition industrial trade unions and offer a reading of the class genesis of Belarusian populism through the lens of Gramsci's notion of 'passive revolution.'

I have chosen to study labor in the Republic of Belarus because its condition becomes increasingly common in the postsocialist region and beyond. Until recently Belarus was seen as a marginal and unrepresentative example of the post-socialist transformation, lagging behind its neoliberal (hybrid-)democratic neighbors[1]. With the post-crisis wave of populism, however, the tables have turned: now it is Poland, Hungary, and even the US that are catching up with 'the last dictatorship' as they satisfy some and divert other political passions of their working classes. This is precisely the mechanism that fascinates me in the Belarusian state-capital-labor settlement, where the industrial working class, sacrificing its own political agency, pushed the country's populist leader to thwart neoliberal transformations and preside over a gradual and

[1] In 2005, before meeting with Belarusian opposition leaders in Vilnius, Condoleezza Rice called Belarus 'the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe' (Rice and Dougherty 2005). After she left her post of US Secretary of State, this optimistic teleological formula was adopted as a title of the two books by historian Andrew Wilson (2011) and former British ambassador to Belarus Brian Bennett (2011), which set the agenda for scholarly debates (White 2011). A corollary to this teleological vision was the framing of Belarus as the last Soviet republic, either in apologetic (Parker 2007) or in a damning manner, seeing Belarusian society as a 'laboratory for the analysis of functioning of the Soviet society' (Hervouet 2009, 13).

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measured marketization of the society in an attempt to save Eastern-European capitalism from itself. The ideological expression of this process, now commonly referred to as populism, reveals its structure at its purest in the Belarusian 'island of populism' (Matsuzato 2004), devoid of nativist and xenophobic admixtures that define the notion elsewhere, and instead showing signs of a popular, bottom-up provenance.

If the '90s and 2000s were celebrated (or deplored) as the years of strong democracy and weak labor, the second decade of the 21st century saw democracy weakened and labor, at least rhetorically, strengthened. Either demoralized, impoverished and atomized through 'involution' (Burawoy 2001) or betrayed by its political representatives (Ost 2005), during the first two post-socialist decades, labor underwent neoliberal transformations in the former Eastern Bloc with dull resignation. Restrained by the calcified organizational forms ill-fitting for the market (Crowley 2004) and split into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' labor (Kalb 2019, 212), the working class in the region lost its political clout due to inactivity or dubious alliances, and was concomitantly erased as a 'class on paper' from both popular and scholarly imagination (Ost 2015). With the advent of the populist wave around 2010, however, the working class seems to have regained its strength: the conservatives in Poland made good on unions' demands (Ost 2018) and elsewhere, in the US, Trump promises to bring back jobs into the country.

This new strength of post-socialist working classes straddles structural economic improvement and the superstructural imaginary rehabilitation alike. Labor lost out, however, in the middle levels of organizational and political impact. Variously described as neopatrimonial, oligarchic and mafia states (Magyar and Hale 2019), the new populist regimes are far from giving direct political expression to the interests of the working class through trade unions or political parties that claim to represent the workers' rights. They rather represent a solidified type of neoliberal

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paternalism, balancing anti-labor measures (like the recent ‘slave law’ in Hungary) with social-nationalist promises to the deserving workers and the middle classes (Kalb 2019, 217).

While the future of European populism is uncertain, Belarus is a textbook example of a quarter century-old stable populist state (Goujon 2002; Matsuzato 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 92–93). The country’s president since 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka[2], a political outcast who came to power on an anti-corruption campaign against the former Soviet *nomenklatura* elite, claims to provide wages, pensions and profits to ‘his people,’ but punish mischievous bureaucrats and greedy businessmen. Moreover, his is a form of populism devoid of traditional political ideologies of the right or left[3], nor tainted by nativism or cultural exceptionalism (Ioffe 2003), which sets it apart from Poland to its west and allows it to entertain close ties with the Russian Federation to its east. Although Russia is not represented as an ethnic ‘other’ in the official populist discourse, it serves as a socio-economic ‘other’, an example of the vices of an unrestrained market, privatization and corruption[4]. Lukashenka’s populist rule is unique among post-Soviet patrimonial presidencies (March 2017, 275–77), comparable to Putin’s popularity among Russians and exceeding the popularity of any foreign politician among Ukrainians[5].

[2] In the body of this dissertation I will systematically use Belarusian language as the basis for transliteration of Belarusian citizens’ names and realities, although Russian-based transliteration may be used in other non-Cyrillic texts, including in the bibliography to this dissertation. In ambiguous cases, I will give both versions (Aliaksandr Lukashenka/Aleksander Lukashenko, the city of Salihorsk/Soligorsk). This decision is made out of convenience and reflects a general trend in the Western scholarship to prefer one of Belarus’ two official languages, although a great majority of my informants, even deliberately nationalist, speak Russian in their everyday life.
[3] The so-called ‘state ideology,’ which is taught in the universities and guarded by a corps of bureaucrats responsible for ideological work in public organizations and at workplaces, is, according to a Belarusian political scientist, ‘an eclectic set of separate elements of Marxism and Keynesianism, the market and feudal socialism, liberalism and conservatism, pan-Slavism and nationalism, atheism and Orthodoxy’ (quoted in Bekus 2010, 220) and represents a self-referential description of state apparatuses and state policies. Both the people in power and the opposition intellectuals seem to agree that “we don’t have ‘Lukashism’, we have a portrait of Lukashenka” (Feduta 2005, 372).
[4] According to Lukashenka’s famous quote, ‘Belarusians are Russians with a quality mark’ (Ioffe 2014, 172).
[5] Polish journalist Adam Michnik, who characterized Lukashenka as ‘a collective farm Bonaparte’, thought he could easily win power in the Kremlin in the mid-1990s, if he could impose his terms of integration between Belarus and the Russian Federation (Ioffe 2014, 138). With Putin coming to power in Russia in 2000, the Belarusian president received a lot of negative publicity, but the recent polls consistently show that Lukashenka beats other foreign leaders in the ratings of approval among Russians (RPORC, December 2018) and Ukrainians (‘Rating,’ November 2019).

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Being an exemplary case, Belarusian populism mirrors and amplifies the political-economic contradictions of the promised welfare and the actual suppression of labor characteristic of its Western populist neighbors. Belarus is an economic winner of the post-Soviet transformation (Ioffe and Yarashevich 2012) with most of the gains going to the working class (Yarashevich 2015) but a political loser, with 'no guarantee of rights' for the workers (International Trade Union Confederation 2017, 81). Belarus has the highest unionization rate in Eurasia, but only a small number of trade unions represent their members against the employer and the state (often the same thing). Belarusian workers have been largely supportive of the government, but regularly joined mass protests against its economic and social policies. The exploration of the genealogy and power structure underlying these paradoxes of authoritarian populism from the point of view of the working class is the main ambition of this dissertation.

Belarusian trajectory: therapy without shock, flexibility without market

Before I lay out the path of inquiry into the role of labor in the genesis of an authoritarian populist settlement, I will present the historically specific trajectory of Belarusian society, identifying the key historical and structural turning points and contradictions. Belarus (formerly, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic[6]) stands out among its post-Soviet neighbors as a developmental state capitalism with a self-declared socially-oriented market economy (Becker 2018), an upper middle-income country with a GDP of $59,66 bn and $5,670 GNI per capita[7]. After a brief parliamentary republic (1991-1994) associated with a falling GDP and hyperinflation, Belarusians elected Lukashenka as their first president and since 1996, several years before Russia and Ukraine, embarked on a steady economic growth with the highest growth rate in the region (8% on average in 2000-2008). This growth was based not on the

[6] Further in the dissertation, following Belarusian scholar Nelly Bekus (2010, 10), I will use 'Byelorussia' or 'Byelorussian SSR' to refer to the Soviet period and 'Belarus' or 'the Republic of Belarus' to refer to the post-Soviet period.
[7] World Bank data for 2018, see Belarus Country Profile at https://data.worldbank.org/country/belarus.

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Washington consensus measures prevalent in Poland, Russia and Ukraine at the time (Stiglitz 2003), but on the preservation of the state-owned industrial economy, favorable hydrocarbon trade with Russia and low unemployment, leading to a reduction in poverty and inequality unprecedented among post-Soviet countries (EBRD 2017). Having weathered the Great Recession significantly better than its neighbours with a 0.2% growth in 2009, the Belarusian economy sank to a 1.4% yearly average in 2009-2017, with a two-year recession (-3.8% and -2.5%) in 2015 and 2016. The current recovery at the rates of 2.4% (2017) and 3.7% (2018) is endangered by the changes in the terms of oil export from Russia and the growing public debt (International Monetary Fund 2019).

Unlike its neighbours, Belarus managed to preserve its Soviet-inherited economic potential, which had been built at a breakneck pace of post-war industrialisation and urbanization, when the republic's industrial output grew at double the average Soviet rate, turning Byelorussia into the Union's technology-intensive export-oriented 'assembly shop' (Ioffe 2004). As of 2017, the state sector accounted for 47.7% of employment[8] and 48.1% of the gross value added[9], higher than in any other post-socialist country, and state-owned enterprises accounted for over 56% of industrial production, employing 23% of the labor force. The country's economic backbone are large scale companies with over 4000 employees active in machine building (agricultural and industrial vehicles, buses, etc. are mainly exported to Russia and Ukraine) and chemical industry (fertilizers and oil refining are the main sources of the foreign currency and the largest tax-payers). Private capital is concentrated in trade (especially retail chains), food production, banking, telecommunications and the state-supported IT sector.

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[8] Calculated as a share of employment in firms of 'state ownership' and 'mixed ownership without foreign participation,' to overall employment in 2017, based on (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2018, 63).
[9] Calculated as the contribution of state-owned and partially state-owned firms into the nation's gross value added for 2017, based on (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2019, 68).

Belarusian statistics have historically shown the lowest level of officially registered unemployment in the region (never exceeding 3.1% since 2000 and 1% since 2007), which currently stands at 0.5%. The rate of unemployment according to the ILO methodology was 5.6% in 2017 and 4.8% in 2018, with a quarter of the unemployed looking for jobs for more than a year (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2018, 207–8). The rate of participation in the informal economy is not recorded, but according to expert estimates stands at a regionally low level of 8% (A. Vankevich 2016). Given the stability of industrial jobs, growing wages and low unemployment and informality, Belarus seems to have preserved the traditional structure of the working class, the decline of which has been much deplored (Standing 2011).

At the same time, researcher of post-Soviet labor, David Mandel (2004, 217), pointed to the obverse side of the picture. Until 2002 Belarus has been the only post-Soviet country where trade unions have constituted the most formidable opposition against the government, whereas the latter presented itself as socially-oriented and pro-worker. Shortly after Lukashenka came to power, Belarusian authorities were consistently more repressive against organized labor than the Ukrainian or Russian states. The period of record GDP and wage growth coincided with the introduction of 'ultra-flexibility' (Tomashevskii 2016) in the labor market with over 90% of the workforce on non-standard employment agreements and restrictions of the right to strike, register trade-unions and express public protest (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004). The system of fixed-term contracts, introduced in practice in 2004 and legalized in the Labor Code in 2019, have no precedent in any post-socialist country, limiting the employment term to a maximum of five years, and thus making it extremely easy to fire an employee but very hard for an employee to change his or her job before the contract ends. Some human rights activists characterize this as forced labor (Kirakosyan et al. 2014). Meanwhile, the unemployment benefits are miserable (roughly the equivalent of 10 USD), and the failure to find a job in half

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a year may lead to an indirect tax in a form of higher utility and medical care prices (N. Gray and Cameron 2019).

The landscape of organized labor in Belarus reflects this contradictory ensemble of the most progressive and the most reactionary policies in the post-Soviet space. A promotional video dedicated to the 115th anniversary of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus[10] (FTUB) showcased its participation in the development of Belarusian tourism and renovation of a WWII memorial complex but dedicated only a couple of minutes to the Labor Code, amended in July 2019 to normalize the further flexibilization of the labor market. The video ends with president Lukashenka's address to the Federation's chair, in which the president compared FTUB to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as the only organization of such scale in the country and asked it to take part in organizing the coming parliamentary elections.

Indeed, many authors consider this immense vertically integrated bureaucratic structure covering over 95% of employees a part of the country's ecosystem of government-operated NGO's (Briukhovetskii 2012; Y. Kryvoi 2017, 117). As integrated with the government as this most comprehensive union federation in Europe may be, it still functions as the government's 'left hand' in a country where the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection has been consistently advocating labor market flexibilization. As such, it can be considered a 'legacy union' (Caraway 2012, 2008) similar to the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia or the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine. Its institutional and political trajectory, however, is unique among other post-communist heirs of the Soviet All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions.

However strongly FTUB may ally with the government now, its opposition to the country's ruling elites was even stronger in the crucial period of 1991-2002, when the Belarusian model

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[10] Accessed August 28, 2019, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BIB1bsn2us

of authoritarian populism was forged. The only mass civil society organization, more numerous and endowed with more resources than any political party and most private businesses, the Federation co-determined Belarusian social policy in the '90s and its chair was the main challenger to Lukashenka in the 2001 elections. FTUB ended up in the position it is now after its leader lost these elections. Its most intransigent union leaders, expelled from the Federation, joined a network of highly politicized and militant 'Free' and 'Independent' trade unions formed as an alternative to the Soviet-inherited Federation in the late '80s. If always less numerous, their membership never exceeding 1% of those employed in the economy, these unions had more organic ties with their rank-and-file members in the economy's key companies, participated in every episode of contestation in the country, but also suffered the most counter-attacks from the government.

Now these alternative unions are federated into the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU). Mostly a coordinating body, it unites four organizations with the total membership of less than ten thousand. Only the largest of them though, the Belarusian Independent Trade Union (BITU), functions as a classical trade union with registered primary organizations at the oil processing and chemical plants capable of engaging in local and sectoral bargaining. BITU accounts for 60% of the alternative unions' membership, while the rest is shared among Radio-Electronics Workers' Union (REWU), Free Trade Union of Metalworkers (FTUM) and Belarusian Free Trade Union (BFTU). These are territorial organizations only nominally associated with the sectors reflected in their names, mostly without registered cells in workplaces and often with undisclosed membership. Basically without access to the site of production, these labor organizations focus on information campaigns, legal counseling and representation as well as the organization of public demonstrations.

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The very conditions in which these alternative unions operate reflect all the contradictions of the Belarusian model, thus making them a good vantage point from which to trace these contradictions in both synchronic and diachronic manner. Additionally, the life stories of their members and the collective stories of these organizations are punctuated by the crucial points in the development of Belarusian society: the labor protests of 1991-1993, the turn to authoritarianism in 1995, the changes in regulations of the labor market and association rights in 1999-2004, and finally, the turn to market liberalization since 2011.

For the purposes of this dissertation, this network of opposition trade unions serves as a research site rather than an object of study. Granting strategic access to the main contradictions of state-capital-labor relations, it allows for a historically-informed anthropological investigation of Belarusian authoritarian populism from the point of view of the working class. I will use the materials that I have gathered on this research site to answer the main question that I pose in this dissertation: what are the political-economic and ideological foundations of Belarusian authoritarian populism in its post-crisis conjuncture of 2011-2019? This breaks down into three subsidiary questions: What role did the labor organizations play in the emergence of the authoritarian populist state-capital-labor settlement? What are the mediating mechanisms for negotiating these relations between labor and the state-exploiter? And how are these relations and mediations reflected on the ideological plane, as populist ideologies of domination and popular idioms of resistance?

Towards a Gramscian understanding of authoritarian populism

The unique and contradictory ensemble of paternalist welfarism and bureaucratic flexibilization of the labor market that constitutes Belarusian populism resists the explanatory schemes developed by the bulk of the anthropologists and sociologists who have studied the demise of labor and the rise of populism in the age of neoliberal globalization. For the purpose

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of reviewing the relevant literature, I will first comment on the potential usefulness of the heuristic tools proposed by anthropologists of class and labor as well as by scholars of populist discourses; then I will discuss the main approaches taken in the field of Belarusian area studies, and finally present a synthetic theoretical framework grounded in the Gramscian idea of the passive revolution which I deem relevant to tackling my research questions.

Elements of a theory for the East of Eastern Europe

Belarusian society was shielded from the double polarization between the hybrid cosmopolitan elites and the indigenized population in the downward hegemonic cycle of global capital accumulation (Friedman 2018), which was shown to account for the rise of populism in other post-socialist countries (Kalb and Halmai 2011). This framework was developed on the basis of a reactive form of populism that was associated with a 'Polanyi-type' resistance of the working class structurally affected by global economic transformations or the withdrawal of a favorable social contract (Silver 2003, 30). The Belarusian working class, however, has largely preserved its structure and material basis, which are exposed to a very measured erosion of the industrial infrastructure and work-related welfare provision. Thus, its condition is in many respects more similar to the creeping marketization of the bureaucratic late-socialist societies with workers' relative control over their production process, informal bargaining and atomization, as analyzed in the classic studies of the Hungarian (Burawoy 1985) and late-Soviet politics of production (Clarke et al. 1993; Ticktin 1992; Filtzer 1994).

Even if the mechanism of populist mobilization is different, what is transposable to the context of labor under the authoritarian populist regime in Belarus, however, is the methodology of 'critical junctions' (Kalb and Tak 2006) and a relational approach to the anthropological study of class as 'uneven, social and geographic power balances, surrounded by an array of unevenly assembled myths, ideologies, and practices' (Kalb 2015, 14). I will return to the more concrete

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and operationalized application of this approach in the methodological section of this Introduction after I outline the theoretical elements relevant for the analysis of the power balances and ideologies of the state-capital-labor nexus in contemporary Belarus.

With regard to the specific question of the interaction between organized labor and an authoritarian state, I partially draw on 'critical junctures' theory in political science as represented by a classic comparative study of labor's impact on the regime change in Latin America (Collier and Collier 2002). This approach gained followers among scholars of the contemporary labor movement under non-democratic regimes in the Eastern Europe and South-East Asia (Caraway, Crowley, and Cook 2017), where it is often skewed towards finding 'the legacies of the past' (Crowley 2017) and scrutinizing the weakness of the labor, whereas in this dissertation I focus on the emerging anthropological characteristics of such 'critical junctions'. In this respect, my preoccupations are closer to the analysis of the 'moments of struggle' (Varga 2012, 108) and the agency of labor organizations in overcoming the challenges of mobilization, confrontation and political alignments (Varga 2014).

Lukashenka's sovereigntism arose as a response to an indirect impact of the international pressure transmitted through Belarus's largest trade partner and political ally, the Russian Federation, which was going through a tumultuous period of primitive accumulation in the 1990s (Kotz and Weir 1997). In this context, a multi-scalar analysis of the foundational populist moment in Belarusian politics faces the challenge of 'downscaling' rather than the 'upscaling' suggested for the Visegrád populist block (Kalb 2018). I consider Belarusian populism as a pre-emptive formation rather than a reactive one, following the notion of 'preemptive authoritarianism' developed by Belarusian scholar Vitaly Silitsky (2006; 2005) and Lucan Way's idea of 'semiauthoritarianism' (2005). The concept of a preemptive strategy reflects the agent's perception of the threat that is imminent, even though the threatening event is

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happening elsewhere. The concept of preemption can operate on various levels in the experimenting patterns of the state policies as well as grass-roots organizations.

In addition to the political-economic concepts developed in the analysis of Eastern European populism, I build on the growing body of literature devoted to the discursive analysis of the populist rhetorical repertoire[11]. I need to say from the outset that, although this approach owes much to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I will not use their post-structuralist reading of Gramsci (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2004) for the reasons noted by Perry Anderson (2016, 81–83): their discursive idealism detaches populist claims from their social embedding and collapses the analytical categories of hegemony, politics and populism into each other. Essentially, I part ways with Laclau and Mouffe after their early insights into the Gramscian problematics of populism[12] and proceed with theorizing the functioning of populist idioms in the context of the deficient hegemony characteristic of the case I am dealing with in this dissertation: the authoritarian populist regime where the state colonizes civil society. Thus, before I elaborate on the discursive theories of populism, I need to problematize the notion of hegemony.

Since the '70s Kate Crehan noted the rise of 'hegemony lite' in social anthropology (Crehan 2002): an interpretation that equated Gramsci's concept of hegemony with ideological domination in general. Responding to James Scott's attacks on a strawman of Gramsci fashioned after this 'hegemony lite' (Scott 1990, 90), William Roseberry noted that 'hegemony' is more correctly defined as 'a material and political process,' and this concept's value resides 'in its illumination of lines of weakness and cleavage, of alliances unformed and

[11] This body of scholarship is well represented in (Kaltwasser et al. 2017).

[12] I refer to Laclau's elucidating study of Peronism written from the perspective of an Althusserian reading of Gramsci (Laclau 2012) and a theoretically related essay by Mouffe (1979), where she defines hegemony as a class-determined principle of articulation of separate ideological elements and contrasts it, importantly for this dissertation, with *transformismo* as a leadership principle that does not stretch to the whole of society.

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class fractions unable to make their particular interests appear to be the interests of a wider collectivity' (Roseberry 1994, 365). It is exactly this negative and processual side of hegemony that interests me in the struggle between labor, capital and the state in the authoritarian populist regime of contemporary Belarus.

Thus, instead of resorting again to the concept of hegemony, which Gramsci understood as a rather rare occurrence, I will use a set of more fundamental categories that would allow me to grasp the situations of a failed and partial hegemony: 'alliances unformed' and 'particular interests' that did not become universal. This was the motivation behind the idea of the 'organic composition of dominance,' developed by one of the founders of the 'subaltern studies group,' Ranajit Guha[13] (1997, 20–23). According to him, domination is a combination of persuasion and coercion exercised by a coalition of dominant classes over subaltern classes. The prevalence of persuasion over coercion leads to a hegemonic form of domination, while the prevalence of coercion in the 'organic composition of dominance' signals a deficient hegemony, of which passive revolution is a variety. Here by 'coercion' I mean the use of open physical or structural market violence[14] (in legal or illegal forms) and by 'persuasion' I mean the acceptance of the interests of the ruling coalition by the subaltern classes as coinciding with their own. Subaltern classes find themselves in a state of subordination, which is a certain contingent combination of collaboration and resistance. As the forms of coercion and persuasion have corresponding justifying idioms, the subaltern classes produce their own idioms of cooperation and resistance, which may or may not become hegemonic.

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[13] Although building on the Gramscian conceptual framework in a rigorous manner, Guha does not mention the notion of passive revolution, a situation of a deficient hegemony, even in cases historically similar to those discussed by Gramsci as instances of passive revolution. Another representative of the 'subaltern studies,' Partha Chatterjee, uses this concept in a programmatic manner (Chatterjee 1993, 50–52), although limiting his analysis to a post-colonial transition and a conjunctural level (Callinicos 2010, 509), which does not allow for transposition of his theoretical development to the post-Soviet situation.

[14] Both Marx and Weber agree that waged labor is only formally free and is essentially based on economic coercion.

With a view to conceptualizing these historically contingent pre-hegemonic idioms, I now pick up on the discursive approach to populism, according to which populism constructs a certain moral image of 'the people,' which is not immediately identifiable with the empirically given population (particular classes or social groups) (Müller 2014, 485). Morally pure, the image of 'the people' is then rhetorically opposed to the negatively charged trope of 'the elite,' corrupt in various ways and fought by a populist leader to the benefit of 'the people' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 5–6). Although the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' is often perceived as the core of populist discourse, it has a vertical dimension that sets 'the people' against its 'other,' a morally degraded, underserving, parasitical remainder (Kalb and Halmai 2011; Friedman 2018; Rajaram 2018) that plays an increasingly important role in the discourse of Belarusian populism. As most of the existing research on this topic is focused on discourses of the established or aspiring elites, this conceptual apparatus needs a modification to account for the circulation of populist idioms between the grassroot challengers and the elites. I will present this modification in the form of a dynamic model of the 'dramaturgy of populism' with multiple actors and synchronized with the shifts in the 'organic compositions of dominance' in the synthetic part of this theoretical introduction.

Finally, if the theories of labor and populism discussed above need substantial adjustment before application to the Belarusian material, the specialized studies on Belarusian political and social development do not thematize the class basis of the Belarusian governance model or the role of labor in its formation and functioning, although some statements about the state-capital-labor nexus can be inferred from it. Broadly, this literature can be divided into what I would call 'the narratives of despotism' and 'the Machiavellian accounts.'

The narratives of despotism present the story of a confrontation between civil society and the authoritarian government that essentially returned Belarus to the worst times of the Soviet rule

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(Andrew Wilson 2011; Eke and Kuzio 2000; Rouda 2012). The authoritarian government that took over the state after the 1996 referendum has destroyed civil society and subjugated its remnants through bureaucratic and police violence. The 'Belarusian model,' according to this narrative, rests on subsidies from Russia, state propaganda brainwashing the population, and all-pervasive political repressions. The main factors that led to this dire situation of civil society, including labor organizations, are the lack of national consciousness inherited from the Soviet period, weakness of the democratic values, the prevalence of paternalistic attitude in the population, and the lack of Western developmental efforts.

The Machiavellian accounts, more sensitive to the internal dynamics of the elites and their relationship with the population, point to obvious deficiencies in the above story. First, there are obvious discontinuities between the Belarusian government since 1996 and the Soviet state: democratically elected, Lukashenka never belonged to middle or higher ranks of party officials; as opposed to almost all post-Soviet leaders, he never relied on any 'party of power' or had an explicit coherent ideology based on Marxism-Leninism (Kazakevich 2019). Secondly, the Belarusian economy, although significantly state-owned, state-regulated and dependent on favorable trade conditions with Russia, is not a planned economy (Nuti 2000); it has demonstrated significant resilience and ability to reform (Ioffe and Yarashevich 2012). Thirdly, the Belarusian population does not differ significantly in its attitude to democracy and political freedom from neighboring post-Soviet countries, sometimes even surpasses them in its support of democracy (Rouda 2019, 248). Additionally, a strong national identity, absent in Belarusian society, is no guarantee of liberal democracy, as shown by the examples of Azerbaijan or Georgia.

Although focused predominantly on the analysis of inter-elite and geopolitical conditions of the Belarusian regime, the Machiavellian accounts are more sensitive to the role of the

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Belarusian population in sustaining the country's government. Not denying the role of coercion in sustaining the Belarusian government, scholars who support the Machiavellian thesis stress the efficiency of the 'social contract' between the ruling power and the working class, entrepreneurs and pensioners (Gaiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009). Although state propaganda is an undeniable reality, the state's redistributive policies play a crucial role in the government's legitimacy. Even though Belarus is characterized as a neopatrimonial or mafia state, its ruling elites share the rent with the population (Balmaceda 2014).

The most successful explanations in the Machiavellian trend belong to liberal realist theorists of democracy. Models developed by Vladimir Gelman (Gelman 2008) and Lucan Way (Way 2016) grasp parts of the causal processes at play in the evolution of the Belarusian polity. What puzzles both of these researchers is why after the breakup of the Soviet state Belarus took a path of development different from those of independent Ukraine and Russia. While in the last two cases the façade of democracy based on a cartel-like deal among elites lasted for at least a decade after 1991, independent Belarus was born into a situation of atomized and disoriented elites facing a numerically strong but a politically impotent workers' movement, which in three years' time resulted in a peaceful power capture by an outsider. Although these are the best accounts of the Belarusian trajectory, they focus solely on the interplay of elites and expunge the role of labor and labor organizations, relegating them to the undifferentiated and inert mass of the 'population,' either as passive onlookers or as one of elites' resources.

As opposed to the above, the main theoretical intuition of this thesis is that post-1994 Belarus is not a continuation of Stalinist dictatorship or of Brezhnev's stability/stagnation, but rather a singular attempt to continue the original project of *perestroika* in post-Soviet space. Gorbachev's ambition to speed-up the Soviet economy by introducing limited market relations was heavily influenced by the Chinese experience after 1976 but failed due to structural reasons

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(pace of industrialization, autonomization of sectoral ministries, inefficient bureaucracy) and, most importantly, due to the sequencing of the reforms (*glasnost* prior to marketization). Due to specific economic, political and class conditions that I explore below in the first chapters of the dissertation, in the former Belarusian Soviet republic shock therapy and the formation of clan politics did not prevail after 1991, giving this country a second chance. Belarus under Lukashenka tried to go back on the path of state-supervised market reforms, and this task became even more urgent after the Great Recession. Thus, after 2011, the horizontal links with China and the transfer of knowledge and technology gave a second impetus to the effort of building an efficient state-capitalist economy. This trajectory demands a form of class analysis that would take into account the state, its role in mediating class relations and withstanding global challenges. I will present a synthetic theory of neo-*perestroika* through Gramsci's notion of a passive revolution.

Passive revolution as an integrating framework

I side with the scholars who find the Gramscian concepts of 'passive revolution' and 'Caesarism' more useful for analyzing postsocialist social formations, since they allow grasping both their origins in the elites' decision to abandon the Soviet system and their dynamics of political evolution without hegemonic historical blocs (Simon 2010; Bedirhanoglu 2004; K. Gray 2010; Hui 2017). These notions, as opposed to more established concepts such as 'hybrid regimes', allow to account for the agency of the subaltern groups and classes.

'Passive revolution' is a concept used by Antonio Gramsci to look for historical analogies between the political and social development of the united Italy in the second half of the 19th century and the rise of fascism in the mid-war era and Fordism (Gramsci 1971, 104–20). Gramsci uses the idea of passive revolution in a pre-conceptual manner, as a heuristic for teasing out historical analogies, therefore it needs systematic theoretical development, which

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often lacks in its later usages leading to the over-extension of the concept (Callinicos 2010). Additionally, Gramsci's central notion of hegemony is inherently contradictory (Anderson 2017) and needs conceptual clarification, specifically if applied to a passive-revolutionary situation. Here, I offer a development of the notion of passive revolution in the direction of a more fine-grained definitional capacity that would be compatible with the contemporary debates on postsocialist labor and state.

Passive revolution refers to such a social and political development that tries to overcome international and internal challenges of economic competition and popular discontent without the thorough restructuring of a given social formation, in other words, short of political or social revolution. The type of domination exercised within passive revolution lies between liberal democracy and outright dictatorship: as opposed to parliamentary democracies, a passive-revolutionary regime lacks hegemony over the subaltern, but it is responsive to some of the demands of the population, while diverting or rejecting others, which sets it apart from a dictatorship. In this respect, it can be approximated to the notion of hybrid regimes as used in political science, although with a broader societal scope that includes the subaltern population.

Morton and Bieler (2018) discern two meanings of the term 'passive revolution'. In the first sense, it is a 'revolution from above' imposed by the elite reformers who respond to economic, military and ideological challenges from abroad but lack mass support (Gramsci 1971, 46). In the second sense, it denotes revolutionary political or economic transformations packed into the form of conservative restoration, where demands of the subaltern play a certain role. In Gramsci's words, it reflects "the fact that 'progress' occurs as the reaction of the dominant classes to the sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness of the popular masses – a reaction consisting of 'restorations' that agree to some part of the popular demands and are therefore

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'progressive restorations', or 'revolutions-restorations', or even 'passive revolutions'" (Gramsci 2007, 252).

In every instance of a passive-revolutionary development, an external revolutionizing impetus should be identified. In the case of post-Soviet transformations this was the outward extension of the newly established hegemony of neoliberal elites. The challenge of facing neoliberal globalization prompted two types of responses from the post-Soviet countries which can be mapped to the two meanings of the passive revolution. In countries like Poland, Russia, or Ukraine, the newly established historical bloc of ex-communist bureaucrats and new capitalists presided over a top-down project of neoliberal modernization lacking popular support. This response corresponded to the first meaning of passive revolution: 'revolution from above.' In Belarus, the passive revolution of the second type prevailed, which was characterized by the partial fulfillment and displacement of popular demands. This was a pre-emptive passive revolution that avoided the top-down shock therapy. Poland, Russia and Hungary later moved to the second type of passive revolution, but this time it was a reactive move as opposed to the pre-emptive Belarusian one.

Facing pressure from abroad or from below, a passive-revolutionary political process acquires an internal dynamic[15], which I describe here as a succession of the 'modes of domination'. Building on the above-mentioned work by Guha, I define a 'mode of domination' as a certain proportion of coercion and persuasion that results in a stable politico-economic situation over a certain period of time. Modes of domination are phenomena of conjunctural level and can be used to analyze certain phases in the development of a passive revolution. The stability of the domination mode is constantly undermined by a set of contradictions: those between the

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[15] 'One may apply to the concept of passive revolution... the interpretive criterion of molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes' (Gramsci 1971, 257).

coalition of ruling classes and the subaltern classes, those within the ruling coalition and those between the ruling coalition of different social formations[16]. Thus, passive revolution should be accounted for historically as a set of unstable phases punctuated by periods of instability.

Passive revolutionary regimes are directed, according to Gramsci, by a Caesarist figure, either individual or collective (Gramsci 1971, 219–23). Gramsci's 'Caesar' is a development of Marx's 'Bonaparte' (Marx 1963) as a political representative of the ruling classes who is, however, not organic to these classes. The 'Caesar's' function is to balance between the contradicting interests of various classes without directly representing those interests, that is without resorting to liberal democratic mechanisms or without outright state capture. As such, 'Caesar' has a certain legitimacy of shielding his subalterns from the chaos of internal discord or external conquest, although he does not need to acquire moral and political leadership, or hegemony.

Passive revolution, by definition, is a deficient hegemonic form of governance in which the Caesarist dominant group relies relatively more on coercion rather than persuasion. The dominant (although not hegemonic) ideology remains indispensable for the stability of the passive-revolutionary project. The minimal legitimacy of a Caesarist rule is ensured by the elites' ability to: a) perceive and interpret the demands of the subaltern; b) to partially fulfill them; c) to enforce their solution while displacing the demands of the subaltern and preserving the core interests of the elites.

The deficient-hegemonic nature of a ruler's legitimacy within a passive-revolutionary social formation is vulnerable to outbursts of popular 'hidden transcripts[17]' (Scott 1990) or idioms of

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[16] 'A continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (…) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups' (Gramsci 2000: 205).
[17] James Scott famously criticized Gramscianism and specifically the notion of hegemony. Unfortunately, he formulated his criticism in a general strawman-like form. Scott's fieldwork and theories are, however, paradoxically consonant with a passive-revolutionary non-hegemonic situation.

resistance that, being vague and incoherent, may articulate with ideologies of challenger elites if they want to exercise their hegemony (industrial workers and the unemployed, in the case that I am studying). The structure of minimal legitimacy is similar to that of 'moral economy' (Thompson 1971) rather than 'social contract,' which enters my theoretical framework as a form of an idiom of persuasion/cooperation.

These idioms circulate in the 'dramaturgy of populism,' which I referred to above. Recalling the discursive approach, these are the main characters of the populist dramaturgy: the pure people, the corrupt elite, and the despicable 'non-people.' A populist leader acquires legitimacy by 'extracting the people from within the people' (Lefort 1988, 88) and presenting the extracted image to the actual people. This procedure may either succeed and lead to a stable period of a populist governance, or fail. The success or failure depends on whether the target audience identifies with the projected image of 'the people' and becomes subject to interpellation.

This extraction of the people is a dynamic process contingent on extra-rhetorical context. Depending on the context, populism as a 'thin-centered' rhetorical repertoire may be filled with varying 'thick' ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). The content of the main categories of populism, or the clothing of the main characters of the populist dramaturgy, changes depending on these 'thick' ideologies. Thus, scholars discern between movements and regimes whose populist rhetoric supports developmentalist nationalism (Juan Peron), socialism (Chavez, Correa) or neoliberalism (Fujimori, Menem) (Kaltwasser 2014). Corresponding to these ideologies, the imagery of the populist drama changes its properties. A regime that uses a populist rhetorical repertoire, however, does not have to be static and rely rigidly on one ideology. The drama may have several acts, and a populist leader may 'extract the people from within the people' several times. In this dissertation I show how throughout the recent decades in Belarus, the populist imagery circulation from the bottom up and back.

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In formulating my hypothesis, I follow two claims formulated by Mandel regarding the period before 2004 (2004, 217–18). Firstly, the Belarusian government's economic model exposes it to labor's pressure more than those of Russia's or Ukraine's ruling elites, because the Belarusian government, acting as an employer, takes direct responsibility for the functioning of the enterprises and the well-being of their employees. Relatedly, the Belarusian working class has not suffered the same economic insecurity or deproletarianisation as Ukraine and Russia, thus preserving labor's capacity to resist. Secondly, Mandel argues that economic neoliberalization, that was much more advanced in Ukraine and Russia than in Belarus, can be considered the 'functional equivalent' of political repression, making the systematic repression of disorganized and impoverished labor superfluous. I add a third thesis, according to which labor was an agent rather than a victim, contributing to the changing relations of production first directly, through social protests, then indirectly, pushing forward a passive-revolutionary development.

From theory to method

The methodological challenge of studying a passive-revolutionary regime within a site composed of trade unions is that of extending out (Burawoy 2009, 30) from a network of small labor groups engaged in local struggles and ideological quarrels to the macro-level of relations of class forces underlying a passive-revolutionary state project and to the historical dimension of these relations driving the dynamics of a passive revolution. In this section I operationalize the theoretical framework of the passive revolution outlined above and merge it with the experiences and materials obtained from my field site thus constructing theory-driven cases (Burawoy 2009, 203) that would reflect structural and diachronic aspects of a passive-revolutionary process.

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The relations of class forces underlying distinct phases of a passive revolution need to be gauged through different levels of domination. I build on the insights of Wright (2015), Wolf (1999), and Gramsci to construct these levels of domination. My starting point is Wright's (2015: 121) game metaphor representing levels of political struggle: the systemic level is about which game to play (capitalism or socialism?), the institutional level is about the rules of the game (types of capitalism) and the situational levels is about what moves to make in order to improve your access to material resources (changing jobs, education, protest etc.). However useful this classification may be for the analysis of class relations, it is not fine-grained enough to account for the complex interactions between the production process, the state and the public sphere. Anthropological methods are of help here, as they allow for the dimension of individual life trajectories and for an account of the ideologies and imaginaries that surround class on various levels of power balances.

Therefore, I complement Wright's levels of political struggle with Wolf's (1999) types of power: personal (individual potential), interpersonal (one person exercises power over the other), tactical (over resources/actions), and strategic (power over allocation of labor and possibilities of actions). Personal and interpersonal powers belong to the sphere of Wright's institutional power, tactical is a part of institutional power, and strategic power can act partially within the institutional level (within a certain mode of production) and on the strategic level (during the transition between the modes of production).

Taking into account the specific problematic of domination, workers' public sphere and labor control, I find it useful to synchronize the above schemes with Burawoy's account of factory regimes (Burawoy 1985) and Gramsci-inspired accounts of the levels of power relations (Gramsci 2000: 205). Each of these levels of domination are faced with resistance that I will analyze using the typology of workers' bargaining power proposed by Wright (Wright 2000)

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and developed by Silver (Silver 2003, 13–15). These forms of bargaining power are associational power that depends on the strength of workers' organizations, marketplace bargaining power that depends on the flexibility of labor markets, and workplace bargaining power that stems from a strategic position in a technical division of labor or a production chain.

Following Mihai Varga's analysis of labor unions' strategies (Varga 2014, 45–47), I take episodes of contention as my units of analysis and I construe them as cases of specific conjunctures in the development of a passive-revolutionary regime, which I then analyze across the levels of domination outlined above.

Table 1. Key events and levels of analysis

	1991 labor unrest	1995 transportation strike	1999-2004 protests against fixed-term contracts	2012 labor protests	2017 protests against the ‚parasites' law'
Strategic	*Collapse of the Soviet Union*	*Consolidation of populist authoritarianism*	*Shift in labor regulation*	*Economic stagnation*	*Market reforms*
Tactical	*Emergence of representative labor organizations*	*Increased militancy*	*Cooptation and marginalization of trade unions*	*New forms of organization*	*Re-emergence of mass protests*
Ideologies	*Anti-communism*	*Competition of populist idioms*	*Paternalism vs opposition radicalism*	*Enterpreneurialism*	*Austerity*

As the table above shows, I have selected four cases of the episodes of contention in which my informants took part. These cases were selected on the basis of the following criteria: a) active involvement of organized labor and mass participation (representation); b) embeddedness in strategic political and economic processes (political, economic and ideological crisis); c) consequences for labor regulation and labor organizations (tactical); d) embeddedness in ideological contestation.

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A diachronic comparison of the selected cases of contention being at the core of my research, a systematic cross-country comparison lies outside of its scope. Upscaling of the social processes, however, requires implicit comparisons, which I introduce in every chapter. The selection of comparable cases that I draw upon are limited to Russia, Ukraine, and Poland.

I consider episodes of political change, policy innovations and labor unrest in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine as the most relevant for elucidating the specificity of the Belarusian case. Thereby I diverge from the prevalent trend in 'transitological' scholarship that aims at demonstrating the 'backwardness' of the Belarusian political system and society as compared to those of the Western European countries and the poster cases of successful 'transition' such as Poland, Lithuania, or Hungary. More persuasive arguments have been made (Ioffe and Yarashevich 2012; Ioffe 2014; Pikulik 2019) for analyzing Belarusian polity and social processes in the context of the common starting point at the fall of the Soviet Union, common challenges of neoliberal globalization and a continuing system of interdependencies between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. As opposed to 'capitalism from outside' in Central Eastern Europe, heavily reliant on Western European political attraction and capital investment, these three post-Soviet countries developed 'capitalism from above' (Szelenyi 2015, 39) with tight although varying state-capital relations within these countries and close industrial and trade dependencies among them. Thus, substantial commonalities among these societies will allow me to tease out more neatly the factors that may account for Belarus' specific path.

Thus, in the first section, while analyzing labor unrest in Belarus in 1991 and in 1995, I bring in the cases of miners' protests in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine to elucidate the specific factors that shaped the Belarusian case, as well as their influence on political development. Additionally, I compare the processes of primitive capital accumulation and elite group formation in the three countries arriving at an assessment of the role of labor in their

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diverging paths of transformation. In the second section I benefit from the 'converging divergence' (Pikulik 2019, 490) of these three countries as they resumed economic growth in a symbiotic effort to ride the wave of the commodity boom of the 2000s. External shocks for the Belarusian economy and the legitimacy of its ruling elites were largely mediated by its geopolitical-economic hydrocarbon nexus with Russia (Balmaceda 2014). Finally, the last section addresses the differential responses of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to the post-recession global conjuncture, with the Belarusian elite remodeling its populist rhetoric and economic policies along Russia-style neoliberalization but experiencing a popular and populist backlash diverging from the Russian *Bolotnaya* or anti-pension reform protests as well as Ukrainian *maidans*.

Although I find implicit comparisons with post-Soviet cases more fruitful on a systemic level, I draw heavily on the scholarship analyzing Polish labor and populism on the ideological level (Kalb 2014; Ost 2005, 2018). The Polish experience directly inspired Belarusian organized labor since the early '80s, and many idioms have been taken over from *Solidarnosc*. On the other hand, the permutations of Polish populism, both from below and from above, constitute a contrasting case to the Belarusian populism model of legitimacy and the populist idioms of resistance against it.

Techniques of data gathering

My fieldwork unfolded in ebbs and flows from December 2014 to July 2017, totaling ten months of interviewing, stints of participant observation, collecting and copying private archives and old newspapers. The bulk of my activity was in Minsk, in and around the headquarters of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions and two of its members unions: Free Metalworkers' Union and Radio-Electronic Workers' Union. There I conducted semi-structured interviews with the leaders, activists and experts of these unions, as well as

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with some representatives of the Free Trade Union and its rival, the Federation of Trade Unions. I was present at formal planning meetings in the opposition unions' offices and assisted in the day-to-day activity of the activists of FTUM's Minsk Car Factory's unregistered organization.

In order to get acquainted with the strongest among the opposition unions, the Belarusian Independent Union, I visited their headquarters in Salihorsk, a monotown to the south of Minsk structured around the potash mines of '*Belaruskali.*' From there I travelled to Mikashevichy, a small town famous for the workers' protests in '*Hranit*' mines, which I analyze in Chapter 5.

In order to grasp the experience of bureaucratic precarization, which I analyze in Chapter 4, and the consequences of the economic downturn of 2014-2016, I talked to the workers of Minsk Car Plant and Minsk Tractor Plant, as well as informally employed people and Ukrainian migrant workers. Finally, the most significant social protest that happened in two decades in Belarus coincided with the last months of my fieldwork, May-July 2017. Thus, I travelled to Homel, the site of the most important regional demonstrations, to interview members of the local REWU organization and other participants of the protests that I analyze in the last, sixth chapter.

Starting with the very first talk with one of the activists, I realized how important the memory of the 1991 protest was for them personally. My interlocutors also emphasized the institutional grounding of the contemporary labor organizations in these events. Subsequently I included the questions about this event and other historical occurrences of labor unrest in all my interviews. In addition to interviews, I gathered materials from personal and institutional archives of several independent trade unions, including documents, photographs, leaflets and newspapers. This turned out to be an invaluable source for the history of labor organizations and labor unrest, since there are no institutional archives on 'independent' trade unions and no

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systematic research involving archival material has been done on the topic. I base the two opening chapters of this dissertation on these materials.

My other connection was through a circle of left-wing intellectuals in Minsk and Homel, with whom I cooperated as an editor of a Kyiv-based journal[18]. This milieu comprises left-wing researchers, artists, former liberal-nationalist activists and anarchist, socialist and Green Party activists. Politically equidistant from the authorities and the opposition movement, they entertained ad-hoc contacts with the trade-union network I studied. Following their lead, I was able to meet some local scholars who were open to cooperation. Additionally, their personal connections allowed me to find my way to a younger generation of Belarusian workers, some of them belonging to the diverging strata of the so-called precariat: from artists and IT-specialists to self-employed and casual workers.

In the field I faced constrains similar to those that Ronan Hervouet, a French anthropologist engaged in a long-term study of Belarusian *datchas* and agriculture, summarized in his account of a 'discreet ethnography' (Hervouet 2019). He admits to having difficulties cooperating with the authorities on various levels as well as with Belarusian scholars, facing the mistrust of his informants and problems of self-presentation both to the informants and to the political authorities. This forced him to use a network of trusted contacts in the capital city to approach his rural informants rather than enter the field as a participant observer, to abandon recording his interactions and to modify his self-presentation narrative (Hervouet 2019, 99). The dangers of this snowballing technique are obvious: it results in a restricted number of trusted contacts from within Western-related scholarly/professional circles in Minsk, as I witnessed after having met a Minsk-based professional who provided the French scholar with access to his family's *datcha.*

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[18] *Commons: Journal of Social Criticism* (commons.com.ua)

My own fieldwork experience faced analogous limitations of positionality, cooperation and access. I came to Belarus as a foreign scholar associated with the Open Society Foundation, whose branch in Belarus was closed for political reasons in 1997[19], and as a citizen of Ukraine, a country by that time (winter 2014) involved in a conflict with Russia that flooded Belarus with Ukrainian migrants and sent its economy into the first recession since 1996. Both of these circumstances opened as many doors as they closed.

The fact that I was affiliated with a European educational institution and that I was a Ukrainian citizen living abroad for several years assured an initial credit of trust from my informants among the opposition-minded trade unionists, who were used to cooperation with foreign foundations and journalists. The reference provided by Canadian scholar and activist David Mandel, an author of books and articles about the Belarusian labor movement and the coordinator of an educational project for post-Soviet trade unions, deepened this trust and provided me with my first key informants from the Radio-Electronics and Free Metalworkers' unions. Henceforth, I was welcome in the offices of the four opposition trade unions and was invited to participate in their strategic meetings and record interviews with union activists and chairs.

At times, more difficult than securing access to the union offices and appointments for interviews was developing an understandable self-presentation that would be both coherent, accessible to informants and not suspicious to the state representatives whose attention I may have attracted. Calling myself an 'anthropologist' was excluded almost immediately due to a

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[19] Open Society Foundation was set up in Minsk in 1993 and involved activists of the United Civic Party as well as liberal and nationalist intellectuals. The Foundation moved to radically oppose Lukashenka and was forced to close its operations in 1997 under the pressure from the Belarusian regulation authorities.

specific disciplinary connotation of this word in the post-Soviet context[20]: one of my informants, a union lawyer, remarked ironically that if I am an anthropologist, I should go and measure president Lukashenka's skull[21]. With time, I settled on the story that I am a sociologist who studies labor regulation and the history of the workers' movement in Belarus.

The doors that my positionality closed were those of the public academic institutions and the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus. I could not move beyond personal contacts with the people employed in these institutions. These, although insightful in other respects, could not supply me with the data gathered by the Federation unions or the surveys of the Institute of Sociology. As one of the professors from the International Institute of Labor and Social Relations[22] told me, there was no hope even he could access these data given the securitized and bureaucratized procedures.

As opposed to the experience of Hervouet, I did not face any direct threats from the police or the security services. I traveled to Belarus as a citizen of Ukraine, thus using the visa-free regime between the countries that allowed me to stay in the country up to three months in half a year. There were constant rumors and suspicions about the presence of secret agents within the opposition movement, including the anti-government trade-union network. I learnt about an actual spy in the Radio-Electronic Workers' union only after having returned from the field, as the trial on the unions' two leaders started in 2017 (Chapter 6).

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[20] In USSR and the post-Soviet space, anthropology usually means physical anthropology and is taught in the departments of biology. What is known as social and cultural anthropology in the anglosphere may be distributed among the departments of ethnography, folkloristics, cultural studies, sociology and history.
[21] A teratological account of the Belarusian ruling elite with classist and racist undertones is widespread in the opposition circles, from matter-of-factly remarks about Lukashenka's past as a state farm director to the rumors that he is the son of a Roma or has a psychopathology (e. g. Sheremet and Kalinkina 2003).
[22] A Minsk-based university affiliated with the Federation of Trade Unions.

Outline of the dissertation

The rest of the dissertation consists of three parts of two chapters each, and the concluding remarks. The first section starts with the labor protests of late Soviet *perestroika*, traces the post-Soviet primitive accumulation in Belarus and the rise of the passive revolutionary populism since 1995.

Chapter 1 analyzes mass strikes and protests in April-May 1991 in Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and introduces the main protagonists of the story ('vanishing mediators'): a network of opposition-minded informal workers' groups, political clubs, strike committee and trade-unions. By an implicit comparison with workers' protests in the neighboring parts of the Soviet Union, this chapter isolates the impact of organized labor on the specific path this Soviet republic took after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main argument of this chapter is that the labor protests contributed to the atomization of the ruling communist elite and the crisis of their legitimacy, but given the lack of a strong political opposition force (similar to Yeltsin in Russia), strong workers' mobilization remained without lasting organizational structure (as opposed to *Solidarnosc* in Poland). No preconditions where created for a strong executive to push through neoliberal transformations faced with further labor resistance.

Chapter 2 continues the argument, now focusing on the failure of neoliberal transformation and the populist style of political debates. It traces the evolution of the 'official' Soviet-inherited and 'alternative' newly-established trade unions, that both flourished in 1991-95 and were able to pose a considerable challenge to the attempts of shock therapy, privatization and mass lay-offs. Paradoxically, not opposed in principle to abrupt market transformations, the labor leaders could not entrust it to the parliamentary republic dominated by ex-communist elites but lacked either strong liberal allies in the parliament or independent representation. This 'catastrophic equilibrium' enabled an outsider Lukashenka to win a landslide victory in the elections to the

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newly established presidential post in 1994. Channeling the workers' political passions cultivated by the unions in the 90s, he imposed himself as a Ceasarist figure to stabilize the 'catastrophic equilibrium' and engage in prebendal subjugation of the state bureaucracy and management. Later, however, the Ceasarist regime had to get rid of the possible political rivals in the labor camp, thus the crackdown on the transportation workers' strike in 1995, which inaugurated the first phase of the passive-revolutionary regime.

The second section continues the story of the passive revolutionary regime in Belarus and its interaction with organized labor, as it entered its stabilization phase after 2001. The focus changes from the case studies of tipping point events to the 'molecular' processes of '*transformismo*': cooptation of some labor organizations, marginalization of others, and flexibilization of the labor market. The general argument of this chapter is that the bundle of anti-labor policies introduced in 1999-2004 initially as a tool of political control, was later repurposed to destroy the remnants of workers' autonomy on the factory level. Thus, the passive revolutionary regime, having started as a stabilizing device against labor unrest, persisted as a non-revolutionary response to the pressures of neoliberal competition in its immediate geopolitical environment. This was reflected in the change of the workers' public sphere: atomization and NGO-ization of labor organizations, their growing dependence on foreign partners. In parallel, the passive-revolutionary regime entered the phase of stability fueled by the steady growth of the country's economy, it's mode of legitimation switched from the predominance of coercion to the redistribution of the fruit of relative prosperity to 'the people', now imagined as loyal citizens occupying their proper place of workers, bureaucrats, and business people in society.

Chapter 3 starts with the final clash between organized labor and the Ceasarist regime in 1999-2001, tracing a series of protests against presidential decrees aimed at introducing short-term

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contracts, new regulations on the functioning of trade unions and political parties. By the end of the 90s, all labor organizations, from the Soviet inherited Federation of Trade Unions to the small militant labor groups formed a united front against the presidential group in power. With the collapse of the national-liberal opposition, trade-unionism became the main protagonist of political struggle in the country, gaining hegemony in the opposition camp. The chair of the Federation challenged Lukashenka in the elections of 2001 but failed. His defeat marked the beginning of the final assault on other organized labor in the country. If the majority of union functionaries had been successfully coopted, the dissident unions formed an alternative alliance, further entrenching in the liberal-nationalist opposition camp. Marginalization in economic life, political sectarianism and the increasing dependence on Western support launched the institutional and ideological transformation of the non-coopted labor movement, turning it into more of a network of NGOs rather than classical trade unions. This process is presented though the story of an informal workers' group in the country's largest automobile factory, their everyday interactions and organizational rituals.

Chapter 4 traces the impact of the short-term contract system and associated policies of labor control on the experience of industrial and service workers engaged in the protection of their rights. Devised in 1999 to keep the bureaucratic cadres loyal to the new passive-revolutionary regime, the fixed-term contract system was henceforth extended to virtually all the employees in every sector of the country's economy. With the onset of crisis in 2009-2011, the system was updated and repurposed as a tool of market disciplining in the conditions of full employment. The flipside of labor market flexibility under the fixed-term system was the immobilization of labor, making it prohibitively hard to quit the job. This set of policies successfully undermined the associative capacity of the workers and neutralized their informal bargaining power, thus solving the conundrum Gorbachev faced during *perestroika*.

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The third section zooms in on the latest stage in the development of the Belarusian passive revolutionary regime, the years of economic crises and geopolitical upheavals that started in 2011. The delayed impact of the Great Recession, the fallout from the war in Donbass and the changes in Russian-Belarusian economic relations forced Belarusian Ceasarism to rekindle its class alliances. Shifting emphasis from the promises of prosperity for 'the people', the ruling elite started looking more favorably at the small and middle entrepreneurs, especially in high-tech sectors, and engaged in an effort to attract foreign investment (esp. China) and normalize relations with the EU. The rest of 'the people' were re-imagined as self-responsible, hard-working and deserving as opposed to the undeserving 'parasites'. The shift in the balance of power to private capital was reflected in the changing fiscal and monetary policies that congealed into a sui-generis form of austerity that relies on state ownership, full employment and labor flexibilization at the same time. This shift in the mode of domination was met with renewed labor resistance, in the forms of wildcat strikes and spontaneous mass protests.

Chapter 5 presents a case study of the largest labor protest among the wave of post-crisis unrest, this chapter reveals the new tendencies in the state policies and labor's response in the wake of the 2011 devaluation shock. The legitimacy of the government, rooted in promises of $500 wages and growing consumption, collapsed after the devaluation crisis of 2011. Organized labor's response was weak, undercut by the systematic bureaucratic pressure from the government and NGO-type attitude to class struggle. The unrest in the '*Hranit*' mining plant testified to the deeply embedded mix of workers' self-perception as entrepreneurial individuals, their unions as NGO-style organizations and the 'moral economic' references to workers' dignity and labor rights.

Chapter 6 is built around a case study of the mass protests in February-May 2017. These protests were a response to the state's effort of repurposing the labor immobilization trend for

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the new austerity regime by adopting the law that would tax the unemployed. Essentially, it was a protest wave rooted in the identification with the image of ‘the people’ used by the Belarusian populist discourse in the previous period of stability. Organized labor was surprisingly active in mobilizing the protestors and organizing the events but refused to recognize the ‘moral economic’ nature of their grievances due to their tenuous alliance with liberal nationalist political actors.

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PART I. *PERESTOIKA* RELAUNCHED

Days into my fieldwork in Minsk[23] I met Stsiapan, a veteran of the Belarusian labor movement and the chair of an unregistered trade union in the Minsk Car Factory. I was going to talk to him about the workers' experience of the fixed-term contract system and, in general, about the labor movement in times of economic downturn, but the first thing I heard after I introduced myself was a brief history of the Belarusian workers' movement, interspersed with nostalgic mentions of the former names of the streets we passed as we strolled through the center of Minsk. Stsiapan's speech seemed to merge class consciousness with national awareness[24]. As we walked towards the central office of the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers (FTUM), Stsiapan recalled how 24 years earlier tens of thousands of workers in their overalls gathered on what was then Lenin square. He finished the story with a semi-rhetorical question: 'When will people take to the street again and smash the government?'

Oftentimes, when I asked a question about the present, I would receive an answer about the past. In the beginning I was puzzled, as I knew little about the country-wide strikes and protests that had shaken the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic in April 1991, given that the existing historical literature mentions them passingly, and specialized studies of Soviet labor movement treat them as a mere episode within the Soviet Union-wide labor unrest (Mandel 1991, 154–66; Filtzer 1994, 108–13). Further conversations with union activists, however, gave me a sense that the memories of the 1991 labor unrest shaped the identity of the

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[23] February 2015.

[24] 'National awareness' (Bel: *natsyianal'naia sviadomasts'*; Ukr. *natsional'na svidomist'*) is a concept used by Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalists to denote an active recognition of the set of values and the historical direction they ascribe to their nation. Opposed to the merely passive 'national identity,' it is somewhat analogous to the Marxist notion of the class consciousness as opposed to the class situation. As I will show later, nationalist idioms are present in the Belarusian opposition labor organization I studied since their emergence in the 1980s.

contemporary Belarusian opposition labor movement, and they haunted my informants' interpretations of and expectations about their current predicament. The 1991 protests kept popping up in my conversations with informants as a foundational and exceptional event: 'Nothing similar happened in the territory of the former Soviet Union[25]'.

Most of my interlocutors' life stories reached a breaking point at the time of the 1991 protests. They belong to the third generation of the Soviet workers, forged in the break-neck urbanization of post-war Byelorussia, mostly employed in industry, highly skilled and educated[26]. Born around the 1950s in villages and starting their professional careers in the 1970s in the cities, they reached their vocational peak during *perestroika,* were politicized in the ideological chaos of *glasnost*, and started a confrontational struggle for their rights as workers in 1991. Either reforming Soviet-inherited unions or establishing alternative ones on the basis of strike committees, they continued the struggle throughout the economic slump of the '90s and the increasingly authoritarian rule of president Lukashenka. Starting with the suppression of the transportation workers' strike in 1995, Lukashenka's government gradually banned, marginalized or coopted these labor organizations, sending their more vocal activists into precarious employment, isolation or to the political margins.

This is also the trajectory of Stsiapan, who co-chaired a strike committee on the Minsk Car Factory in April 1991. The strike committee morphed into a Free Trade Union, rebranded itself as the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers after it was banned in 1996, and a decade later absorbed the activists expelled from the Federation of Trade Unions under the pressure of the

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[25] Interview with A. Bukhvostau

[26] Here I refer to a study of the three generation of Soviet workers performed by Soviet sociologists Gordon and Komarovsky (1986). According to this study, majority of the first generation born around 1910s was mostly poorly educated, doing unskilled physical labor. Have of the second generation born in the 1930s was employed in industry and performed non-manual work. In the last generation, twice as many were involved in non-manual labor as in physical labor. The authors conclude that the late Soviet production system was inadequate to the needs of the young skilled workers and professionals. Due to disbalanced in the internal labor market, many engineers had to perform non-skilled labor lacking auxiliary personnel while poorly trained people could be employed at tasks above their skills. This created poor 'sociopsychological climate'.

presidential administration. Simultaneously with the Free Trade Unions, which were not restricted to a particular branch of economy, the Belarusian Independent Miners' Union appeared on the potash mines of Salihorsk. After the collapse of the Soviet Union it formed the Belarusian Independent Trade Union (BITU), nowadays the largest and most powerful of the opposition unions.

Aliaksandr Bukhvostau[27], Stsiapan's boss and the chair of the republican FTUM, represents a reformist trajectory. In the 1980s he was on a leading position in the Communist Party and in trade-union committees at the Homel Agricultural Machinery Plant (*Homselmash*). With the start of *perestroika*, he took a critical stance towards the official trade union policies and the party, although he remained a Marxist. In 1990, he organized the first large strike in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, and since then he led the semi-independent Union of Agricultural Machine-Builders (ASM) within the Federation of Trade Unions, which opposed Lukashenka together with another FTUB member, the Union of Radio-Electronics Workers (REWU). After the Federation gave in to the president's pressure in 2002 (see Chapter 3), Bukhvostau had to leave his position as ASM's leader and joined forces with his former ideological opponents from the Free Metalworkers' Union, becoming the leader of FTUM in 2012. REWU remained an independent, although small organization.

On the surface, my informants sounded as if they blamed state repressions for their lingering on the margins of Belarusian civil society and revisited their memories of the early '90s as mere nostalgia for the glorious past, both for the nation and for the workers. In line with the liberal-nationalist opposition narrative, they imagine the period between the 1991 protests and the authoritarian turn of the late 1990s as a brief democratic respite when the labor movement flourished, bracketed by Soviet and post-Soviet authoritarianism. In deeper conversations,

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[27] In Russian: Alexandr Bukhvostov. I give the real names of my informants who give consent to this and are publicly visible persons.

however, one of my informants revealed a more nuanced understanding of the relations between the past of the workers' movement and the present of Lukashenka's authoritarianism:

> [Labor protests of 1991 in Byelorussia] raised the importance of the working people in the eyes of power. I think were it not for these events in 1991, we would not have 'Luka' [Aliaksandr Lukashenka] now… What happened in 1994? After these disturbances of 1991 the authorities somehow mutated. Then the Soviet Union collapsed, people reoriented drastically… And Lukashenka popped up in 1994 as an alternative to the powers that be, that is why people voted for him[28].

When I later developed a theoretical framework to understand the evolution of the Belarusian state-capital-labor nexus, I realized that I kept this historical self-understanding of workers on the back of my mind. The following two chapters of the dissertation are dedicated to a theoretically-informed explication of this intuition that I obtained in the field: that there was a continuity between the late *perestroika* and the foundation of the 'Belarusian model' after 1996 and that labor played a central role in it. The first chapter tells the story of the April protests in Byelorussia as the closing episode of *perestroika* in this Soviet republic, a symptom of its intractable contradictions, and a birthplace of the new labor militancy, 'the vanishing mediators' of post-communist transformation. The second chapter centers around the small but very consequential protest of Minsk and Homel transportation workers in 1995, four years after Byelorussian SSR became the Republic of Belarus and a year since it elected its president. If the first chapter closes *perestroika,* the second chapter opens a new political era, which I call neo-*perestroika*.

Although I rely on oral and written memories of my informants, the following two chapters are not a reconstruction of the social memory of the opposition labor movement in Belarus. I use archival sources and secondary literature to reconstruct the political and institutional conditions under which this social memory and the underlying ideologies developed. Therefore, I start

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[28] Interview with Uladzimir, February 12, 2015.

each chapter with an outline of the strategic level of power relations as it existed in the Byelorussian SSR on the eve of 1991 labor protests and in Belarus before the 1995 strike. The mapping of the institutional landscape, first as the 'vanishing mediators' of labor groups and strike committees in 1991 and then as a complex system of trade unions and political organizations in 1995, follow as a tactical terrain where players make their moves and engage in a 'war of maneuvers'. The individual trajectories of my informants meander between these two landscapes, therefore so does my narrative.

Outlining these landscapes demands a theoretical guidance poaching into the field of comparative sociology and political economy. As I announced in the Introduction, I proceed in a dialogue with the liberal realist models of the post-Soviet political divergence. They do a good job of teasing out economic and political 'legacies of the past' weighing over the late-*perestroika* Byelorussia: strongly centralized leadership as opposed to regional and economic fragmentation in the Russian and Ukrainian parts (Gelman 2008, 161–64) combined with weak control from Moscow and the lack of national cleavages to mobilize the political opposition (Way 2016, 44). These conditions prevented the formation of clan-based post-Soviet regimes, akin to those of Russia's and Ukraine's oligarchs, and left '[the resulting political regime] … vulnerable to disequilibrium' (Gelman 2008, 168). Lukashenka simply used the incumbent elite's disorientation to come to power in 1994 and strengthen his coercive capacities in the face of weak opposition while fulfilling his populist program.

This political analysis, however, focuses exclusively on the elites and relegates the rest of the population to the status of a passive resource in the interplay of power struggle on the top. The evidence that I present in this part of the dissertation suggests that the working class was endowed with a much more significant degree of agency than these models assumed. Indeed, the foci of the following chapters are not the structures but the events where my informants

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were key players. The main questions that I pose in each chapter concern their agency: how did these events influence the levels of power? What new structures emerged?

To answer these questions, I analyze the 1991 and 1995 protest events as milestones in the process which I have introduced as a passive revolution previously, to account for the dialectics of 'revolution from above' and 'revolution from below' (Mandel 1992) in the initial stages of the post-Soviet transformation, adding the register of populism as it emerged and circulated between the elites and their challengers.

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Chapter 1. ‘Vanishing mediators’: the 1991 labor protests in Byelorussia

> “The illusion proper to the ‘vanishing mediators’ […]: they refuse to acknowledge, in the corrupted reality over which they lament, the ultimate consequence of their own act”
>
> (Zizek 2008, 185)

‘Byelorussia is the Vendée of *perestroika’*—this scathing verdict, ascribed to famous anti-Stalinist writer Ales Adamovich[29], turned into a cliché matched in popularity only by Condoleezza Rice’s characterization of Belarus as ‘Europe’s last dictatorship.’ Taken seriously, the verdict attributed to Adamovich implies two statements: that *perestroika* was an event comparable to the French Revolution, and that Byelorussia was the place of a counter-revolutionary revolt. This chapter proves both statements wrong. The Communist Party leadership’s attempt to boost the stagnating Soviet economy in 1985 was indeed represented as a return to the true ideals of the October Revolution, but in practice *perestroika* (literally, ‘restructuring’) was a series of reforms and restorations. Byelorussian communists were indeed lukewarm towards Gorbachev, but too weak to openly rebel; Byelorussian workers did rebel, but not for the restoration of Stalinism or Brezhnevism; most of my informants recall that time with affection, as a brief democratic respite. What was *perestroika*, and what was the role of Byelorussian rebellion in it?

Before discussing the labor protests that took place in the last months of the Soviet Union’s existence, I need to outline the structural pre-conditions for this labor mobilization that go back

[29] Although it is a standard attribution in the literature (Ioffe and Silitski 2018, 34), the precise origin of this quote is unknown (Ioffe 2004, 33). A Belarusian national and a supporter of the Belarusian Popular Front, Adamovich thus expressed his frustration with the republic’s inert authorities resisting the rising nationalist movement.

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to the beginning of Gorbachev's project. *Perestroika* had a fundamentally non-revolutionary nature and was conceived along the lines of the post-Maoist China (Miller 2016, 54) in an effort to speed up the faltering economic growth. Its economic essence was to overcome the inherent contradictions of the Soviet mode of production (Ticktin 1992, 14) by moving from the extraction of absolute surplus to the extraction of relative surplus, reducing the inefficient use of inputs, the bad quality of the products and the inefficient use of work time, which would demand more managerial control over the labor process (Filtzer 1994, 4–6).

These measures would demand a skillful balancing act between the partial fulfillment and the partial repression of various social groups: skilled and non-skilled workers, state enterprise directors, ministerial authorities and party elites. Rather than a revolution proper, such a balancing act performed by means of state power with the goal of modifying the existing deficient relations of production under the pressure of the West and of the subaltern population fits the definition of the Gramscian passive revolution (Roccu 2017). And *perestroika,* like the Chinese transformation (Hui 2017; K. Gray 2010), was indeed analyzed as the final stage of the Soviet passive revolution (Van Der Pijl 1993, 256–58) or the beginning of a new one (Simon 2010; Bedirhanoglu 2004). In distinction to these analyses, what interests me here is the role of the workers in this process.

In the first instance, the Soviet working class entered the *perestroika* process passively, as a bargaining chip. Unlike Deng Xiaoping in China, Gorbachev faced a powerful lobby of agricultural, industrial and military managers represented by the conservative faction of the Communist party (Miller 2016). In the Soviet mode of production, ridden with informal bargaining between enterprises and ministries over resources (Clarke et al. 1993, 15), Gorbachev's attempts to cut subsidies to inefficient enterprises and make them responsible for their losses faced vigorous political resistance, and since he did not have the means to crash

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the political opposition to his reforms through violence, he resorted to stick-and-carrot tactics. The stick was the *glasnost* campaign aimed at creating a civil society that would weaken the conservative faction of the party and with it the agricultural, industrial and military lobby whom it stood for. Added to this was the introduction of workers' self-management in the form of the council of workers' collectives (*soviet trudovykh kollektivov* – STK further in the text). Combined with the workers' relative control over their labor process (Ticktin 1992, 13; Filtzer 1994, 6), *glasnost* and the elements of self-management helped overcome workers' atomization and enable self-organization.

Giving workers organizational resources with one hand, Gorbachev created the reasons for their grievances with the other. The mentioned carrot was Gorbachev's 'gamble' to swap large-scale subsidies for agriculture and industry in the short term for an increase in productivity and the appeasement of the conservatives in the long term (the policy of 'acceleration') (Miller 2016, 150). This gamble failed: the subsidies for agriculture and industry did not lead to higher productivity but contributed to the growing budget deficit. Aggravated by the low international energy prices and the short-sighted anti-alcohol campaign, the deficit reached 10% of the Soviet GDP by the end of the '80s (Miller 2016, 145). Printing money to cover it led to food shortages and inflation on the shadow market, which was eating into the workers' real incomes. As the budget was completely spiraling out of control in 1991, the Union's prime minister Pavlov decided to mend the hole at the expense of consumers and ordered to increase food prices. This was precisely what sparked the unprecedented republic-wide wave of strikes and protests in Byelorussia that would become an important contributing factor for its specific trajectory of post-Soviet transition.

Even before Pavlov resorted to austerity, the failure of Gorbachev's gamble led to workers' protests in various parts of the Soviet Union. The last three years of *perestroika* witnessed the

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first mass strikes in the Soviet Union since the 1920s and the emergence of new forms of workers' public sphere. The two largest waves of unrest happened in July-October 1989 and in March-April 1991, affecting mostly the coal mining industry, which employed 2.2 million workers and produced 20% of USSR's energy. These waves brought new forms of workers' self-organization to life, such as discussion groups, strike committees, independent trade unions, and they reshaped the existing Soviet trade unions. Moreover, they also contributed to the drastic reshaping of the political landscape, undermining the Communist Party and boosting nationalists and liberals.

Freedom and deprivation created a vicious circle, as Soviet workers were drawn into the passive-revolutionary bargaining between the Soviet political and technical elites. Poor living and working conditions in coal-mining regions caused by long-term underinvestment in the social infrastructure combined with the 'ministerial feudalism': coal mining enterprises were critically dependent on the subsidies distributed by the USSR's Ministry of Coal because of the low coal prices that neither corresponded to the demand for coal nor covered the productions costs (Siegelbaum 1997, 5). The waves of labor unrest mainly went along the sectoral lines and thus primarily affected coalmining enterprises. This was aggravated by centrifugal tendencies: miners enjoyed prestige and wages among the highest in the country, but the discrepancy between their symbolic prestige and high wages, on the one hand, and the irrationally low revenue from selling coal and the unbearable working and living conditions on the other resulted in the miners' general impression of being neglected by the central authorities. The contrastive case of steelworkers, who showed only sporadic protest activity, sheds light on the miners' condition: steelworkers had better access to consumer goods and because of that they could accept the hegemonic narrative that miners acted in their collective egotistic interests (Siegelbaum 1997, 8; see also Crowley 1997), and did not solidarize with them.

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For Gorbachev, the strike of 1989 was, in his own words, 'the most difficult trial… in the entire four years of perestroika' (cited in Mandel 1991, 51), comparable to the Chornobyl disaster. As it turned out after only two years, he had been too optimistic: the worst was yet to come. And yet, this wave of strikes ended in significant concessions from the central government, in the workers' and regional administrations' growing desire to gain independence from the center and in the formation of the Independent Miners' Union, where Gorbachev's rival Yeltsin gained support.

The anti-Moscow tendencies grew at a tremendous speed both among workers and in the republican governments: in January 1991 Ukrainian mines came under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian coal ministry, which sparked miners' hopes for easier bargaining with Kiev than with Moscow. Directors of Ukrainian mines with the support of local trade unions and working collectives demanded an increase in coal commission prices and threatened to stop supplies. Not satisfied with concessions, Donbass miners started a new strike on March 1, 1991, that spread to Western Ukraine and the Russian part of Donets coal basin. Miners of the Karaganda, Kuzbass and Pechora basins followed with demands of economic and political liberalization.

The constitutive feature of a passive revolution, according to Gramsci, is the deficiency of hegemony. A Bonapartist/Caesarist figure presiding over a passive-revolutionary process relies less on the 'intellectual and moral leadership' than on ad-hoc alliances and coercion. Gorbachev was losing the tools of coercion before he strengthened his hegemony, and, as a consequence, the competing liberal and nationalistic hegemonic projects gained strength. Influenced by them, striking miners' forms of organizations and idioms of resistance traveled to other Soviet Republics, setting the stage for protests in Byelorussia in the spring of 1991.

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1.1. Labor unrest and workers' public sphere in late *perestroika*

The Communist party's 'transmission belt,' the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, had virtually no 'moral and intellectual leadership' among its members. According to the findings of its research department, in 1989 only 4% of them trusted their unions and 3% thought they participated in the management's decision-making through the unions; 95% believed unions needed reorganization and 89% were ready to leave them (Clarke et al. 1993, 62). Strike committees, the main organizational form of the protests, gained the political and moral leadership instead, having proven capable of substituting the state in management, welfare provision and security. Similar to how my Belarusian informants recalled their experience in 1991, a Western scholar of Belarus describes the workers' self-organization that surpasses the celebrated examples of the later 'Occupy' movements:

> The miners occupied the central squares in permanent meeting. Worker detachments maintained order. […] With a few exceptions, the miners assured operations necessary to maintain the mines and continued to ship coal to metallurgical enterprises whose furnaces would otherwise have been ruined. Arguing that they were putting forth demands for the entire community, the miners asked workers in other essential branches not to strike. People began turning to the committees for help in matters such as pension allocations, obtaining telephones, construction and housing repairs, food supply and labor disputes (outside the coal industry) where they had been unable to obtain recourse through the official channels (Mandel 1991, 56).

Nevertheless, like in the case of the protests that would take place in 2011, these episodic mobilizations could not produce long-lasting political structures. The atomization of workers was not fully overcome even within workers' strike committees across different shopsfloors; there were little contacts among workers in different departments and even less among different enterprises; independent workers' organizations were linked through overarching higher level organizations rather than horizontally (Clarke et al. 1993, 64). My informants corroborated this, recalling that cooperation between strike committees on the city and republican level was far from horizontal. Individual enterprise strike committees sent their envoys to a higher level

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(Minsk city and republican) strike committee, which then summarized their demands and sent back recommendations. The unit committees, however, decided on the next move individually and often under the pressure of the management.

The strength of local labor organizations and the weakness of their coordination prevented the emergence of an organic political force able to represent working class interests on the level of the emerging Soviet parliamentarianism. The properly political sphere was dominated by the established Communist party, now split into reformers and conservatives, and the anti-communist intelligentsia groups, ideologically a blend of conservatives, nationalists and radical liberals. Labor could only express their demands on the national political level by allying with one of these forces.

To the extent that the Soviet labor movement remained on the level of economic-corporate organization, two views on the future of the unions prevailed: one option was to turn the existing trade unions into the authentic organs of workers' representation; the other was to create new unions as the old Soviet ones were impossible to transform (Clarke et al. 1993, 62). Although seemingly contradictory, both of these options have been realized and reverberated throughout the history of the Belarusian labor movement: the reformed movement coagulated in the Federation of Trade Unions, represented by the unions of the radio-electronics (REWU) and the agricultural machine-building workers (ASM), while the strike committees gave birth to the Belarusian Free Trade Union (BFTU) and the Independent Miners' Union (IMU). Their current organizational and ideological differences can be traced back to the plethora of workers' and political groups that emerged in the late 1980s.

Early forms of labor organization in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic

In the early and mid-'80s, Byelorussia was not a site of any significant dissident or labor protest activity, and the forms of workers' public sphere alternative to the official organizations had

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been influenced by the processes in other republics, mainly in Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic republics. Later on, however, their protests affected Byelorussia more than any other labor protest affected other Soviet republics (Goujon 2010, 57), and the life stories of my informants reveal how Byelorussian workers moved from atomization and informal bargaining with their bosses to achieve an impact of such scale. The embryonic labor organizations where my informants participated had their foci in the center of the republic, in Minsk and Salihorsk, and in the industrial south-east, in the city of Homel. They differed in social profiles—skilled industrial workers and engineers in Minsk, miners in Salihorsk, machine-builders in Homel—but also in ideological tendencies: radicals prone to set up new organizations in collaboration with the nationalist politicians dominated the center, while reformist unionists loyal to *perestroika* were the majority in the south-east.

The first semi-underground groupuscules of Belarusian workers exposing anti-communist and anti-management sentiments crystallized in the 1980s and relied on a very heterogeneous bricolage ideology coming from Western cold-war propaganda outlets and the re-interpreted official rhetoric. Already in April 1982 a group of people calling themselves SMOT (Free Inter-Professional Union of Laborers) appeared in Minsk (Dolinin 2013). Anatol, a young physicist from Minsk, who would become a prominent labor activist in the '90s, heard about this organization on Radio Liberty and, together with several colleagues, established an underground group called *Soprotivleniye* (Resistance). The group consisted of three activists and around 30 sympathizers[30], and it first engaged in anti-Soviet hooliganism like drawing swastikas on the communist party offices, before planning to set up independent trade unions and protect workers' rights through 'psychological and sometimes physical' influence on the bosses (Rupets and Lvov 2005, 120). Anatol visited the Moscow office of SMOT where he

[30] Personal communication by Anatol, 21.04.2015

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saw a very colorful mix of ideologies: from the Jews preparing to leave the USSR to far-right *Solidarists*, left-wing dissidents and monarchists. They saw themselves as a 'network of molecular revolution[31]' and many were monarchists close to NTS[32] circles.

Although Anatol borrowed a book on a Russian Nazi collaborationist Vlasov in the SMOT Moscow office, he never became an adherent of the far-right or conservative ideology. Throughout the '90s he established contacts with Latin-American left-wing activists from Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, which he sustains until today. In 1986, his group *Soprotivleniye* seized to exist, its members left their workplaces and joined a cooperation movement, while Anatol set up the 'Workers' Solidarity' independent union at his plant in 1990. Some members of the SMOT network became instrumental in setting up other labor organizations, such as the Labor Union (LU) and the Belarusian Independent Trade Union. Anatol's organization would continue to exist informally throughout the 1990s and publish a leaflet called 'Basta!', a source that I use in the next chapter to assess grassroot workers' protests activity.

Until 1991 Anatol worked at the Minsk Instrument Engineering Plant together with Siarhey Antonchyk, a future leader of the 1991 protests and a deputy of the Byelorussian Supreme Council on behalf of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF)[33], a nationalist movement that attempted to mobilize workers' support. According to Russian researchers, in December 1988

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[31] Although this might be a later conceptualization – personal communication by Matsveyenko, 21.04.2015, see also the next footnote.
[32] The National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (Национально-Трудовой Союз российских солидаристов) is a far-right political organization formed in the early 1930s by White Russian emigres and based on the ideas of Christian corporatism. Their fierce anti-communism lead them intro alliances with any possible force opposing Soviet Union, from the inter-war Polish government to Nazi Germany. After WWII they adopted the tactics of 'molecular theory' sending their agents into the territory of USSR in the hope of forming a network of autonomous 'molecules' (cells). Although these 'cells' have regularly been uncovered by Soviet security services, since 1987 some of the NTS members could act legally and even assist in establishing Independent Miners' Union.
[33] Inspired by 'popular fronts' in the Baltic republic, BPF was initially a network of discussion groups. Most of the participants came from academic intelligentsia, mostly with a background in humanities (Goujon 2010, 33). Siarhei Antonchyk, Henadz Bykau and Viktar Ivashkevich were among the few workers in the core circle of the movement and later in the BPF party.

the BPF had more than 200 groups of support, 40% of them in workplaces, and in April 1989 it announced[34] the establishment of the Labor Union of Belarus as a 'network of activists and groups prepared to lead spontaneous mass protests of workers' (Rupets and Lvov 2005, 120). Antonchyk, however, told me that the Labor Union emerged in parallel and without supervision from the BPF, and that they converged later[35]. He recalled that the news about this labor organization was spreading among workers, and they started gathering to discuss their problems without an explicit political program, 'like football fans discussing who scored a goal.' The common sentiment among these workers was that they needed a common identity and the respect seemingly enjoyed by their western colleagues: 'We are workers, nobody respects us. Things are different in the West.'

By the end of 1989, the LU represented 70 enterprises nationwide and probably comprised around 500 workers[36]. It was neither a political proto-party representing workers' interests nor a conventional trade union, although LU declared the goal to form a nationwide workers' association similar to the Polish *Solidarnosc* (Rupets and Lvov 2005, 121). At this stage Viktor Ivashkevich, a loader and one of the founding members of BPF, joined Labor Union. He would coordinate the nationalist movement's interactions with the labor organizations throughout the 1990s (see Chapter 3). As opposed to Antonchyk, who considered the struggle for workers' rights a relatively autonomous activity, Ivashkevich clearly subordinated it to the political goals of the national-liberal opposition (Kviatkouski 2002). Further developments would demonstrate that the latter's view was going to prevail.

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[34] According to a French researcher, BPF started actively working on creating a labor union during the strikes of 1989 (Goujon 2010, 33).
[35] Interview with Antonchyk, 27.03.2015.
[36] Interview with Antonchyk, 27.03.2015.

Labor Union perceived *perestroika* as an attempt to transform Party *nomenklatura* into a financial oligarchy (Rupets and Lvov 2005). A founder of the LU cell at the Minsk Automatic Lines Plant, Henadz' Bykau, mentioned that LU had an explicitly anti-capitalist direction[37] (Pokhabov 2013, 18), although a programmatic document prepared later by the Union's leader Mikhail Sobal[38] uses the anti-communist rhetoric (Konfederatsiia truda Belarusi 1991) characteristic of the contemporaneous Russian 'free trade unions'.

Stsiapan together with a dozen of his colleagues also joined a LU cell in the Minsk Automobile Factory (MAZ), where he was working as a repairman of high-tech industrial machinery. At MAZ they came across LU leaflets that promoted defending workers' rights through the Labor Code and expressed indignation over the activity of the cooperatives. In our interview, he recalled taking part in a protest organized by LU on Minsk's central square in 1990. LU's leadership accused the Minsk city Communist Party committee and the management of MAZ of an attempt of *nomenklatura* privatization: he claimed that the party bosses wanted to establish a bank called *Priorbank*, where they would transfer money belonging to the party, the Car Factory and the Tractor Plant. Around 15 people gathered on the Lenin square to protest against what Stsiapan called a 'Ponzi scheme'. The police promptly arrived to detain them[39].

In March 1991, Labor Union transformed itself to the Confederation of Labor of Belarus (KLB), allegedly having 8000 members (Rupets and Lvov 2005, 121). Although self-presented as a new type of trade union (Konfederatsiia truda Belarusi 1991), it evolved into a hybrid organization dealing simultaneously with labor, political and commercial affairs, the latter getting the upper hand[40]. It gradually started focusing on teaching its members how to be

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[37] Although this may be a later interpretation, since Bykau said this during a discussion organized by a left-wing organization. He did not mention this during an interview with me.
[38] The document is published without an author, but Anatol, who gave it to me, claims that the authorship belongs to M. Sobal.
[39] Interview with Stsiapan, 25.11.2015.
[40] Also corroborated by an interview with Matsveyenka.

entrepreneurs, basically becoming ‘a school of capitalism,’ which repelled many of the workers’ leaders (Rupets and Lvov 2005, 122).

Another focal point of the independent union movement in Byelorussia was the miners’ protest in Salihorsk, a potash mining monotown, which happened in the context of the Union-wide miners’ strike in 1989 (Alfer and Kozlov 2012, 49). During the protest, a group of workers established a club called *Poisk* (‘Quest’) with Ivan Yurgevich as its charismatic and able leader. He was an excellent organizer, established close ties with Sobal’s Minsk group, and was full of contempt for the officially recognized reformist unions (Arestov 2013). Initially, the miners joined the Labor Union[41], but in 1991 they established the first alternative trade-union in Byelorussia, Independent Miners’ Union.

Whereas Minsk and Salihorsk labor groups rejected the officially recognized unions and flirted with nationalist and liberal intellectuals, the south-eastern focal point of the labor movement, Homel, represented a reform path from within the established Soviet organizations. The strike and the series of public protests that started in the Homel Agricultural Machine-Building Plant (*Homselmash*) in 1990 were co-organized by Aliaksandr Bukhvostau, the chair of the plant’s trade-union committee. Bukhvostau called it ‘the first normal strike’, allowed by the new law on the resolution of labor conflicts, and the first one-day warning strike in Byelorussia since WW2[42].

Although the workers’ grievances had to do with the payment of monetary compensation for the people affected by Chornobyl fallout, the so-called ‘coffin money,’ and not with industrial relations, the plant’s trade union committee chaired by Bukhvostau supported workers’ demands and called a conference of the workers’ collectives that authorized the committee to

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[41] Interview with Antonchyk, 27.03.2015.
[42] Interview, 12.02.2015.

lead the strike. Other Homel enterprises joined, the city strike committee was established, and the director of *'Homselmash'* transferred control over the enterprise onto the workers. The city-wide demonstration gathered around 5000 people (Bukhvostov 2016).

This seemed like a dress rehearsal of what would happen in Minsk a year later. The militia and the KGB did not resort to violence. According to Bukhvostau, 'had it happened three years before, we all would have been shot.' He described the situation in Homel as 'triple power': while the Communist party was losing power, city council was gaining it under the pressure of the city strike committee[43]. The city strike committee remained active until April 1991, promptly joining the Minsk protest (Glushakov 2014).

If tactically the Homel strike foreshadowed the Minsk events, strategically it had modest goals: to appeal to the central power and to bargain with the local bosses. In anticipation of the Communist Party conference in Moscow, the Homel strike committee joined by the representatives from Mahiliow[44], an industrial city in Russia, organized a black-coated march to the Soviet capital. Amidst the anti-Soviet protests of Yeltsin's supporters that included trade union activists, a workers' delegation that came to seek protection from the local bureaucrats was received favorably in Moscow. The Belarusians attacked their republic's leaders and signed a favorable agreement with the central governmental commission in Moscow. After the success of Homel workers', the head of the Byelorussian government Kebich congratulated Bukhvostau, who then replied: 'When you stand in front of the door, we open it with a kick. Just wait, we will come to you in Minsk'[45].

In the next section I will analyze how these forms of workers' public sphere were mobilized during the spontaneous protests that erupted in Minsk in the spring of 1991, how they mediated

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[43] Interview with Bukhvostov, February 12, 1990.
[44] Russian: Magilev
[45] Interview with Bukhvostov, February 12, 1990.

between the workers' spontaneous outburst of political passions and the ideologies of the political players, and how they evolved organizationally.

1.2. A hundred thousand on the Lenin Square

> 'Labor cannot form a right-wing movement… That is why in Belarus essentially a left-wing movement promoted right-wing ideas'
>
> Siarhiey Antonchyk[46]

On April 2,[47] 1991 prices in grocery stores rose twofold in the whole Soviet Union. This price hike was part of the unpopular reforms of Valentin Pavlov, who was appointed prime minister of the USSR in January 1991 in an apparent conservative swing of *perestroika*. Pavlov made a belated attempt to patch the tremendous budget deficit of around 30% of GDP, seen as the economic cost of Gorbachev's political attempt to buy the agricultural and industrial *nomenklatura* into accepting market reforms (Miller 2016, 150). The increased costs were somehow to have been covered by workers' existing budgets in a dress rehearsal for further, much harsher austerity measures.

Although Byelorussia fared relatively well during the all-Union economic slump, the decline of its national income by 1.4% in 1990 translated into falling real incomes of the workers. *Belaruski Chas*, a republican newspaper of the Federation of Trade Unions, reported that over the year 1990 '…*kolkhoz* markets prices jumped by 34%... while the income of urban workers and public servicemen crawled by 12%' (Vaskov 1991). In early 1991, the union newspaper had been writing about the uncontrollable increase in consumer prices whilst advertising the

[46] Interview, 27.03.2015.

[47] The popular explanation for this exact date was that the price hike should not coincide with the Fool's Day on April 1 to be taken seriously.

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Federation's demand for a higher minimum wage, and income indexation in an agreement between the trade unions and the Byelorussian Council of Ministers. The newspaper kept threatening that workers were on the verge of an uprising.

Pavlov's price shock was the last straw. According to official calculations, prices were set to grow by 65-70%, but under conditions of food shortages the prices of practically all consumed goods rose 2 to 4 times. Low price categories of goods disappeared from state-owned stores and goods with unregulated prices became even more expensive. One of the participants in the Minsk protests recalled that meat used to cost 2 rubles per kilo, but since April it costed 10 rubles (Pokhabov 2013). Meanwhile, the government suggested a compensation of only 60 rubles, or 24% of the average wage in Byelorussia[48].

My informants recall unanimously that this was what sparked the April protests in Minsk. At the height of the protests the head of the Byelorussian planning agency admitted that the reform angered people because of their perceived relative deprivation and the crumbling legitimacy of the government in tackling the situation (*Narodnaia gazeta,* April 6, 1991). Although occurring simultaneously with the second wave of miners' strikes in other republics, the events in Byelorussia resembled the social and economic demands of the first large labor protest in post-Stalinist USSR in which a June 1962 demonstration was brutally suppressed. In that case it was similarly caused by Union-wide economic reforms resulting in 25-30% increases in the prices of meat and dairy (Kozlov 2009, 415–16). Only that in the Belorussian case, it was the republican capital city that was revolting, and the authorities could not use force to suppress it.

Uniquely for late-*perestroika* labor unrest, the protest started in the capital city of Minsk on April 3, when up to fifty thousand workers laid down their tools and went out on the streets of

[48] Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions reacted mainly by suggesting a raise of monetary compensation for the price hike from 60 to 70 rubles, which turned out to be a ridiculous move when even Minsk enterprises themselves decided on compensations anywhere from 90 to 170 rubles.

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the industrial *Partizan* district. The first walk-out were female workers from the Electro-Technical Plant, who were then joined by workers from neighboring enterprises, including the two giants, Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and Minsk Tractor Plant (MTZ). On the next day, almost all the large plants in Minsk came to a halt, with up to a hundred thousand people in work uniforms gathered in the city's central square, joined by students, BPF activists, and potash miners from the neighboring Salihorsk.

Strike committees were promptly organized and kept the strike simmering for a week while conducting negotiations with the government. The next large demonstration happened on April 10 with up to seventy thousand people in Minsk and was followed by a 2000-strong students' solidarity action on April 12. Similar strikes and protests spread regionally, when the last large events (April 23-24) in Minsk (20 to 40 thousand people) were accompanied by thousand-strong demonstrations in Salihorsk, Zhlobine, Vitsebsk, and the railroad blockade and ten-thousand strong gathering in the town of Vorsha[49] (April 24-25) (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 159–60). The whole wave of unrest likely involved 200 000 people (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 163; Andrew Wilson 2011, 163). The protests were exceptionally peaceful (less than 1% of all protest participants in Minsk in 1990-August 1991 were involved in violence) and they faced little police violence or repression (3% associated with police violence and 14% of participants were arrested, usually for a short term) (Titarenko et al. 2001, 139).

This wave of labor unrest differed from the Soviet protests discussed above in several key aspects. Firstly, it spread throughout all branches of industry from machine-building to mining and transportation, as opposed to sectoral miners protests in Russia or Ukraine. Secondly, it was not localized, although most numerous activities happened in Minsk, relatively large events also took place in all regions, as opposed to the more regionally contained protests in

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[49] In Russian: Orsha

Kuzbass and Donbass. Thirdly, as opposed to the cases of Russia and Ukraine, the labor protests in Byelorussia far outnumbered the purely political demonstrations that never reached a threshold of 5 000 people (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 161).

Distinguishing features and the unfolding of the Belarusian protest

These three distinguishing features demand a more detailed discussion, as they significantly determined the dynamics of the protest and its political impact. The first two of them, the participation of various branches of industry and the nation-wide geographic span, are interconnected and determined by the place that the Byelorussian SSR occupied in the economy and geopolitics of the Soviet Union. Virtually destroyed during the Second World War, Byelorussia received by far the largest amount of investment in fixed assets as compared to other republics, which went into capital-intensive enterprises such as machine-building, radio-electronics, oil processing and the chemical industry, all of which were placed in the intermediate links of the all-Union division of labor and subordinated to the all-Union ministries (Savchenko 2009, 146). The Byelorussian SSR was defined as a single economic zone, lacking pronounced sector or regional specializations or ethnic divisions. By the 1980s the majority of the industrial proletariat worked for companies with over 500 employees, and most of the large processing industry was in Minsk and in the east of the country, while 'company towns' dominated the province (Ioffe 2004, 88).

The fact that Minsk was both the political capital, concentrating intellectual and ideological resources, and the industrial capital, facilitating organizational infrastructure, explains why the protest erupted there. It seemed to have snowballed in conjunction with features of the industrial landscape. On the first day, April 3, it was contained within the *Partizan* district of Minsk, a cluster of large industrial enterprises in the east of the city. A member of SMOT who worked in the Electro-Technical Plant in 1991, recalls the rumors that some enterprises had

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introduced additional compensations for the price increase, and workers started demanding the same from their management[50]. As their line manager refused to discuss the issue, the workers walked out into the courtyard attracting people from other shops; a spontaneous meeting took shape, and people poured out to the street[51]. Walking along Dauhabrodskaya street in the *Partizan* industrial cluster, they were joined by workers from the Cogwheel Plant, the Tractor Plant, and the Minsk Automatic Line plant. Not satisfied with what the high-ranking ministers, who promptly arrived, promised, the workers formed a joint strike committee and formed patrols. The next day, on April 4, *Partizan* district, as it were, reclaimed its name and turned into a guerilla base preparing for a march. From there, it is only an hour's walk to the main square of the city and its constructivist House of the Government.

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[50] Such a measure was actually implemented in the Minsk Automobile Factory, which, upon negotiations between the trade union and the management, agreed on the compensation of 90 rubles by redistributing the share of the profits that they refused to send to the republican budget (*Belaruski Chas,* 1991 March 25: 3). Some other enterprises followed, sometimes with higher increases.
[51] Personal communication by PB, 15.04.2015.

Figure 1. Workers in front of the House of the Government, April 1991 (source: 'Nasha niva,' https://nn.by/)

Directors and management of the enterprises usually did not restrict the worker's activities and in some cases helped them. Some participants recall that officials condoned the protest: the director of the Motor Plant called his workers for a gathering, and the gates of the Minsk Automobile Factory were opened according to an order from the management. Some workers' collectives appealed to factory party committees to lead the strike, but there were no party members who would risk joining workers without the central committees' approval (Charukhin n.d.). Although strike committees were not legally recognized entities, their leaders could position themselves as representatives of the workers' collectives[52]. Officially recognized trade union committees used the start of the protests to push their demands through the Federation

[52] Personal communication from PB, 15.04.2015

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of Trade Unions, that had already started talks with the government (*Belaruski chas,* April 3, 1991).

At the doors of the House of Government, the strike leaders climbed the rostrum that was part of the Lenin monument, which nobody had used before for giving speeches. The people were addressed from this rostrum by the people's deputies of BSSR, mostly from the opposition (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011b). The Communist chairman of the Supreme Soviet Dzemiantsei did not come out, fearing an attack, and the prime minister Kebich tried to talk to the crowd, but was whistled down (*Belaruski chas,* April 4, 1991). A city strike committee was established.

On the third day of the protest, the strike committees started to coordinate their actions and delegated their representatives to the Minsk strike committee and the republican strike committee, which comprised 98 enterprises (Alfer and Kozlov 2012, 7; Golubev et al. 2004, 9). Attesting to the span of the protest and the immense speed of communication, the organizers meeting was attended by around 120 strike committees from more than 15 cities. Sobal, the leader of the Labor Union, was elected the head of republican strike committee. Its task was only coordinating the communication between the strike committees, whereas the right to represent the whole strike movement was delegated to the Minsk strike committee[53].

The unrest quickly spread to other cities and other branches of industry. Having heard about the events in Minsk on April 4, a group of activists started a strike in the *Belaruskali* potash mines in Salihorsk with 2500 participants. The city strike committee gathered on the main city square and elected Ivan Yurgevich and another miners as the co-chairs (Dovnar and Yeroshenia 2011, 27). The strike committee did not include members of the official trade union, and, similar to that of Minsk, workers' militia was formed. Two days into the strike, the Salihorsk

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[53] Belaruski Chas, cited in (Dovnar and Yeroshenia 2011, 25).

Labor Union was transformed into the Independent Miners' Trade Union of Belarus, the first 'new' trade union in Byelorussia/Belarus. The strike and protest actions lasted longer in Salihorsk than in Minsk, until the beginning of May.

The regional span of the protests created tremendous pressure on the government and showed it limited coercive potential. Around the second peak of the protest, around April 10-11, an opposition MP reported that hundreds of special police forces had been brought in from other parts of Soviet Union, waiting in the underground premises of the House of Government (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011a). They had never been used, and neither had the police force. Throughout the negotiations with the governments, the protests ebbed and flowed, with a surge on April 23 and 24 in the capital and in Salihorsk, Zhlobin and Vitsebsk, followed by Maladechna, Barisau, Lida, Homel, Napapolatsk, Vileika and others (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 60). On April 24, workers of Vorsha, a transportation hub of the all-Union importance, demanded to convene the Parliament and threatened to block the Moscow-Paris or Leningrad-Odessa railway lines. That day the head of the parliament Shushkevich invited several opposition members to a Presidium meeting with the head of the Supreme Court, procurator general, KGB chief and the minister of interior, who threatened to use force to disperse workers and to punish those responsible for the strike, which turned out to be a bluff. By the end of the meeting the number of people blocking the railway rose from 20 to several hundred (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2013, 154). On the next day, Antonchyk and the Minsk strike committee asked Vorsha to recall the protest over the fear of clashes with the special police that had arrived on the eve[54].

The organizational effect of the generalized protest was the establishment of new country-wide and cross-industrial trade unions as well as reform of existing unions. Some leaders of the strike

[54] Mikhail Sobal's unpublished notes, available at https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1WzJFoj1qXX_8sRpqK1_tCJ1Oze3sh0o9QYf0Hm_-WS0

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committees went on to lead trade union committees of their organizations within FTUB, but most of these strike committees later morphed into Free and Independent trade unions. Thus appeared the Belarusian Free Trade Union (BFTU), Belarusian Independent Trade Union (BITU, miners and chemical industry workers), and Labor Confederation of Belarus, merging into Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU) on December 13, 1993 (Alfer and Kozlov 2012, 7; Golubev et al. 2004, 9).

The third distinguishing feature of the Byelorussian protest was that the labor mobilization with social demands outnumbered purely political protests. In 1990 and 1991 a third of all protest events were organized by trade unions or strike committees (14% and 19% respectively) but they attracted 80% of the participants in all the protests, while one third of all protests in Minsk organized by the opposition nationalists gathered only 9% of the participants (Titarenko et al. 2001, 142). The labor mobilization, however, was quickly politicized and led by the nationalist politicians. For the first few days (April 3-4), economic demands prevailed, but turned political including ‘de-partyization’ (throwing out of the party committees out of enterprises) and new elections of representative bodies. After the columns of workers appeared on Minsk’s main Lenin square, they had to bestow the representative power to the members of the BPF, since many strike committees were chaired by the members of the Labor Union affiliated with it. The Minsk city strike committee was co-chaired by Siarhey Antonchyk (an MP from BPF, a depute of Minsk city council), Henadz Bykau (member of the BPF council) and Heorh Mukhin (one of BPF leaders). Ivan Yurhevich, the miner, was also a member of Salihorsk council of BPF (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011b).

But this did not represent a flawlessly united block. If we compare the labor demands accepted on the meeting of April 4 to those put forward by the BPF in the parliament, we will see that initially workers did not press to implement major changes including the new citizenship law,

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private property on land, or changes to its constitutional status and other laws directed towards establishing political autonomy from Moscow. Although workers demanded the resignation of all-Soviet authorities, they called for elections only for the Byelorussian parliament (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011a). Understandably so, since 83% of Belarusians voted for preservation of the Soviet Union in the March 1991 (Andrew Wilson 2011, 150).

Moreover, rank-and-file participants of the protests were far from uniformly indoctrinated by liberal nationalism. A deputy head of the Cogwheel Plant strike committee, who was not a member of BPF, recalls[55]:

> Sometimes it was scary on the [Lenin] square, when there were hundred thousand people [on April 4]. There was a division: some stood with red and green flags [of the Byelorussian SSR], some with white-red-white flags [nationalists]. People insulted each other… Militia officers disappeared. It almost came to a fight. And we were freaking out standing between the two sides: some thirty-forty thousand on one side, some seventy thousand on the other. If there had been a fight, we would have been beaten by both (laughs).

Some workers reacted negatively to BPF both on the central square and on the shop floor. Thus, Navumchyk recalls that after having started his address to the protesters on the Lenin square, he heard people shouting 'Speak Russian!' (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2013, 514). A shop foreman from Electro-Technical Plant recalls that although the general attitude to BPF was negative, there were white-red-white flags on the shop floor, which the Party Committee had demanded to be taken down[56]. During a strike committee meeting of the Electro-Technical Plant, one of the workers was indignant that there were BPF flags in the protest. A representative from the plant's strike committee retorted that 'BPF helps us. And there are not only them (…). We do

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[55] Interview, 12.02.2015.
[56] Personal communication of PB, 15.04.2015.

not repel anyone. But no party should be able to bring us under control'[57]. Some strike committee members did not like attempts of BPF deputies to lead the protests saying 'You are politicians, we are workers' (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011a).

On the other side, the BPF politicians both on the party level and on the other level of workers' organizations were caught by surprise by the events of April 3. They were not ready for the protests either ideologically, or organizationally. When the workers organized their first thousand-strong meeting in the *Partizan* district, Mikhail Sobal, the leader of the Labor Union, tried to talk to the crowd, but the workers did not want to listen, they whistled at him as for some of them the word 'union' in the name of his organization has negative associations with untrustworthy bureaucrats[58]. Sobal, on his part, feared that the workers' protest might be a provocation from the KGB and tried to stop them from going to the city center[59].

Signaling the indifference of the party leadership, in early April, the BPF leader and chief ideologist Zianon Pazniak was in Northern America, invited by the US and the Canadian diaspora to promote the independence of Byelorussia against prevailing opinions in the White House, which at the time, supported Gorbachov. Pazniak wanted to return upon hearing about the protests but decided not to as he would be late anyway (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011a). He thought that the momentum of the protest would last for two days at best and there was no reason to return 'when the fire was extinguished' (Vashchanka 2007, 40). Even after BPF members managed to portray themselves as representatives of the protest, one of the Front's leader admitted that 'what is happening now, is unexpected for us' (quoted in Charukhin n.d.).

A BPF Minsk city council member recalls that when she was asked to lead the workers' delegation to the city council on April 4, neither she nor everyone else could offer a plan of

[57] METZ strike committee meeting minutes, 12.04.91.
[58] Personal communication by Anatol, 15.04.2015.
[59] Interview with Antonchyk

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further action or a set of political demands (Vashchanka 2007, 41). Workers who spoke from the city council rostrum only complained about material difficulties and put forward no political demands. As she comments, 'they were not prepared', which probably testified to a lack of propaganda work on the part of BPF organizers. She was disappointed by the impotence of the political leadership: 'It was very painful to see how the chance disappears… The strike showed to everyone (although not 'everyone' probably 'saw' it) that only large masses of people themselves were not enough to do something. We needed a big idea to fight for, that would unite us, a man who would lead and who would be accepted (…). Workers were waiting to a call to action (…) It seemed that time stopped. Nobody knew what to do' (Vashchanka 2007, 42).

To summarize, the Byelorussian protest of the spring of 1991 combined organizational strength of the labor movement with a deficient hegemony of political forces that claimed to represent it. The grass-root workers' leaders remained on the level of economic-corporate interests, capable of articulating the immediate economic interests of the workers, but unable to elevate these interests into a coherent ideological picture and represent itself at the political level. From the other side, the liberal-nationalist politicians failed to establish a full moral and intellectual leadership in the workers' public sphere, thus missing a chance of spreading this hegemony to the whole of society. These conclusions lead us to the question of the ideological field of the Byelorussian *perestroika*.

Diverging populist idioms

The ideological struggle during *perestroika* can be described within the framework of a 'thin ideology' of populism that pitches the 'pure' people against the 'corrupt' elites (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). As I showed earlier in this chapter, Gorbachev had to combat the nomenklatura lobby resisting his economic reforms by resorting to the policies of *glasnost*.

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Glasnost and the redistribution policies were essentially Gorbachev's form of populist politics (Matsuzato 2004), pitting the 'Soviet people,' a super-class entity already constructed by Stalin (Brandenberger 2010) and Khrushchev (March 2017, 1:268), against the calcified communist elites. Being ideologically 'thin', however, populism can be filled with various 'substantial' ideologies, from nationalism to 'market bolshevism'. Having opened the populist ideological space and moving away from the Bolshevik elitism, Gorbachev inadvertently invited his contenders to play this game. Thus, *perestroika* populism facilitated contestation for the notion of 'the people' among the newly forming political groups.

I discern three forms of anti-communist populism in the late '80s that continued in various forms throughout the '90s in Belarus: the national-liberal, workerist and reformist. The nationalist-liberal movement, which was initially called 'Belarusian Popular Front for *Perestroika* – Revival', came up with its own construction of the people as a primordial nation, stressing its suffering under the Soviet regime, as epitomized in *Kurapaty* mass executions and the Chornobyl disaster (Goujon 2010). The worker's movement had its own vague populist ideology, partially influenced by the national-liberal populism, partially by the reformist wing of the Federation of Trade Unions, appealing to its 'toiling people' constituencies and stressing the corrupt and exploitative nature of the (ex-)communist elites. Strike committees in 1991 readily accepted the populist rules of the game, criticizing the party for betraying the working people. This trope was common both for the liberally oriented labor groups inspired by the Polish *Solidarnosc*, and the dissidents within the old Federation of Trade Unions. The third trend would coalesce around various reform groups within the communist party that would find its leader in Aliaksand Lukashenka, then a young provincial member of the Byelorussian/Belarusian parliament and a *perestroika* enthusiast.

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The workerist idiom can be summarized by the phrase 'robbery of the people,' contained in the statement of the protesters[60] adopted in front of the House of the Government on April 4. This statement, as the workerist populism itself, consisted of the mix of *perestroika* ideological languages through which workers tried to formulate their demands. This document, speaking in the name of the disgruntled workers, lays the blame for the crisis on the Communist party that 'has led us to economic disaster and now wants to keep its power over us at our expense'. The Party's assertion that the latest decision (i.e. raising prices) is the way to the market economy is, according to the workers, 'a robbery of the people.' The blame extends to the president of USSR, its government and Supreme Soviets of the USSR and Byelorussia because they are 'stooges of the Communist Party'. The document denounces the Party's understanding of the market economy and states that the '[m]arket is welfare and fare wages, not poverty'.

Complementing the Minsk proclamation, 'Demands of the Striking Workers' Collective of Salihorsk' (Dovnar and Yeroshenia 2011, 34–35) oppose these 'robbed people' or 'honestly laboring men' to the 'narrow elite circles' and 'speculators'. The preamble of the document is rich in Marxist rhetoric denouncing the limitation of workers' social and economic rights and stressing the newly emerging inequalities caused by the introduction of market relations. According to the document, *perestroika* resulted in economic disaster, inflation, inequality, redistribution of the means of production in favor of 'narrow elite circles' that whitewash illegal capital and invest it into 'associations, joint enterprises, cooperatives, commercial banks.' As a result, 'incomes of honestly laboring men are insultingly meagre in comparison to the super-incomes of the speculators (*spekulianty*) and various businessmen' and 'everyday honest labor in the public industry is being discredited economically and morally'.

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[60] Reproduced in (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 159–60)

The workerist opposition between ‘the (honestly laboring) people’ and ‘the (predatory) elites,’ as it is clear from the above documents, was articulated with the fight for the meaning of the market transformation. The first slogan the Minsk protesters used on April 3 was ‘market wages for market prices!’ (*Belaruski chas,* April 3, 1991) was an effort to appropriate the dominant pro-market discourse. Workers of the late Soviet Union understood market economy as the end of inequality in redistribution, when everyone would have access to the same shop and same goods (Kotz and Weir 1997, 128–29). This was an oppositional reading (Hall 1980) of the dominant *perestroika* discourse that demanded realization of the egalitarian ideas of the declared socialist system through the means of naturalized market model, that would include ‘people’s privatization,’ ‘fair price of labor power,’ ‘proper function of trade unions’. Condemnation of the morally apprehensive uses of the market from this workerist perspective logically follows from this oppositional reading, leading to fear of ‘*nomenklatura* privatization’ and ‘speculators.’

This idiom of the ‘people’s market’ was taken up on the level of organized labor and used by the trade unions to gain trust. Siegelbaum (1997, 13) claims that market reform ideology was supported by AFL-CIO advisers from Free Trade Union institute, which invited Soviet activists on trips to the US (Siegelbaum 13). Thus, Sobal, leader of the Confederation of Labor that would turn to ‘a school of capitalism,’ boasted about his trip to the US (*Belaruski chas,* February 18-25, 1991). Bukhvostau, in a programmatic article about the authentic role of trade unions (*Belaruski chas,* May 6, 1991), complained that ‘ignoring the law of commodity production led… into a deadlock,’ but with the coming of market relations trade unions should recover their genuine function of ‘protecting the price of labor power.’ These tendencies of an explicitly celebrating market relations or naturalizing them would continue in the further history of Belarusian labor movement.

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As I showed above, liberal-nationalist networks had been instrumental in establishing organizational resources for the workers mobilization. In many cases the core of the strike committees were members of the Labor Union of Belarus, an organization related to the Belarusian People's Front, although in several Minsk factories the protest was led by the members of SMOT, a more 'workerist' and militant group and many strike committees had been formed on the basis of trade-union organizations, less influenced by BPF. This organizational basis led to an uneasy interaction between the workers' and the national-liberal versions of the populist idioms.

BPF's national-liberal populism, initially supportive of *perestroika,* gradually moved to treat the whole communist party including Gorbachev as a 'corrupt elite' suppressing the primordial Belarusian people. BPF's radical wing embraced anti-communist and nationalist ideology, stressing the corrupt *nomenklatura* supposedly bracing for privatization for themselves and perverting market reforms. Although BPF's ideologists had little to say about economic reforms or welfare instead focusing on cultural and religious 'revival' of what they imagined as a primordial Belarusian nation, they initially tried to appeal to workers as a weapon against the communist elites. BPF's leader Zianon Pazniak wrote in 1991 under the impression of the workers' protests: '[P]eople should help to conduct de-partyization, i.e. labour collectives should disband the Communist Party structures…' (quoted in Bohdan 2011, 102).

A letter of support to the striking workers by Vasil Bykau[61], a famous Soviet and Belarusian writer and a co-founder of BPF, features a telling vocabulary mix that expressed the interaction of the labor-populist and the nationalist-liberal idioms (quoted in Siarhiey Navumchyk 2013, 143). He directs his support to 'the working class of Minsk that heroically shows its workers' solidarity in achieving the goals of all the people, in a fight for a piece of bread, democracy

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[61] Russian: Vasil Bykov

and *glasnost'*. The first part of the sentence reads like a typically Marxist jargon suggesting the unity of the particular (class) and general (people) interests; the second part reveals the koine *perestroika* language. The letter, however, ends with a recognizable nationalist trope denouncing the 'predatory measures of the Center [i.e. Moscow]' and the greetings 'May God help you! Long live Belarus!'.

Although sometimes forced to use class-based rhetoric, nationalist intellectuals harbored distrust to the workers' common sense. One of BPF's leaders Navumchyk relates that workers were not considered 'BPF audience' (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2013, 514). Thus, philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich said that protests were caused by 'anxiety for the dissolution of the Soviet Union' and for 'unbridled democracy', and Pazniak paradoxically used the political situation in such a way that protesters were standing under white-red-white flags. In another speech he assessed the strike as 'first of all a powerful protest against *perestroika*, reforms, the approaching crash of the Soviet Union, liquidation of socialism and imposition of democracy, a protest that the Belarusian Vendée could not (…) formulate then' (quoted in Siarhiey Navumchyk 2011a).

These ideological clashes further weakened the political hand of the opposition and undermined labor's ability to form an organic political expression of the workers' interests. This led to a situation in which the political impact of the workers' mobilization was indecisive, strong enough to undermine the existing ruling elite but too weak to give birth to an alternative project. In the cleavage between, as I will show at the end of the next sections, the third trend of populism will gradually gain power.

1.3. The political impact of the April protests

After we have seen what distinguished the Byelorussian protests and their political context from those in the rest of the Soviet Union, we need to briefly return to Gorbachev's faltering

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passive revolution so as to assess the political impact of this protest on the macro-scale. To recap, Gorbachev tried to use popular grievances to justify his passive-revolutionary project of market reforms but eventually lost control both of the mass unrest and of the direction of the political process. In 1990 he was trying to preserve the unity of the elite by acting as a Caesar-arbitrator between the programs of market extremist Yeltsin and the more conservative Ryzhkov, but in December 1990 he made a move to the right by appointing conservatives Pavlov and Pugo to the posts of the prime minister and interior minister respectively, and authorizing a violent crackdown on the protests in the Baltic countries. The perceived conservative threat pushed the striking miners in Russia to support Yeltsin (Filtzer 1994, 107), and Pavlov's innovations sparked the protest in the Byelorussian SSR.

The second wave of Russian miners' strikes in March-May 1991, that coincided with the labor unrest in Byelorussia, eventually thwarted Gorbachev's attempt to consolidate the party elite and catastrophically accelerated the centripetal political and economic tendencies. The central government's economic concessions to the Russian miners in April 1991 did not satisfy them, the strike stopped only after the miners concluded agreements with the republican authorities. It was Yeltsin, now Gorbachev's radical opponent and the chairman of Russia's Supreme Soviet, who used the miners' support to win the newly established Russian presidency and call for the resignation of the Soviet leader, saying that 'in Gorbachev's character there is a striving for absolute personal power' (Mandel 1991, 136). In return, an extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies convened to depose Yeltsin as its chairman, which was followed by pro and contra rallies (according to Mandel 1991, 136–37). The miners' strike committees mobilized to reinforce the pressure from the 100 000 demonstrators in support of Yeltsin in Moscow, who gathered in spite of Gorbachev's prohibition. Thus, Yeltsin succeeded in keeping control over the Russian parliament as its speaker and in imposing the post of President which he occupied (Kotz and Weir 1997, 135–36).

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Meanwhile in Ukraine, the miners in Donbas supported the republic's independence from Moscow. They failed to find a political representative in the government in Kyiv or to create an alliance with nationalist political forces, but became a resource for Ukraine's communist-turned-nationalist leader Kravchuk to bargain with Moscow. Soon the blood-sucking enemy, in the eyes of Donbass workers, moved from Moscow to Kyiv, and the miners' desire of the economic autonomy was invested into an alliance with the regional Donbass elites (Siegelbaum 1997, 21).

Labor militancy was one of the principal factors behind the conclusion of the so-called 'nine-plus-one agreement' that reinstated the Gorbachev-Yeltsin alliance on new terms. On April 24, 1991 Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, and the nine leaders of its republics including Yeltsin, already the president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, agreed on 'Immediate Measures for the Stabilization of the Situation in the Country and Overcoming the Crisis,' that provided for a new Union agreement between the Soviet republics in six months. Apart from the political arrangement, it introduced 'a special work regime' in the basic branches of industry, that prohibited strikes and 'sounded very much like martial law' (Mandel 1991, 163). If the miners' strike committee initially perceived this as a betrayal, Yeltsin pacified them by subordinating Russian mines to the Russian coal ministry and promising them economic independence. As a consequence, Russian mines stopped the strike in May 1991.

Thus, in Gramscian terms, the Russian liberal-nationalist political opposition, spearheaded by Yeltsin, succeeded in imposing its moral, intellectual and political guidance over the newly emerged labor movements; in turn, this subverted Gorbachev's passive revolution by disintegrating the state power on which he relied. In Byelorussia, the relation of forces was different.

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The members of the Communist Party of Byelorussia were terrified by the labor protests and disoriented by the lack directions from Moscow. The post-war generation of Belarussian communist managed to attract unprecedented investment into the republic in exchange of loyalty and upwards mobility to the Moscow party and state apparatus, which prevented the formation of regional networks and autonomist tendencies like those in the Ukrainian or Russian parts of USSR but also deprived the party of local initiative (M. E. Urban 1989, 10–15). Their 'theoretical and ideological organ,' the newspaper '*Kommunist Belorussii'* ('The Communist of Byelorussia') had nothing meaningful to say about the protesters apart from the inadequate promises of the 50% wage increase by the end of the year and the threats of legal punishment for attempts to expel party organizations from the factories (Chyzhova 2008, 13). The party officials, parroting Moscow, promised a prompt resolution of the crisis through 'the faster renewal of the economy along the market foundations' and 'the unfettering of economic relations facilitated by the ideas behind the prices reform and the development of the market' (quoted in Charukhin n.d.). Right after the beginning of the strike the Communist head of the Supreme Soviet Mikalai Dzemiantsei[62] abandoned his post for health reasons, while the communist party boss Malafeiau failed to secure Moscow's permission to introduce a state of emergency (Andrew Wilson 2011, 149).

The BPF faction in parliament sensed their enemies' weakness and sought to use their claims of representing the workers' indignation to mimic Yeltsin's maneuver against Gorbachev. But the Byelorussian nationalists' representation in parliament was nothing compared to that of Russian liberals, and they had no one comparable to Yeltsin as the chair of parliament. BPF supported liberal intellectual Stanislau Shushkevich for the function of parliament chairman, hoping he would then return the favor, but he mostly dragged his feet. Thus, on the 19th of April

[62] In Russian: Nikalai Dementei.

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members of the Supreme Council Presidium met with representatives of the striking committees and BPF to tell them that the economic demands would be met, but refused to discuss the political demands BPF pushed for (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2013, 146).

Encouraged by the BPF Supreme Soviet deputes, the workers' representatives pressed political demands: new elections and the declaration of independence. Hoping that the Vorsha blockage would back his cause, Antonchyk insisted on convening the Supreme Soviet meeting to rush through the bills already prepared by BPF, but Shushkevich, unexpectedly turning to the threats of forceful dispersal of the strike in Vorsha, ignored this demand. When the parliament's session eventually started on the 21st of May almost no one from the Presidium supported BPF's political demands. The Supreme Council considered the introduction of the post of president and a project of union agreement, without mentioning the declaration of sovereignty, new elections to the parliament, or the rest of BPF's political demands (Siarhiey Navumchyk 2013, 173). Meanwhile, given the economic concessions, the intensity of the strikes subsided, although the strike committees continued to exist in a stand-by mode.

The post of the president was never supported in the parliament, and the communist leader Malafeiau, who hoped to become a president, was completely discredited after the failed August putsch. This coup attempt was a conservative effort to subvert the signing of the new union agreement, which was in preparation throughout the summer, but since the conservatives failed miserably, they only precipitated the disintegration of the USSR. Ukraine and Russia forced the break-up, and Byelorussia/Belarus had nothing left but to host a meeting where the leaders of the three countries signed an agreement that invalidated the Soviet Union agreement of 1922 and established a Commonwealth of Independent Nations.

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Table 2. Comparison of the 1991 labor protests and their political outcome in the three Soviet republics

	Byelorussia	**Russia**	**Ukraine**
Economic distribution of the protests	Mining and the main manufacturing industries	Mining	Mining
Geographic distribution of the protests	Country-wide, centered in the capital	Kuzbass, Pechora	Donbass
Political allies	Liberal-nationalist minority in the parliament	Liberal parties, head of the Russian parliament then Russian president	Regional economic and political elites
Political outcomes	Collapse of the communist elites, parliamentary republic with fragmented groups, no radical market reforms	Strong pro-liberal president with a communist opposition, radical market reforms	President mediating between fragmented elites, gradual market reforms

The disorientation of the Byelorussian communist party lacking signals from Moscow and discredited by the workers' protests at home as well as BPF's inability to take initiative politically or ideologically opened the door for a third force. This would be expressed in a third variety of *perestroika* populism and find its leader in Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

During *perestroika*, Lukashenka's upwardly mobile trajectory pushed him to support Gorbachev and the reform-minded part of Byeloarussian *nomenklatura,* thus adopting an anti-establishment discourse. As the head of a state farm in the late '80s, he had experimented with brigade subcontracting to increase labor productivity and joined a Byelorussian team of reformers keen on introducing market relations in farms. He attended a meeting with Gorbachev dedicated to reforms in agriculture and would later brag about Gorbachev noticing his suggestions (Feduta 2005, 34). Later he participated in a debate about the proto-neoliberal

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500 Days' Program[63] held at Gorbachev's office. Gorbachev, allegedly, invited Lukashenka to speak, and the latter said that turning against the BPF one can't reform a country's economy in 500 days—at best one *kolkhoz*. Gorbachev appeared to agree (Sheremet and Kalinkina 2003)[64].

These meetings encouraged Lukashenka to run for the elections to the All-Soviet Congress of Deputies on an anti-establishment platform, bashing the corruption and the conservatism of his district's elites. He lost with a slight margin in a dirty campaign staged against him by Viacheslav Kebich, the chair of the Byelorussian central planning agency. Their stand-off would repeat in 1994, with Lukashenka winning the presidency in a landslide. Meanwhile, Lukashenka was elected to the Byelorussian Supreme Soviet in 1990, where he drafted laws on private property and organized the splinter group 'Communists of Byelorussia for Democracy' in parliament. There, he tried to join every faction and used every occasion to stress that he represented 'the opinions of his voters' (Feduta 2005, 52).

When in May 1991 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Byelorussia came forward with a proposal to institute the presidency (for its general secretary) and impose a state of emergency as a response to workers' protests, Lukashenka wrote a famous article levelling severe criticism of the authoritarian anti-*perestroika* tendencies within the Communist party (Lukashenko 1991). In conspicuous contrast to the rest of the MPs, Lukashenka together with the 33 members of the 'Communists of Byelorussia for Democracy' group, urged the parliament to support Gorbachev during the failed August putsch (Ioffe 2014, 125). Although not happy with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he would then lead the independent Belarus

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[63] The program contained radical market reforms of the Soviet economy, including recognition of private property, mass privatization (in a hundred days), price and trade liberalization etc. It was developed by Grigori Yavlinsky, deputy prime minister of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, in the summer 1990, and was favored by Boris Yeltsin. Gorbachev rejected the program but included some of its proposals into an alternative projected developed by the head of the Soviet Council of Ministers Ryzhkov.

[64] Some authors express doubts as to the significance of these meetings, given Lukashenka's habit to exaggerate. Gorbachev, however, would later recall both meetings with Lukashenka, call him a progressive director and appreciate how he behaved in the last years of USSR, still remaining faithful to the idea of the Union (Gorbachev 2011).

and take up Gorbachav's passive revolution, avoiding his mistakes. The labor movement would unwittingly help him in this endeavor, at a bitter cost.

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Chapter 2. From chaos to populism

In the previous chapter I showed that the labor unrest which swept the Byelorussian SSR in 1991 partially determined this country's post-Soviet transformation. Labor organizations leading the protest were strong enough to delegitimize the Communist Party, but their political allies too weak to establish a Yeltsin-style market-fundamentalist coalition. Simultaneously, the organized labor tapped into popular anti-establishment sentiments and formulated a populist agenda expressed in a mix of a pro-market and a working-class rhetoric. It failed, however, to create an independent political force that would represent workers' economic interests, while the liberal-nationalist political group, with whom the new labor movement formed an alliance, lacked either popular support or a firm standing in the parliament or the government. This paradoxical bloc of economically strong organized labor and politically weak liberal-nationalist politicians would persist during the brief parliamentary republic of 1991-1994 and, as I hypothesize, create preconditions for the rise and success of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's presidency. This chapter is dedicated to the pro-democracy labor movement's unwitting contribution to the rise of authoritarian populism.

The person whom I perceived as an epitome of this paradox of the Belarusian labor was Siarhey Antonchyk, a leader of the national strike committee, an MP from the BPF group in the parliament, and the arch-nemesis of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in 1994. I sought to meet him immediately upon starting my fieldwork in January 2015, and it was the circumstances of our first encounter that led me to the idea of the present chapter.

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Through the contacts in the Belarusian Free Trade-Union I acquired Antonchyk's phone number, and we agreed to meet at a presentation of a book about the early 1990s[65]. The presentation took place in a headquarter of the BPF, by now a marginal political movement, hidden in a basement of a block of flats. The book's author Siarhey Navumchyk, a former member of parliament from BPF who was granted political asylum in the US, spoke via internet video provided by Radio Free Europe. He recalled an episode from August 1995, a year after Lukashenka became the president of Belarus, when his colleague lawmaker Antonchyk disappeared during a violent crack-down on a metro workers' strike. Illegally detained together with other labor activists by the special police force, he spent a night in a secret detention center in spite of his parliamentary immunity. He was released after Navumchyk and his colleagues threatened to announce to the media that Belarusian president committed a political murder.

As I dug deeper into the history of that metro workers' strike of August 17-21, 1995, I realized that it signaled a turning point in Belarusian political development during the first post-Soviet decade. On the one hand, the strike continued the previous trend of labor militancy, inaugurated by the protests of 1989-1991 and sharpened throughout the early 90s. Caused by Belarusian workers' grievances over the disastrous economic consequences of the post-Soviet transition, directed at the state as the main employer, the 1995 strike tested growing mobilization capacities and the representative nature of the new and old trade-unions, which cooperated in organizing it. On the other hand, as the first instance of violence against workers and labor organizations, it foreshadowed further stand-offs between organized labor and state-employers, characterizing the failure of a broader workers' solidarity, labor leadership's numerous

[65] Siarhey Navumchyk's 'Ninety-Five' (Siarhey Navumchyk 2015) is part of a five-book series about the years 1991-1995 in the political development of Belarus, published by the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

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miscalculations in ideological and political domains, and repressive tendencies of the newly established regime.

What made possible such a daring protest event, which paralyzed traffic in the two largest Belarusian cities, given the economic slump was milder in Belarus than in its neighboring countries? What made the newly elected and immensely popular president, who came to power on pro-labor promises, resort to unprecedented violence? Answering these questions, I will analyze this event as a critical junction in the evolution of the post-Soviet Belarusian social formation on several levels: firstly, the structural level of economic transformations and changes in the state's welfare policies; secondly, within the development of labor organizations and, broader, workers' public sphere; and, finally, in the field of ideological and organizational political struggle.

My hypothesis is that what appears as the first populist rule in post-Soviet space was a form of what Gramsci called 'Caesarism,' a personalist contingent resolution of a system crisis. I argue that the workers' public sphere and protests, ignored or blackboxed by many liberal scholars of the Belarusian political regime (Way 2016; Gelman 2008), contributed to the unique path of transformation taken by Belarusian society by affecting the behavior of the elites, contributing to a class cleavage in society and creating a fertile ground for populist claims. Thus, the labor movement played a crucial role in preparing the ground for an authoritarian populist Caesarism, and had to be eliminated as an autonomous force capable of contending for power.

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2.1. Catastrophic equilibrium

The failure of legitimacy of the communist elites in the last year of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, analyzed in the previous chapter, prepared the conditions for a social and political stand-off in the next three years. The ensuing interregnum, characterized by an atomized political field, political elites deficient of legitimacy, a disrupted economy and a

militant labor movement, was a 'catastrophic equilibrium' (Gramsci 1971, 219), where none of the classes and social groups were able to gain the upper hand. While nationalist and liberal ideologies remained unpopular and the labor militancy pressed for welfare demands, political struggle was waged on the terrain of populism, where various agents seeking political influence competed for popular support through appeals to various interpretations of the 'people'.

The form this unstable equilibrium took was an atomized political sphere. As opposed to Russia and Ukraine, Belarus entered its independence without a president. Its parliament was elected in 1990, which made its legitimacy questionable after gaining independence. The labor protests, the putsch attempt, and the resulting ban of the Communist Party disintegrated the former communist elite, divided it into weak, ideologically confused and disorganized groups. Their sworn enemies, the liberal-nationalist Belarusian popular front, remained a 'minority counterculture' (Way 2016) with only 8% of the votes in the 1990 elections, but with a disproportionate influence in the parliament, claiming the capacity to mobilize thousands on the streets and having influence on the labor movement. The resulting political arrangement was unstable (Gelman 2008, 168), where 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci 1971, 276).

Two outcomes of this instability could have been possible: a post-*nomenklatura* dictatorship of the Central Asian type or a 'chaotic mode of domination' (Nazpary 2002, 5), emergence of oligarchy under an ex-communist tutelage of the Ukrainian or early Russian flavor. The latter option was slowly in the making. As the MPs lacked expertise and were unable to implement laws (Eke and Kuzio 2000), the government's head Viachaslau Kebich tried to subdue the parliament. Benefitting from social unrest and the political elite fragmentation, he decided not to build 'a party of power,' but to capture the state through an enhanced control over the economy and the support of the self-interested regional state officials (Feduta 2005, 61).

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However, the political economic correlate to the ‘chaotic mode of domination’ (Nazpary 2002, 12–13), ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) of public property in the hands of the industrial-financial cliques, as happened in Ukraine under the tutelage of its first post-communist president (Bojcun 2015), was problematic for Belarusian elites. Soviet-inherited large-scale industrial enterprises accounted for 70% of the assets and 60% of the profits in the Belarusian economy (Isayonak and Chyzhova 2015, 37), but due to Belarus’ former position in the all-Union division of labor, when the republic highly depended on raw material supplies and exported 80% of its production (Ioffe 2004, 88), these highly efficient and technologically advanced companies were integrated in the middle links of the all-Union chains of production. Consequently, their functioning depended on the state’s sustenance of international economic ties, and privatization attempts opened an opportunity for the emerging Russian oligarchs to enter Belarusian markets and politics.

Thus, adding to the unstable equilibrium, the Belarusian emerging capitalist class was economically weak and, as a result, weakened politically. After the law on privatization was passed in 1991, only 250 firms, mostly small companies that belonged to municipalities or the republican authorities, were privatized within the next two years, primarily bought out by their labor collectives or renters (Isayonak and Chyzhova 2013, 128). Big and strategically significant enterprises remained in state ownership, often coexisting in a form of state-private partnership, like the state-owned Minsk Automobile Plant that by 1992 was surrounded by around 40 private small firms (Isayonak and Chyzhova 2013, 129).

Organized labor as a disruptor

This state-controlled economic empire sustained one of the most skilled and proportionally numerous working classes in the post-USSR. When the economy went into recession, resulting in many enterprises cutting working weeks to two or three days (Ioffe 2004, 90), workers were

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indignant. If many of the key political players lacked strong organizations and resources, organized labor showed considerable strength throughout the early 90s, constituting a complementary factor that prevented the 'enclosure of the commons,' added to the political unstable equilibrium and strengthened populist anti-corruption sentiments. From the shop-floor to the parliament, it managed to organize industrial actions, mass protests and influence political decisions.

This is evidenced by the fact that mass demonstrations with social demands in 1992-1995 mobilized more participants than the protest events of the national liberals and communists, limited to only activist participation (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 182). If in 1991-1994 trade unions and strike committees accounted for a quarter of all protest participants in Minsk, equal to national-liberals' share, by the end of 1994 and throughout 1995 the labor's share of mobilization was more than double (47%) that of national-liberals' (Titarenko et al. 2001, 142). As opposed to purely political protests, the mobilization for social protests was more numerous outside Minsk (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 186), signaling the mobilizing potential of trade unions and grass-root participation.

Labor's clout was also evident from the protests' consequences that usually led to concessions on the local economic and national political levels, while protests were mostly tolerated by the authorities and police. Labor's pressure further weakened and fragmented the ruling elite, but labor organizations were not able to condense workers' demands into a political will, thus leaving a vacuum and preparing the ground for a strong arbiter figure.

An example of this successful pressure was the first large wave of post-*perestroika* protests that happened in March and April 1992 at '*Belaruskali'* potash mine in Salihorsk, which foreshadowed similar events in coal-mining areas of Ukraine's Donbas and Russia's Kuzbass. The largest regional protest in Belarusian history involved ten to twelve thousand participants

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on March 17 (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 183). It was primarily organized by the Independent Miners' Union with further minor support from a FTUB-affiliated branch union. The occupation of the mining company and blocking of its operation, a hunger strike, a march on Minsk and demonstrations in the central squares of Minsk and Salihorsk lasted 44 days in total and had a profound impact on workers' organizational structures, their relationship with management and the state. Although the strike in Salihorsk was ruled illegal, it led to the first tariff agreement in Belarus, according to which the minimum wage was tied to a living wage, thus raising wages at '*Belaruskali'* 3-4 times, shortening the working day and extending the paid leave (Novik 2013a, 20–22).

Nevertheless, this hardly translated into a political success. On the eve of the Salihorsk strike, the Minsk strike committee and BPF organized a demonstration in support of the miners, and the charismatic miners' leader Ivan Yurgevich[66] voiced workers' demands in parliament: a new tariff agreement, a new director of '*Belaruskali'* and the resignation of the prime minister. Characteristically, the first two demands were fulfilled, but the third, which interested mostly the national-liberal politicians, was rejected (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 183).

The ideology that surrounded this protest was a continuation of the contradictory workerist populism that emerged in the last years of *perestroika*. The potash miners' demands reflected organized labor's attitude to the marketization agenda, expressed in a fear of privatization by predatory business elites and a hope for a form of 'people's privatization'. Since 1991 the union's representatives had been working in the city council to prevent the so-called '*nomenklatura* privatization' of the Potash mines and the city's industry by blocking dubious

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[66] Ivan Yurgevich (1943-2002) was probably the only significant labor leader unconditionally revered today by most of the contemporary opposition labor organizations. My interlocutors from all union organizations talked about him with admiration, and the Belarusian Independent Trade Union, a successor organization to Yurgevich's Independent Miner's Union, organizes regular trips to his grave.

bank loans. The '*Belaruskali*' workers' collective demanded a 60% share in enterprise's assets and a share of its profit[67] but insisted that their company should not lease its assets without the union's consent and further demanded that it revoke any previous deals of this kind. Additionally, the miners' union advocated a personalized pension system financed through a private pension fund (Novik 2013a, 55–70).

This was complemented by a strong welfare agenda informed by a quasi-Marxist reasoning. The union understood wages not in market terms as an equilibrium between the labor demand and labor supply but as costs of reproducing labor power. The union's declaration published in a local newspaper mentions Marx's theory of surplus value extraction (Novik 2013a, 234). The miners insisted that the wage should depend on a minimum household food budget[68] 'that takes into account the real conditions of reproduction of labor power according to its value' (Novik 2013a, 58). The miner's union established its own commission to determine the real value of labor power, while the ministry, although conceding to the demand of using a household food budget, insisted on their calculations of the inflation index.

This spontaneous ideology of the immediate economic interests found a confused expression on the political level. The BITU leaders running for local elections included a liberal democrat favoring privatization, a social democrat in favor of a large public sector, and a right-wing social-democrat who believes in 'European economy with some elements of Japanese model, i.e. socially-oriented market economy' (*Salidarnasts,* June 30, 1995). Describing his impressions from a visit to a *Solidarnosc* event in Poland, the right-wing social-democrat

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[67] In 1998 25% of the company's shares belonged to the workers. That year '*Belaruskali*' and the city government suggested swapping these shares to the company's debt in exchange of the promise not to sell the company. The union protested against this decision but to no avail (Novik 2013a, 148–55).
[68] It was proposed that the consumer budget should be based on the calculations by a Moscow-based nutritionist A. A. Pokrovsky ('*Besedy o pitanii'*, Moscow 1986).

admitted he was most impressed by a catholic mass and the progressive role church plays in Polish civil society (*Salidarnasts,* June 23, 1995).

The 1992 unrest led to a rise in membership of the Independent Miners' Union of Salihorsk from 463 members in January to 1681 in June (Novik 2013a, 67). The next month it joined with the Confederation of Labor of Belarus (a successor to the Union of Labor), the Free Trade-Union of Belarus and the Union of Air Traffic Controllers in signing a memorandum[69] to found the 'Congress of Independent and Free Trade Unions'. In the following year the Miners' Union expanded to other branches of economy and changed its name to the Belarusian Independent Trade Union, henceforth the strongest 'new' labor organization.

Meanwhile, the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, which gained autonomy from the all-Soviet federation in 1990, proclaimed political pluralism and independence from the state. FTUB was successful in pressurizing the government into signing some of most progressive laws regulating industrial relations and trade union activity in 1992-1993[70]. Its leader proudly announced that under the threat of a general strike, the government signed the General Accords for 1993 that included a no-lockout clause, a program for keeping employment, and fixed prices for basic consumer goods. He concluded this victorious speech by conceding that it was still a compromise, but 'we do not need to be afraid of this word' (interview with Uladzimir Hancharik[71], *Avtozavodets,* January 6, 1993).

Criticizing FTUB leadership for compromises, the Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers' Union (ASM), chaired by Bukhvostau, and the Radio and Electronic Workers' Union (REWU) led by Fedynich, sought to build a more grass-root decision-making structure and promoted a more militant stance towards management by banning them from trade unions

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[69] Document from a private archive of H. Bykau
[70] Assessment of the Free Metalworkres' Union lawyer, personal communication.
[71] Russian transliteration: Vladimir Goncharik.

(Mandel 2004). In competition with the 'new' unions, REWU and ASM resorted to increasingly more militant and confrontational tactics. Given their size within the Federation, they gradually pushed the latter's leadership towards a more confrontational stance: the largest protests throughout this period (1992-1995) happened in the beginning of 1995 and were led by the FTUB as part of a bargaining process between the Federation and the government (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 184).

These reformist 'legacy unions' made the first attempts to give an organic political expression for a labor movement. Influenced by Swedish trade-unions and skeptical about the Communist party or national-liberals, Bukhvostau together with Fedynich registered the Belarusian Party of Labor in 1994, dropping the compromised word 'democratic' from the initially proposed name. Relying on a Marxist idea of class struggle, the party's base was the Belarusian Independent Association of the Industrial Trade-Unions, comprising ASM, REWU, and several smaller unions totaling 500, 000 members, with virtually all local union bosses as party members. ASM provided the party with funds and issued the '*Rabochaya solidarnasts'* ('Labor solidarity') paper (Bukhvostov 2018). As opposed to BPF, several representatives of this party would be elected into the parliament in 1995.

A comparison with similar events in Ukraine and Russia throughout the same period highlights the political clout of Belarusian labor. As opposed to Russian trade unions, Belarusians were not coopted by a strong political ally, and as opposed to Ukraine, regional political leaders and directors of enterprises could not rely either on secessionist sentiments or on clan interests to exploit labor unrest in their quest for the influence on the central government. Russia's 'legacy union' FNPR had to change its leader in 1993 under Yeltsin's threats, and the alternative Russian Independent Miners' Union took Yeltsin's side even despite miners' protests in 1992-1996 (Pringle and Clarke 2011a, 48–53). Miner's protests in June 1993 in Ukraine's Donbass

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were comparable with the 1989-1991 unrest, and the demand to compensate for inflation was quickly followed by calls for autonomy in the Donbass and a non-confidence vote for the president. The unrest was partially supported by the mines' management who were interested in subsidies and debt relief from the capital. The crisis was resolved after a former mine director and the mayor of Donetsk Zviagilskyi was appointed deputy prime minister and negotiated a twofold wage increase for miners and debt relief, tax breaks and trade deregulation for the mines. The unrest in Donbass contributed to the early presidential elections which handed over the president's office to a more pro-Russian president who would later preside over the creation of the large-scale national bourgeoisie, organized along regional lines (Borisov and Clarke 1993).

2.2. Populist slot filled

'We are all children of Gorbachev. It all started with him, both me and Yeltsin,' Lukashenka would say throughout the '90s and repeat it personally to his 'political father,' when the first president of Belarus met the last president of the USSR in 1999 (*Pervyi kanal* 1999). This touching faithfulness to the legacy of *perestroika* and the efforts not to repeat the mentor's mistakes was visible in Lukashenka's electoral strategy and the evolving structure of the Belarusian model of governance after the 1994.

The ideological struggle for power in the unstable equilibrium of the first post-Soviet years continued to unfold along the lines of the 'thin ideology' of *perestroika* populism, whose emergence I discussed in the previous chapter. Engaged in the competition of populisms, Lukashenka proved successful in spotting and appropriating social grievances, articulated in the course of social struggle, that were not successfully addressed by the political elites or other contenders. In doing this, he consciously resorted to the 'thin ideology' with his campaign

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slogan 'Neither with the left, nor with the right, but with people!' (Feduta 2005, 156) and cultivated an image of the corruption fighter.

A fertile ground for anti-elite sentiment had already been prepared by the labor movement. Its active member Siarhey Antonchyk, one of the leaders of the strike committees in 1991 and later a member of the Belarusian parliament, was inspired by the biography of Walesa in his fight against corruption as a way to the presidency, also tried to play a populist card and present himself as an anti-corruption warrior. Thus, he joined a parliamentary commission on corruption set up in 1993 and chaired by Lukashenka. Sidelining his fellow MPs in the commission, Lukashenka gave a three-hour speech in December 1993, comparing corruption to cancer and attacking the speaker of the parliament, the government and security services (Feduta 2005, 102).

Almost nobody was punished as a consequence of this speech, but it had a tremendous propaganda impact. Even surveys within the Federation of Trade-Unions showed its members' predominant support for Lukashenka, as opposed to possible candidates from within the unions like FTUB's president Hancharik or REWU's Fedynich[72]. It was one of the main factors of Lukashenka's success in the 1994 presidential elections, bringing him over 80% of the votes. Despite the incumbent's advantage, prime minister Kebich lost miserably in the second round, while BPF's leader could only rely on very limited nationalist support bases in a few western districts. Election poll results showed that support for Lukashenka was higher in the working-class district of the capital city (Ioffe 2014, 156). After the elections, Antonchyk presented his own corruption report, accusing the president's closest allies, but the message did not reach the audience: it was withdrawn from publication. Later the presidential administration would sue Antonchyk for libel, and he had to sell his flat to pay the fine (Koktysh 2008).

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[72] Interview with Bukhvostau, 12/2/2015

Within a year after the elections, Lukashenka was in a precarious position: he had no single political party to rely on in the parliament, no control over courts, he had to appoint relatively independent ministers, and could not trust the KGB. He was not sure whether the state repressive apparatus would be willing to obey his orders in case of violent protests, so he relied more on preventive, structural and targeted direct violence (Way 2016, 127). The main threats to him were the national liberals and the labor movement that entered into an uneasy alliance, which would prove fatal to both of them. Antonchyk's personality was emblematic of this alliance, as much as his fate was emblematic of the failure of the labor-nationalist pact. Nationalist ideology already had proved to lack appeal among Belarusians, thus the national-liberals lacked a mass following. Labor organizations, although able to rely on mass support, did not form an independent political movement. Thus, Lukashenka easily marginalized the first group and used a mix of cooptation and repressions to neutralize the second.

The first strike was directed against BPF nationalists, at their weakest spot: a group of MPs loyal to the new president supported a referendum to change national symbols[73] and introduce Russian as the second language. BPF deputies went on a hunger strike, and on the eve of voting, they were dragged out of the Parliament by the special forces on the pretext of a bomb threat. The referendum was massively approved by the population in a sign of complete indifference to the nationalist agenda (Andrew Wilson 2011, 174). In the parliamentary elections that happened on the same day in May 1995 the nationalists gained no seats, the parliament was dominated by the Communist and the Agrarian parties.

Afterwards, BPF drifted ever further from the common diffuse populism of the '80s, thus continuing to strain the alliance with the workerist idiom. Their evaluation of the people

[73] In 1991-1995 Belarus used the national symbols of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (1918); the new flag and emblem strongly resemble those of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic minus the communist symbols.

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changed from ‘pure’ to ‘corrupt’, as the national-liberal politicians got themselves enclosed into an ideological ghetto. In a bitterly self-ironic article published in an opposition newspaper ‘*Nasha Niva*’ in 2001, a BPF fellow traveler Valiantsin Akudovich, who himself condemned labor protests of 1991 as conservative and pro-Soviet, diagnosed an extreme elitism of the national-liberal movement: ‘We know who isolated us from the Belarusian people: (…) first of all, the nationally unconscious, Polonized, colonized, Russified, Sovietized, servile, swinish, downtrodden and dirty’ (Akudovich 2001). The trope of the corrupt or ‘lumpenized’, as BPF’s leader Pazniak put it (Bohdan 2011, 98), people would spread to the whole of the opposition discourse.

The second challenger to the presidential authority was labor, both as his support base demanding a relief from economic hardships and as a potential political challenger in the form of labor organizations. The president’s anti-crisis program initially included significant pro-market reforms, and the team responsible for its drafting and implementation hoped that Lukashenka would enforce these market reforms by authoritarian methods. The President’s team revered Pinochet and wanted to bring in the Russian architect of shock therapy, Yavlinskiy (Feduta 2005, 103–5). The IMF’s chair visited Belarus, and the country got the first tranche of stabilizing credit ($103 mln USD) (Andrew Wilson 2011, 169). When one of the ministers warned that there will be adverse consequences of the reforms, unemployment and street protests, Lukashenka replied: ‘Nobody will come here to the square [referring to Lenin square, where the 1991 labor protests took place]. There will be tanks and machine-guns, nobody will set their foot. The square will be free! You can do whatever you want!’ (Feduta 2005, 197).

The reform rush did not last long. According to a former member of the president’s team, ‘Lukashenka feared only one thing: large demonstrations’ (Feduta 2005, 270), and mass

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demonstrations over low wages and wages arrears were happening throughout the summer of 1994. The last straw seemed to have a been a mass protest over increased dairy prices in November 1994, after which the president publicly reproached his own government (Andrew Wilson 2011, 170). This was the first show of his trademark trick of blaming 'the corrupt officials' in order to sustain his populist image.

Although the reform plans were still discussed in the president's office, he tried to pull-off a return to Gorbachev's idea of socialism with a human face. Although Lukashenka would dismiss Gorbachev as a weak man (*razmaznia*) who caused economic break-down (Feduta 2005, 36), he continued with his own version of a permanent *perestroika*. One of Lukashenka's biographers diagnoses a 'Gorbachev complex' guiding the Belarusian president reasoning that Gorbachev failed to secure his post because he was not strong enough as a politician. This political failure, as this reasoning goes, ensued in the catastrophic dismantling of the Soviet economy (Karbalevich 2010, 205). Psychological speculations aside, it seems that the Belarusian president would have agreed with Miller's analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which I refer to in the previous chapter (Miller 2016): political liberalism should not precede economic liberalism.

One more trait was common to the last Soviet and the first Belarusian presidents: a Bonapartist tactic of playing the role of an impartial mediator. Lukashenka tried to involve the Soviet-inherited Federation of Trade Unions into this balancing act. Its chair Hancharik recalled his first meeting with Lukashanka as a 'good talk', but in one of the subsequent meetings he rejected the president's Bonapartist offer: 'You square off with the government, and I will be above, like a saint' (Feduta 2005, 383). Another plan to involve the Federation into a comprehensive system of control embracing the KGB, police and the economic supervision

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authority was met with a rejection (Bukhvostov 2013), and since then the union's criticism against the government was perceived by Lukashenka as a personal insult.

Incited by the alternative unions and dissident union leaders in its own ranks, FTUB would drift to an unconditional opposition to the president. The cost would be compromises over the economic content of trade unions' programs. Inspired by the Polish *Solidarnosc*, the leadership of FTUB argued for more market reforms, closing of the loss-making state enterprises and developing the private employers who would absorb the unemployed (Sherement and Makhovskyi 1995). In practice, however, this labor organization hampered market transformations having been obliged to respond to its own constituency. Due to spontaneous strikes over the summer 1994, trade unions, employers and the Cabinet of minister negotiated a resolution which implied subsidies for state-owned enterprises, many of whom were on the verge of bankruptcy. Government was forced to save workplaces and avoid further collision with the workers (Yefanov 1995).

The government delivered on their promise to re-launch state-owned enterprises: they had resumed operations by 1995, but 40% of them suffered from delayed wages. The president laid the blame on the directors (Sherement and Makhovskyi 1995), but, as a prisoner of his populist rhetoric, he was held responsible by the workers. As he assumed the populist slot of the people's representative, workers started appealing to the president as an intermediary. Trade unions were encouraging workers to write collective letters to the president and picket his administration. Thus, during a spontaneous strike at '*Kamvolnyi kombinat*' in Minsk over forced part-time work and wage arrears, workers wrote an appeal to the president, dissatisfied with the management, the trade-union and the authorities' response. In a couple of days 200 workers went to the palace of the president, who listened 'attentively' to their demands and

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promised to fire the enterprise management with a '*volchiy bilet*' (so that they are prevented from finding another job) ('Rabochie vesti,' *Basta!,* summer 1995).

The first year of Lukashenka's presidency revealed contradictory tendencies in his governance tactics and the labor's response. If the president hesitated which economic strategy to choose and how to balance between potential threats, the labor organizations oscillated between immediate economic interests of the workers and political aspirations of their leaders. The events of summer 1995 forced a crystallization of the tactics of both forces.

2.3. Transportation strike as a turning point

Beside the unrest on the streets and large enterprises, Minsk and several provincial centers were shaken by a wave of public transportation strikes and labor conflicts. As union newspapers reported, wages in this sector were lower than in industrial enterprises, and workers were leaving for the private sector or migrating to Russia. Both 'old' and 'new' trade unions were responsive to workers' demands, although strikes in various cities and on various depots were poorly coordinated. However, as opposed to the situation in barely functioning industrial enterprises, workplace and associational bargaining power (Wright 2000) combined in the most efficient way in the public transportation sector, which had immediate communal and political reverberations.

Several notable cases illustrate this. In November 1994 Minsk city authorities cut the wages for public transportation workers by more than half, which pushed bus, trolleybus and underground drivers, coordinated by the FTUB-affiliated unions, to protest in front of the City Council and threaten a general transportation strike. The city authorities backed down, but the bus drivers still threatened a strike to re-negotiate their collective agreement (Stefanovich 1994). Homel public transportation barely avoided a strike over wage arrears in 1994, but the

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situation escalated the next year. In May 1995 a spontaneous strike of bus drivers happened in two Minsk bus parks, forcing Minsk city government to make concessions again.

A similar pattern repeated in August 1995 with strikes in Minsk and Homel, but with important differences. Firstly, if previously transportation workers lacked solidarity—some groups accepted concessions, some continued to protest—the August strikes involved a united action in the two cities and solidarity strikes on other enterprises, Secondly, they showed their disruptive potential: the central precinct of Minsk was paralyzed, and the Minsk underground closed for the first time since its opening in 1984. Finally, the strategy of concessions, routinely used by local authorities before, gave way to pressure and repression from the central government, ultimately involving police violence.

Two cities paralyzed

In March 1995 the administration of Minsk underground decided to cut workers' bonuses, which, according to the FTUB transport union and the Free Trade Union, contradicted the collective agreement. The administration refused to negotiate, and within a month the *Maskouskae* underground railway depot enacted the decision, pushing the resulting take-home wage lower than stipulated by the collective agreement (Makarchuk 1995). Both trade-unions raised the stakes: beyond compliance with the current collective agreement, they demanded negotiations on a new deal under the threat of a warning strike, which they started as scheduled on June 6. The same night Minsk mayor's deputy, the city prosecutor, and the management of the depot met with the workers and promised negotiations (*Basta!* 1995).

The negotiations, however, never started. Thus, the trade-unions, with overwhelming workers support, announced a new strike for August 17. This was followed by a smear campaign in the state-owned media spreading the rumor that the underground workers received a $300 wage and demanded more (Makarchuk 1995). The administration resorted to blackmail: wage arrears

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can only be paid at the expense of pensioners and medical workers. This lowered workers' morale and they dropped the demand to repay wage arrears, insisting on a new tariff agreement and dismissal of the head of the metro administration (Baneva 1995).

When it seemed that the Minsk workers were faltering, 1500 employees of the Homel city electric transportation company grounded 200 buses, paralyzing the city traffic for three hours. In contrast to Minsk workers, Homel drivers radicalized the demands from repaying arrears to raising wages and providing housing (*Belaruski chas* 1995a). As a radical group of activists took over in the strike committee, the city government, now directly subordinated to Minsk, moved from foot-dragging to intimidation. Yuri Zakharanka, then minister of interior and later a political enemy of Lukashenka, sat in the city hall during negotiations as a silent threat from the state authorities (Goldade 2013). Unimpressed, around 500 drivers refused to work on August 16 and held the strike for six days, although without support of a Federation-affiliated union (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 52).

Adding to the tensions, a Minsk trolley-bus depot also went on strike, thus paralyzing the main transportation route of the city, Skoryna avenue (tut.by 2015). Encouraged by the snowballing of protests, a joint conference of the two Minsk metro trade unions returned to their strike plan in support of their Minsk and Homel colleagues. Approved by the labor collective's vote, the strike started on August 17 as planned: metro train drivers refused to get to work and occupied the depot.

As the trolley-buses barely circulated for the second day, the underground stopped running for the first time in its 11-year existence. Thus, the traffic from the environs to the city center was paralyzed: the metro carried a third of the city's passengers. Minsk residents rushing to work in the morning could read the following notices on the entrance doors of the underground: 'Closed for technical reasons' and 'We apologize for the temporary inconvenience, we are

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fighting for the repayment of wages' (tut.by 2015). *'Sovetskaya Belorussiya'*, an official organ of the Presidential Administration, came out with the following long title: 'The strike of the transportation workers, their legitimate demands notwithstanding, looks nevertheless very egotistic. On Thursday many enterprises and inhabitants of the city incurred graspable material losses' (August 16, 1995). The official publication of the Federation of Trade-Unions covered the conflict with a mild disapproval, quoting inconvenience for travelers (*Belaruski chas* 1995b).

At this moment the previous pattern of threats, foot-dragging and concessions broke. The prosecutor's office warned the strike organizers that the strike is illegal, and in the same evening the head of the depot administration demanded them to clear the premises, utilizing the threat of riot police stationed in four nearby busses. The occupation was over: the strike committee left the building, and the workers escorted by the law enforcement officers marched to the central office of the Free Trade Union. The police prohibited gatherings on the square nearby or in the office, and workers had to go home (Baneva 1995).

Yet the capital city was still paralyzed. The situation was aptly summarized in an article in a pro-business magazine *Belaruski rynak*: "The reason for the strike was the lack of the legal way to solve the labor conflict: if the management of an enterprise does not want to set up a negotiating or arbitrating commission, workers' collective cannot force it. Thus, the striking workers try to 'hijack' Belarus as if it was a plane (…) and threatening with a bomb, hold negotiations with the crew (…) The solution of the conflict on the Minsk underground, no matter what the outcome may be, will be a precedent and may allow us to forecast if there is to be a Belarusian political spring" (*Belaruski rynak,* No. 32, August 21-27). This stand-off between labor and the state was a reverberation of the 'catastrophic equilibrium', only that this time there was a decisive force to break through the impasse.

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Scabs, kidnapping and dismissals

Police intervention meant not just a breach in the pattern of labor disputes in the public transport sector, but the return of state violence not seen even in 1991. The head of the metro workers' Free Trade Union cell urged everyone to return to their workplaces, citing city government's decision to repay wages in full[74]. The workers, however, refused to comply, demanding the dismissal of their boss. Seizing this opportunity, Free Trade-Union's national leader, Henadz Bykau, closely associated with the BPF politicians, moved the conflict into the political plane: "Lukashenka does not want to compromise on anything, he wants to strangle the labor movement by force. If *'bat'ka[75]'* wins over the underground workers, he will go crazy and feel that he can do anything" (Vodchits 2015).

The central state authorities also raised the stakes. Minsk trolley-bus drivers got their wages and resumed work (tut.by 2015), which allowed the authorities to apply harder pressure on the metro workers, as the busses substituted the metro routes (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 11). The city authorities contacted several post-Soviet cities to find strike breakers among pensioners and other ex-drivers, while also looking for people with the equivalent skills among Belarusian railway drivers. The underground administration started summoning the striking drivers individually and 16 of them were fired (Baneva 1995).

As the strike continued over the weekend, the city authorities started training strike breakers to launch the metro on Monday. Meanwhile, the police special forces encircled the seat of the Free Trade unions, and the striking workers went to the mayor's office to demand reinstating their fired colleagues, but to no avail. Having returned home, they were visited by the representative of the metro administration accompanied by the police, demanding their return

[74] Underground train drivers received their wages for June, including bonuses.
[75] Meaning 'father' in Belarusian: a colloquial reference to president Lukashenka.

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to work that they resumed work. Out of 150 drivers only 6 agreed (Baneva 1995). They could see on the TV how their president commented on the conflict, criticizing the Ministry of Interior for the lack of resolution and accusing BPF, Polish and American trade unions of inciting the strike. Addressing the strike-breakers, he said: ‘These forces want to do the same as in Poland, where *Solidarnosc* swept away the party structures and came to power’ (Vodchits 2015).

Monday morning TV programs started with the president’s ominous address: he promised to ‘bring order in the capital with the harshest measures.’ Around 9 am the special force police vans arrived at the office of the Free Trade Union on the Freedom square in Central Minsk to wait for a column of around 150 workers marching from the depot. The police warned that mass demonstrations are prohibited on the square, and detentions started. Newspapers reported that special force officers shot into the air and ordered the protesters to lay down, put their hands behind their heads. Two dozen people were detained, among them FTUB’s chair Bykau and the two leaders of the metro trade union organizations. Reportedly, most of the detained had been transported to a military base, where they were guarded and interrogated one by one. In the evening some of them were released after having signed a declaration that they don’t have any complaints. Meanwhile, landline phones in their houses have been cut (Vodchits 2015).

Siarhey Antonchyk disappeared after a press-conference and participation in the protest of the workers of *Integral*, an electronics plant (*Belaruski rynak,* September 3, 1995). To the president’s irritation, the same day 200 microchip producers marched to his palace to demand wage repayment[76]. Their conflict dragged on simultaneously with that of the transportation

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[76] Eventually, according to the union’s newspaper, first the president’s economic advisor, then the president himself had to arrive at the plant, while a group of workers blocked the president’s car upon his attempt to leave. This was a continuation of the pattern of personal appeals to a populist authority figure.

workers, and *Integral's* Free Trade Union declared support for their brothers in the metro (*Basta!*, Fall-Winer 1995).

Eventually, the leaders of the Belarusian Free Trade Union and of its Minsk metro organization were put under 10 days arrest, while the leader of the Federation-affiliated union was arrested for 15 days after he refused to speak in the court (Makarchuk 1995). The court ruled the strikes of the Minsk metro and the trolley-bus drivers illegal (tut.by 2015). Homel's drivers received their due wages, but around 20 participants of the strike were fired with the consent of the Federation-affiliated trade-union (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 52). Fifty-six Minsk metro workers were dismissed, and in the following six years only some of the them found new jobs, while almost all of Homel workers had been reinstated[77].

Contours of the new model of domination

Antonchyk was released in two days and announced in a press conference that he was detained against his will, taken to the military camp of the Internal forces and a KGB building. He claimed that Belarus was on the verge of the martial law, and a temporary concentration camp was set up on the territory of the Internal forces camp ('Sleduiushchaia stantsia?' *Belarusski rynak*, September 3, 1995). Later he talked about 'Haitization' of Belarus, comparing extra-legal detention of labor activists and politicians with the practices of Tonton Macoutes in Duvalier's Haiti (*Salidarnasts',* September 15, 1995). The opposition politicians from BPF announced the transformation of Belarusian 'imperfect democracy' into an outright dictatorship.

What was happening in reality? Emotional reactions aside, Lukashenka's situation was still unstable, and the transportation strike made it very clear what choices the new populist

[77] According to an ILO database, accessed July 3, 2015 at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:50002:0::NO:50002:P50002_COMPLAINT_TEXT_ID:2903627

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president would face in order to safeguard his power: an alliance with aspiring bureaucracy-cum-bourgeoisie with concomitant shock therapy would cause further economic pain to the population, thus undermining his legitimacy and provoking mass protests; or a pact with labor would demand power sharing in terms of economic policies and would embolden political opponents that had already courted workers' organizations.

Amidst disoriented political challengers and the militant labor, the president's team came up with a Bonapartist answer to this challenge: not to side with either capital or labor, but also not to trust the bureaucracy. The violent crackdown on the striking metro workers and the measures that followed presented a tentative contour of the Bonapartist toolkit: rule by decree, partially satisfy popular economic demands, coopt some and punish the rest of the political challengers.

The first tool tested in the aftermath of the strike was the rule by decree: the president would start issuing legal acts in conflict with the current legislation but obligatory for the executive 'vertical of power'. Specifically, the president's temporary decrees would prevail over the Labor Code in the interpretation of judges appointed by the president (V. Kryvoi 2014). Thus, a week after the strike the president issued an edict '[o]n some measures concerning provision of stability and law enforcement,' suspending the two unions active in the strike. It additionally prohibited political parties, civil organizations and trade unions to participate in strikes on certain enterprises and allowed for withdrawing parliamentary immunity from members of the parliament and the local councils. This law was retroactively applied to Antonchyk and Bykau.

The Federation of Trade Unions judged that the September edict contradicted other laws, and the Constitutional court twice ruled that this law contradicted the Constitution. Although Free Trade Unions' leader Bykau took a defensive stance, claiming the strike started spontaneously and never implied political demands, and that the president was misinformed about trade unions' political motifs (Bykovskiy 1995), Free Trade Union was banned until the end of 1997,

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resuming activities after ILO's intervention[78]. Its subdivision, Free Trade-Union of Railway Workers, according to my informants, continued to exist legally, but only on paper[79].

This practice would micromanage various areas of political and economic activity, pre-empting disobedience and disciplining officials and workers. In the next chapters we will encounter decrees on short-term contracts, workplace discipline and taxation of unemployment. From 1997 the presidential administration started pushing through a draft decree 'On additional measures for regulating employment relations and enforcing discipline' accompanied by a mass propaganda campaign. However, up until 1999 it faced objections from the Federation of Trade Unions, ministry of finances, the ministry of labor, the prosecutor's office and the Council of the Republic (*Belaruski chas,* January 29, 1999). The decree was, however, adopted in July 1999 and led to the last large-scale organized labor protests in Belarusian history (see the next chapter).

The president also used his increased power to satisfy some of the workers' grievances and preempt possible public protests. Three months after the strike, the presidential office issued a decree on the repayment of wage arrears, stipulating fines for the employers responsible for delaying wages; the fine proceeds to be used for paying wages[80]. This was done under the threat of a mass protest in the center of Minsk, announced by the industrial unions from the Federation of Trade Unions (ASM 2000, 44). The disciplinary measures against employers, envisioned in the law, would also be reflected in the decree about fixed-term contracts, that would also target their employees in 1999.

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[78] According to ILO record, accessed July 3, 2018, at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:50002:0::NO:50002:P50002_COMPLAINT_TEXT_ID:2903628
[79] Interview with Lozovskiy, 12/2/2015; it is still chaired by Makarchuk, but he does not actively participate in union activity and was not available for interview.
[80] Presidential decree no. 483 'On timely payment of wages,' November 27, 1995.

The same hand that gave out wages to workers would also discipline the bureaucracy. This was the third trend of the emerging model of domination: imposing personal responsibility for public offices. Deputy prime ministers and branch ministers were made responsible for wage payment, and the officials subordinated to the president faced dismissal over mismanagement of remuneration[81]. Furthermore, the 1995 clash would lead to the first 'purges' within the president's inner circle, which would become a trademark of Belarusian state administration practices. Thus, Yury Zakharanka, according to one source (V Silitski 2006), lost his post of the minister of interior for hesitations over using force against opposition MPs and to crack down on the underground workers' strike. Violent suppression of the strike was directed by the head of the Internal Forces[82], who would later take Zakharanka's post (Alkayev 2007). Characteristically charged with embezzlement, Zakharanka would be demoted to colonel, join the opposition and disappear in 1999[83] the same way as his subordinates made organizers of the strike disappear for three days in August 1995.

In the last section of this chapter I will show how these ad-hoc responses of the new elite would turn into the governance framework of what I call a passive revolutionary regime. Its first phase, from 1995 to 1999, would consist in eliminating immediate threats, the most formidable of which proved to be the organized labor.

2.4. From frozen equilibrium to passive revolution

The first violent clash between the populist president and organized labor foreshadowed the ways in which conflict between the presidential elite group and labor would evolve in the second half of the 90s. The presidential center of power would need to overcome a two-fold

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[81] http://laws.newsby.org/documents/ukazp/pos06/ukaz06838.htm
[82] A militarized detachment under the ministry of interior that deals with riots, prisons, and protection of strategic objects.
[83] According to some authors, he was killed by a death squad directed by someone from the president's milieu (Sheremet and Kalinkina 2003).

challenge. In the realm of economy, it would face economic grievances of the working class as well as claims of the emerging capitalists and the incumbent bureaucracy over the state property. In the ideological sphere, the populist presidential authority would have to respond to the populist idioms preformatted by the labor movement and to the nationalist-liberal ideology.

The solution, to which handling of the metro strike pointed, amounted to the beginning of passive revolution, presided by a Bonapartist/Caesarist body subordinated to the president. This passive-revolutionary response consisted in redistributive economic policies that would satisfy both labor's grievances and prevent the strengthening of political rivals, including labor organizations. On the ideological level, this would be reflected in the populism of a 'Peronist' type (Kaltwasser 2014), with a stress on the corrupt bureaucrats, greedy businesspeople and foreign-inspired politicians. A Belarusian researcher compared Lukashenka's ideology after 1996 to Mao's Cultural Revolution: 'Fire the Headquarters' (Matsuzato 2004). An ideological correlate to the prebendal model of domination was the populist idiom of the war against the corrupt elite. In this idiom, the 'pure' people body needs to be constantly purged from the alien elements, the rotten parts of the elite and the comprador politicians.

The first stage of this passive-revolutionary process, which can be dated from 1995 to 1999, involved an emphasis on eliminating political enemies and strengthening the control over the state apparatus, while the labor organization were too strong to be defeated in a frontal attack. The consolidating Caesarist authority, presiding over this process would take the form of what I will call prebendalism.

If there is a rational core in searching for the elements of Sultanism in Lukashenka's model of governance (Eke and Kuzio 2000; Rouda 2012; Goujon 2010, 173), it must refer to a type of primitive accumulation that, following Weber and Szelenyi, can be described as prebendalism

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rather than patrimonialism: “the master rewards his followers with ‘benefices’, offices and property that are awarded on the basis of loyalty and service, and can be taken away again in cases of unsatisfactory behavior” (Szelenyi 2015, 44).

Pace Szelenyi, who claims that Putin was the pioneer of the prebendal type of state-capital relations in the post-socialist space (Szelenyi 2015, 48), it was Lukashenka who should be awarded the honor. When the Belarusian president was already concentrating power around his office, Russia’s Yeltsin and Ukraine’s Kuchma were busy nurturing local bourgeoisie loyal to them along patrimonial models: giving out state property for undervalued prices in exchange of loyalty. This newly acquired capital was secure as fiefdoms, giving rise to competing clans of oligarchs. Only in the mid-2000s did Putin make oligarchs’ property contingent on their loyalty by a selective use of justice, while Yanukovich failed to perform the same maneuver in Ukraine. Lukashenka, meanwhile, directed the primitive capital accumulation along the prebendal model in the very beginning of the post-Soviet transformation.

If Putin had to deal with the class of capitalists past the original post-communist accumulation and with the labor already structurally weakened by the ‘involution’ (Burawoy 2001) and then the real subsumption under private capital (Clarke 2007, 10–11), Lukashenka had to build his prebendal model almost from scratch. Thus, his initial targets were not so much capitalists, who were few and weak, or labor, which was too numerous and organized, but the bureaucracy and the heads of the enterprises aspiring to become owners.

The Caesarist administrative apparatus, which after the 1996 referendum[84] overtook most of the parliament’s and the government’s functions, consisted of the Presidential Administration

[84] The referendum held on November 1996 was a consequence of the stand-off between the parliament and the president, each of them fighting to turn Belarus into a parliamentary or a presidential republic. According to the official results, almost 84% of the population supported the president’s version of the amendments into the constitution that established a new bicameral parliament, extended the current president’s term to 2001, increased

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mirroring the ministries and departments, the Presidential Business Administration managing property and able to distribute contracts and rents, and the State Controlling Committee able to persecute for economic crimes (Balmaceda 2014).

The first move in the initial phase of the passive-revolutionary road was to prevent an excessive accumulation of private capital that could lead to the emergence of business-political groups. Thus, after 1997 privatization was practically frozen. The two ways of private capital accumulation and concentration common in post-Soviet countries, the buy-out of leased production facilities and re-selling of 'vouchers' via special investment funds, were cut. Big state companies were privatized only in exceptional cases, and the privatization of communal property, trade and services came to a close by the early 2000s (Isayonak and Chyzhova 2013).

Already existing private capital was subsumed under a political prebendal control. In 1997, state officials were introduced into companies' management according to the 'golden share' rule[85]. In the second half of the 1990s, almost half of existing businesses were closed down in a re-registration campaign targeting politically disloyal entrepreneurs (Yarashevich 2014, 1709). An astonishing number of entrepreneurs and heads of state companies found themselves in jails over economic crimes: by the mid-2000s they constituted around 20% of Belarusian prisoners (Way 2016, 140).

With private capital reigned in and control over the bulk of the economy, submitting the state bureaucratic apparatus remained the second challenge. The presidential administration used two anti-establishment strategies to subordinate the bureaucracy: reshuffling of the regional elites and punishment of the administrative establishment on corruption charges. Governors

the legal strength of the presidents' decree and gave the president more control over the budget. The referendum was not recognized by the parliamentary opposition, including the communist party and the party of labor.

[85] Representatives of the state in the management of joint-stock and other companies creates on the basis of state property, irrespective of the state's share, could veto crucial decisions in a company's operations, including its restructuring, profit use or appointment of a CEO. The 'golden share' was abolished in 2008.

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were moved from one region to another to prevent them forming local business-political networks (Way 2016). Unlike in Ukraine, governors had to ask for the consent of the Presidential Administration to appoint local officials. As one of the researchers quipped, the personal security of the elite was more in danger than that of the opposition (Matsuzato 2004). After 1997 'show trials' on corruption charges intensified. Lukashenka's former mentor Leonov, who proposed turning *kolkhozes* into joint-stock companies, was arrested. The same destiny befell the central banker Vinnikova (Balmaceda 2014).

Although control over the economy and campaigns against corruption did much to prevent the formation of oligarchic clans or viable political opposition financed by them, it also preserved the composition and organizational capacities of the Belarusian working class. Although some researchers claim (Danilovich and Croucher 2011) that Burawoy's thesis on involution of the post-Soviet economy (Burawoy 2001; Burawoy, Krotov, and Lytkina 2000) holds true for Belarus, it is hardly the case in a country where the industrial basis, employment and public ownership remained in place. Since mass privatization was blocked, there was no finance capital to parasite on the productive sphere, and despite multi-month wage arrears and astronomic inflation, workers relied on monetary exchange rather than on informal networks and domestic production. Informality did not reach such proportions as in Ukraine or Russia, and subsistence agriculture was less significant for people's survival than for their psychological wellbeing (Hervouet 2009).

Labor as the last challenger

Organized labor remained a strong mobilization resource in civil society as the parliament was dismissed after the 1996 referendum and political street protests became a substitute for the parliamentary activities of the political opposition. Political parties and civil society organizations, including trade unions, formed a united front that relied on 'virtual politics' of

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the alternative parliament, elections, and actions often directed to the foreign audience (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 317). However, the lack of strategy among the political party leaders did not allow the protesters to gain any sizable results. Moreover, even ‘virtually political’ events would be regularly faced with administrative obstacles, police violence and persecutions, enabled by the new Protest Law (December 1997), as opposed to the large demonstration of trade unions that would still remain peaceful.

The Federation of Trade Unions, however, remained an immense organization covering most of the workforce and operating considerable assets, while both the Federation and the new unions could claim to represent the genuine voice of the proletariat and challenge the Caesarist populism. The aftermath of the 1995 strike drew the Federation-affiliated and the alternative unions closer in opposition to the president. FTUB’s chair Hancharik, being a delegate to the National Assembly, opposed the 1996 referendum[86]. Challenging Lukashenka in 2001 elections, he would return to the symbolic turning point of 1995 and promise to rehabilitate the participants of the Minsk metro strike, thus inscribing labor struggle into the narrative of the democratic fight against an authoritarian leader.

Unions outside of FTUB still considered Hancharik too cautious and conciliatory (Babayed 1995), but their more radical and sometimes directly political demands pushed the Federation-affiliated organizations into a more activist stance, since they had to compete for their membership in the primary organizations, but also made FTUB look less of an evil in the eyes of the authorities. Spsiapan recalled that his Free Trade Union organization in MAZ was in a semi-cooperative, semi-competitive relationship to the FTUB-affiliated union (ASM). Whenever a dispute between the management and the unions arose, FTU would make

[86] Communicated by Lozovskiy, 12/2/2015.

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unrealistic demands of, for example, wage raises, thus making ASM look moderate in the eyes of the director but also pushing the more numerous union to make bolder claims.

Due to this, workers retained a considerable associational bargaining power. As proof of this, the second half of the 90s was accompanied by regular mass demonstrations of workers and occasional strikes. In 1997-2000, 12 large (over 1000 participants) social protests took place in response to rising living costs, organized by trade unions with occasional participation of opposition politicians (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011, 327). One of the Federation's largest unions, ASM declared an intention to resort to 'all forms of active defense' of workers' rights, laying stress on mass protests and public pressure (ASM 2000, 4). The negotiations revolved around wage levels and arrears. In the shadow of the Minsk metro strike, ASM threatened to hold a protest in the Minsk's main square in early 1996, which forced the president and the government to adopt a series of laws and repay wage arrears. Subsequently, ASM held two large mass demonstrations of eight to ten thousand people in Minsk in 1997 and 1998, and picketed the presidential administration practically every year with the main demand of making wage payment a legal priority (ASM 2000, 44–47).

The survival of the labor movement's strength was also seen in the political impact of the militant Salihorsk based Independent Miners' Union, which organized regular campaigns for higher wages, pensions and unemployment benefits. Although all but one member of their 1996 protest march to Minsk were detained on the way (Dovnar and Yeroshenia 2011, 337), none reached the capital in the next year, and the president publicly boasted that he 'gave a ride to these drunken miners...,' yet he had to issue decrees which raised miners' pension twice (Novik 2013a, 147). After the Russian Federation defaulted in 1998 and the Belarusian currency plummeted, the Independent Miners' Union started a work-to-rule action, though without the support of FTUB's Union of Chemical and Oil workers. Next day, the general director of

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Belaruskali promised an additional wage raise on top of what was stipulated by the collective agreement (Novik 2013a, 13–14).

The unions continued to exploit the president's populist legitimacy. The chair of an ASM-affiliated union at one of the Minsk plants recalled how the strategy worked in the conditions of the consolidating Caesarism:

> We have our demands and the Ministry has its own. We don't make concessions but immediately organize picketing to exert pressure. But since that has no effect: we convoke an assembly of delegates from out plants and we invite the Minister and the directors. Again no effect. Then we announce that we are organizing a mass demonstration to back our demands. In the last negotiations, we did not even have to hold the demonstration, since the President declared it was a threat to national security. He told his Minister: "Either you resolve the conflict or you are fired." And so we negotiated. Since our starting demands were higher than what we realistically hoped for, we finally agreed on a "rather decent" agreement (Mandel 2004).

Navigating the president's stand-off with the country's industrial elites, the unions gradually moved to a more conciliatory stance towards the company directors. Some, like the Auto and Agricultural Machinery Union (ASM), even issued statements in support the persecuted management, specifically Tractor Plant's director Leonov (Mandel 2004). In 1999, the head of Belarusian Metallurgic Factory was arrested over mismanagement, while the trade unions supported him and organized protests (Matsuzato 2004). These tactics would later prove fatal for the unions, as the state bureaucracy fell under complete control of the government (see Chapter 3).

Thus, throughout the formative phase of the Caesarist rule, organized labor remained outside of prebendal control, and its mass base, the industrial working class, was even reinforced by the unintended consequences of the measures directed against the excessive capital

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accumulation and the autonomy of the state bureaucracy. The Caesarist regime was forced to adopt the economic demands of organized labor while trying to avoid visible mass disturbances. This war of positions, however, was far from over.

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Conclusions to Part I

Gorbachev, declaring a return to the supposedly progressive Leninist core of socialism, attempted a passive revolution under external international pressure as well as under the burden of the internal contradictions of the Soviet hybrid mode of production. In an attempt to make it more progressive, he proceeded along three types of reforms: through creating a labor market, though lowering wages and increasing productivity, and though fostering a limited amount of democracy in the workplaces. All of these reforms failed, as the initial mass support of *perestroika*, expressed in the first wave of miners' strikes, had the unintended consequence of strengthening the market and the nationalist radicals coopted by reformists into the passive-revolutionary coalition. Benefiting from the impossibility of a 'passive' transformation of the Soviet mode of production, these elites eventually decided to move on to full-fledged capitalism. Workers' organizations and struggles were 'vanishing mediators', popping out of the unresolved contradictions, driving the 'passive revolutionary' attempt of fixing them and eventually contributing to the radical market and nationalist U-turn. This general story, however, does not hold specifically for the Belarusian case, which did not live through the shock therapy or large capitalist clan formation. Instead, after a brief interregnum, Belarus made an attempt to continue *perestroika* in another setting.

The labor protests of April 1991 demoralized and disorganized the Communist Party of the Byelorussian SSR, weakened by the lack of support from the center. We saw evidence of this with Homel workers bypassing Minsk in a direct appeal to Gorbachev and in the failure of Minsk' party leader Malafeyev to secure support for the state of emergency that same month. The loss of the party's internal legitimacy was symbolized by the humiliation of Kebich on the Lenin square in front of the masses of workers. Moreover, the former 'transmission belt' of the party, the Trade Union Federation, was progressively opposing the party, pressurized from the

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inside by the radical wing of the Union of Radio-Electronic Workers and Agricultural Machine Builders. Externally, it was threatened by the emerging 'free' and 'independent' unions that allied with the nationalist opposition.

However, the opposition failed miserably to capitalize on the workers' discontent. The protest initially contributed to an exaggerated perception of the threat coming from the opposition, which made the communist party agree on the outsider Shushkevich as the vice-chair of parliament and pay disproportionate attention to the initiatives of the opposition (Way 2016, 128). Further, the country's economy was more integrated with the rest of the Soviet state than regionally divided inside the republic. This detail, and the general character of labor unrest in Belarus prevented the formation of branch or regional-based elite groups that would represent the workers on the political level as it happened in Ukraine. On the other hand, the lack of national tensions and the country's previous exceptionally rapid industrialization process deprived the opposition of any significant opportunities to link the workers' grievances with separatist and nationalist sentiments (Ioffe 2004).

Not only did the labor unrest analyzed above reflect the intractable contradictions of the Soviet state and lead to the emerging workers' public sphere, but it also constituted a major factor shaping the further trajectory of the Belarusian regime. I argue that the 1991 labor unrest episode was the only mass protest event in the post-war history of Belarus that played out on what I call the 'strategic institutional' level. It contributed to the unstable equilibrium in the years 1991-1994 and programmed an opportunity for the political and ideological slot which the political outsider Aliaksandr Lukashenka filled in, in 1994.

In my formulation, the Belarusian labor movement was a significant agent that first contributed to the weakening of the communist political elite and then prevented the market fundamentalist solution after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Gramscian terms, the labor upset Gorbachev's

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attempt of a passive-revolutionary transformation of the Soviet economy and ended up in a catastrophic equilibrium between the disoriented and atomized former *nomenklatura* and the weak nascent private capital. No single political agent could tip this unstable equilibrium to its side: the Belarusian labor movement could not form its own political representation and the already existing nationalist and liberal political elites could not or would not rely on labor. Thus, the labor movement prepared the ground, both structurally and ideologically, for a populist force that would stabilize the unstable equilibrium of forces between labor, bureaucracy and the emerging capitalist class.

The Belarusian authoritarian populism was born out of the spirit of postsocialist labor indignation. The Belarusian Labor movement had enough strength to deviate the oligarchic path of capital accumulation taken by the neighboring countries, but no resources to translate workers' political interests into an organized common will. What it did instead was to clear the road for the populist figure of Aliaksandr Lukashenka who would use political chaos and the workers' indignation to win the competition of populisms, occupy the newly established presidential post, and engage in constructing a system of prebendal Caesarism.

The first steps in this project involved the re-launching of industrial production and the violent suppression of strikes, both of which were unique among post-Soviet countries. These were experimental measures on the passive-revolutionary path, responding to the challenges of labor organizations and to spontaneous protests. After crashing the 1995 strike of the Minsk metro workers, the Caesarist regime embarked on a series of tactical pre-emptive blows to behead possible political enemies. The *nomenklatura* challengers were neutralized by subjugating the state apparatus and the management of state-owned enterprises to the presidency's prebendal control. The nationalist and liberal opposition was never strong to begin with, and after 1995 they lost both symbolic and institutional resources. Meanwhile, both 'new' and 'old' trade-

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unions, wielding an immense four-million membership, went into an increasingly hostile stance against the growing presidential power. In the second part of the dissertation I will discuss the solution that the Caesarist coalition found to defeat this last challenger, and the organizational consequences that this defeat brought to organized labor.

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PART II. PASSIVE REVOLUTION IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

> 'Mono-arch! He doesn't eat nor drink, a friend to pensioners and *kolkhozniks*. A father to businessmen and a mother to workers, a candle of God and a poker of the devil. Takes from some and promises to others. Threatens some. Flatters others. Everyone complains but each and every one is at ease.'
>
> (Charukhin 2013, 79)

In a series of award-winning novels about idiocy, inventiveness and the absurd bravery of common people's everyday life in Belarus, Konstantin Charukhin grasps the popular experience of non-hegemonic power relations. The quote in the epigraph above, alluding to Marx's treatment of Bonapartism[87], reveals the paradox of a Caesarist authority, as it is lived by subaltern masses: a rustic paternal figure, not particularly loved by any of the social groups or classes, but tolerated by everyone; protecting workers from capitalists, national capitalists from foreign competitors, both of them from bureaucracy, and claiming his share from everyone's income, a Caesar from a *kolkhoz* enjoys everlasting legitimacy without either need or care for hegemony. This period of stable non-hegemonic Caesarism, which lasted from the labor candidate's defeat in the 2001 elections until the financial crisis of 2011, is the historical focus of the second part of the dissertation.

[87] "The contradictory tasks that face this man [Louis Bonaparte] explain the contradictions of his government, the confused poking about to try to win over and then to humiliate now this, now that class, turning them all equally against himself… Bonaparte would like to appear as the patriarchal benefactor of all classes. But he cannot give to one without taking from another" (Marx 1996, 124–25).

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The analytical focus of this part is the mode of domination pertaining to this period in the relations between the state, the employers and the workers, when, according to a Belarusian scholar, 'the tops can handle governing in the old way, and the bottoms don't try to live otherwise' (Gaiduk 2009, 9). Inverting Lenin's definition of a revolutionary situation[88], this formula describes what I call a stable stage of the passive revolution, when the governing alliance enjoys the minimal legitimacy of its domination but forgoes hegemony, 'political and moral leadership,' by demobilizing the governed. In this situation, 'the tops' secure the ability to 'govern in the old way' by the 'partial fulfillment and displacement of the demands of the subaltern classes' (Roccu 2017, 11) as articulated by trade unions in the '90s: guarantees of employment, the timely payment of wages set above the minimal consumer budget, the prevention of *nomenklatura* privatization and the preservation of industrial production. As to 'the bottoms,' 'they don't try to live otherwise,' because the organic channels for the articulation of their demands have been severed. Much like Marx's Louis Bonaparte represented the conservative smallholding peasants unable to represent themselves because they were as atomized 'as potatoes in a sack' (Marx 1996, 118), Lukashenka claimed to represent the material interest of the workers, after turning Belarusian workers into a 'sack of potatoes' by depriving them of their organizational and political power.

Fond of posing with actual sacks of potatoes collected by his own hands, Lukashenka consummated the paternalist model of legitimacy in the early 2000s. This is usually described as a system of 'social contracts' (Gaiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009) between the government and various social groups: workers, pensioners, public servants, and entrepreneurs. These contracts, which offer minimal welfare in exchange of the population's consent to the government's policies (Gaiduk 2009, 5), were fueled by the redistribution of rent within the

[88] '[Revolution requires that] the bottoms don't want to live in the old way… [and] the tops can't govern as before,' (my translation from Lenin's *Collected Writings* [*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*], 1958-1966, vol. 23, page 300).

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framework of the 'energy-political model' (Balmaceda 2014, 86) based on the favorable condition of oil and gas trade with Russia during the commodity boom of the 2000s. This superficial consent, however, was buttressed by the structural violence on the level of the factory regime and of the organizational capacities of the working class. In the following two chapters I investigate two state policies that perform this structural violence to the effect of turning the Belarusian working class into an atomized 'sack of potatoes': the bureaucratic introduction of fixed-term employment contracts that mimic neoliberal labor market flexiblization, and the suppression of the representative labor organizations capable of conducting autonomous industrial and political actions.

In this second part of the dissertation I show how the Belarusian working class was defeated by the passive-revolutionary regime and discern the consequences of the atomizing and demobilizing policies for contemporary labor relations and labor organizations. Following the methodology of critical junctions, I identify the key events—institutional destruction of the labor movement in 2002 and introduction of fixed-term contracts in 2004—that became turning points in the transition from the initial phase of Caesarism analyzed in the previous chapter to the stable passive-revolutionary regime that I describe here. Afterwards, I analyze the structural limitations that the fixed-term contract system impose on workers' autonomy in the production process on the one hand, and the impact of the subjugation of labor organizations under the Caesarist regime on the other.

Seen from the point of view of the working class, the stabilization of the Caesarist regime started with the reshaping of the strategic terrain for organized labor that resulted in the cooptation of the largest trade union federation and the marginalization of more radical unions, which I discuss in Chapter 3. The formative phase of the Belarusian passive revolution (1996-1999) created the conditions for the consolidation of prebendal Caesarism. The president's

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direct control over most of the economy precluded the crystallization of oligarchic groups that could supply resources for political opponents, while state bureaucracy, including the former ‘red directors,’ had also been subordinated to the presidential ‘power vertical’.

By the end of the ‘90s, organized labor remained the only potential challenger to the ‘socially-oriented capitalist’ state: as the Caesarist ruling alliance was tightening its grip over the country, all trade-unions declared their opposition to the presidential authority, having shown considerable mobilizing capacity and a willingness to supply their resources to the opposition political movements. The stabilization of Caesarism was accomplished with the introduction of fixed-term contract system of employment, which I analyze in Chapter 4.

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Chapter 3. Neo-prebendalism and *transformismo* against organized labor

The first part of this dissertation was dedicated to labor's strength and the state's weakness. We saw how the strike committees threw out the communist party cells from factories, how the radical new unions and the reformist old ones resisted large scale capital accumulation, and how both of them forced the emerging authoritarian power into implementing pro-labor policies. This chapter comes to show how the state sucked this strength out of labor; this transfusion involved the capillary forces of the bureaucracy and the intrusive techniques of the police.

The previous chapter ended with a stalemate in a protracted war of positions, when the presidential administration, while still in the process of consolidating state power, was preparing for a decisive stand-off with organized labor. To that effect, in the immediate aftermath of the 1995 strikes in transportation, the Belarusian president initiated a parallel labor legislation, most efficiently expressed in presidential decrees, which are meant to take precedence over normal laws in practice if not in legal theory (see Chapter 2.2). This process accelerated in 1997 with a presidential draft decree that introduced additional disciplinary punishments, including for wages arrears, and allowed fixed-term contracts with some categories of workers, primarily public administration and management of state-owned companies. These acts of the presidential administration express a Bonapartist strategy that consists in conceding to the demands of the working class while simultaneously incorporating the bureaucratic vertical into what I called neo-prebendal dependence.

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In the beginning of 1999, however, the president's draft decree no. 29, entitled 'On additional measures to improve labor relations and strengthen labor and performance discipline,' entered the parliament in an amended form. Contradicting the Labor Code under consideration in the same year, the updated draft lifted all limits on who could be subjected to fixed-term employment and allowed for transferring anyone from open-ended employment agreements to fixed-term contracts under the threat of dismissal. I will return to the political-economic implications and the impact of this 'ultra-flexibilization' on labor relations in the next chapter; for now, it is important to stress that this decree initiated the decisive five years of a 'positional warfare' that would end in the cooptation of some and the marginalization of other labor organizations. I claim that this new stage in state-labor relations should be interpreted as an extension of a tool already familiar from the previous chapter, namely prebendal domination, and the emergence of another tactic, which, following Gramsci, I will call *transformismo.*

In the previous chapter I have introduced the concept of Caesarism and applied it to analyze the consolidation of power by the presidential administration, complementing it by the concept of neo-prebendalism. In this chapter I will trace the further permutations of neo-prebendal domination, but combine it with another concept from the Gramscian toolkit, that of *transformismo.* Both of these concepts are logically subordinated to the notion of passive revolution (Modonesi 2018, 97). Gramsci defined *transformismo* as 'the gradual but continuous absorption, achieved by methods which varied in their effectiveness, of the active elements produced by allied groups—and even of those which came from antagonistic groups and seemed irreconcilably hostile' (Gramsci 1971, 59). He introduced this notion in the course of his work on the politics of Italian *Risorgimento*, specifically, to account to for the whole period of the Italian history since 1848 until the 1920s throughout which a dominant social group (the Moderates, Giolitti, the Fascists) incorporated individual members ('molecular process') or

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whole factions of the more extreme political parties (the Action Party, socialists, syndicalist and anarchist groups) (Davis 1979).

The concept of *transformismo* is related to that of a deficient hegemony characteristic of a passive-revolutionary regime. On the one hand, a dominant group coopts the member of its allied groups, over which it exercises hegemony (*transformismo* is '…only the parliamentary expression of… hegemony' (Gramsci 1971, 58)). On the other hand, this cooptation is used to disorganize and neutralize potential challengers, and is therefore a form of coercion ('In this sense political leadership became merely an aspect of the function of domination—in as much as the absorption of the enemies' *elites* means their decapitation, and annihilation often for a very long time' (Gramsci 1971, 59)).

If on the level of the 'political class' *transformismo* is part of both domination and hegemony, Chantal Mouffe seems to oppose this strategy to hegemony on the level of a social formation. The interests of the subaltern groups 'can either be articulated so as to neutralize them and hence to prevent the development of their own specific demands, or else they can be articulated in such a way as to promote their full development leading to the final resolution of the contradictions which they express' (Mouffe 1979, 183). Thus, *transformismo* can be interpreted as a tool of domination (and not hegemony) over the whole of society, "a process of 'molecular' drift that strengthens the dominant classes through a gradual seepage (absorption), a co-optation or voluntary transfer of strength from the subaltern classes" (Modonesi 2018, 97). Understood as such, this concept becomes a transposable analytical tool that I will use to elucidate the functioning of the stable phase of the Belarusian passive revolution.

If *transformismo* describes an interaction between the dominant Caesarist coalition and its potential challengers, how are we to identify these actors in the context of the late '90s in

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Belarus? By gradually gaining control over the state through what I called a system of prebendal dependencies, Lukashenka's presidential administration eliminated its potential challengers from the 'political class': the political opposition was purged from the parliament, the parliament itself lost most of its power, the economic elite (directors of the state-owned enterprises and the emerging businesspeople) was alienated from politics, and the executive branch was subordinated to the president. After losing the parliament, the political opposition also lost the fight over hegemony in civil society. Trade unions remained as the only civil actors, wielding tremendous organizational, economic and ideological resources that could only be compared to those of the late Communist party. Alliances between the unions and the opposition led to the former's radicalization and their emergence on the political field as the radical challengers capable of subverting the passive revolution, the way they did in late *perestroika.*

The first section of this chapter traces the 'positional warfare' between the government and trade unions as a strategy of *transformismo* that led to an integration of the most dangerous members of civil society into the passive-revolutionary project and the neutralization of the remaining opposition. In this part of the chapter I focus on the tactics of both trade union actors and the state. The second section discusses the consequences of this strategy for the trade unions, specifically the mutations of their organizational forms, capabilities and ideologies. I identify two outcomes of *transformismo*: the re-articulation of the 'legacy union' with the state apparatus, and the marginalization of the 'alternative' unions in a civil society progressively colonized by the state.

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3.1. The dual strategy of prebendal control and *transformismo*

The 'war of positions' heated up in early 1999, immediately after the decree on the fixed-term contracts appeared in the parliament. The Federation of Trade Unions launched a mass

campaign calling on all labor organization to protest against this 'restriction of working men's rights' (*Belaruski chas,* No. 5, February 5, 1999). The Congress of Democratic Trade Unions used even stronger wording, stressing that the decree was issued by an illegitimate president and would 'turn workers into slaves' ('Zaiavlenie…,' *Salidarnasts*, No. 29, August 9, 1999). The Federation's nation-wide newspaper '*Belaruski chas*' furnished critical feedback on the law on a weekly basis: lawyers levelled devastating criticism of the draft, dozens of local union organizations sent letters unanimously denouncing fixed-term employment, and individual workers wrote to complain that instead of improving discipline, it would destroy cohesion and solidarity in their collectives and would put workers at the disposal of the management. The Federation's industrial unions gathered around fifteen thousand people in Minsk, Homel, and Hrodna in a demonstration against 'rising prices, falling wages, and the impoverishment of working people.' They picketed the presidential palace in protest against the decree (ASM 2000, 49).

This barrage from organized labor came at a time when the Ceasarist ruling coalition faced problems in the rearguard. Russia's default in 1998 hit the Belarusian economy and suppressed people's incomes that had resumed growth only three years before. The government had to admit there would be difficulties with the payment of wages in the budget-financed organizations, resuscitating fears of the endemic wage arrears (*Rabochiy,* June 3&July 1, 1999). Wild-cat strikes and labor disputes renewed in a sign of the government's fragile legitimacy built around the steady growth and timely payment of wages.

The president's political legitimacy was additionally questioned by the opposition politicians, many of whom defected the president's team and now hoped to split the ruling coalition from within. A former head of the Central Election Committee, who did not recognize the results of

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the 1996 referendum extending the term of the presidency, organized 'alternative elections[89]' with makeshift ballot boxes carried from door to door. Although this stunt failed, the ruling coalition was apparently spooked and retaliated with a wave of 'disappearances' of the opposition politicians and people associated with them (Andrew Wilson 2011, 189–92).

Now firmly entrenched in the opposition to the presidential administration, the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus could have been characterized at that time as a typical 'legacy union' (Caraway 2008) or a redistributive-type union (Varga 2014, 64). Indeed, its Soviet legacy was still immense nine years after the Union's collapse: FTUB had over 4,400,000 members representing 95.2% of all workers and civil servants, united in 29,700 primary trade union organizations (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 14), with each worker automatically transferring one percent of their salary as a membership fee. The Federation's subsidiary firms operated an empire of real estate used for administrative and entertainment purposes: hotels, tourist and sports centers, recreational facilities, a university and training centers in addition to the widely circulated newspaper *Belaruski chas* (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 67). This immense structure, which reached virtually every workplace and could challenge the state-employer through the bargaining process and in court, could not have been rivalled by any political party or civil society organization, including pro-governmental ones.

As opposed to what would have been expected from a legacy union, FTUB's three largest sectoral member organizations, Agricultural Machine-Building Workers' Union (ASM), Radio-Electronics Workers' Union (REWU) and the Union of Agricultural Workers, had long been conducting semi-independent politics grounded in a confrontational stance towards the enterprise administration, which drew them closer to 'representative-type unions' (Varga

[89] After the changes to the constitution of Belarus, adopted in 1996 through a referendum, the presidential term was prolonged until 2001. Opposition politicians did not recognize these amendments and some of them improvised an 'alternative election' in 1999, which was supposed to be the end of the first presidential term according to the old law.

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2014, 8). The leaders of ASM and REWU still had political ambitions as leaders of the Party of Labor, now part of the extra-parliamentary opposition milieu. This drew them closer to the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU), which in 1999 had around 19,000 members and included the Belarusian Free Trade Union, the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers, and the Belarusian Independent Trade Union. BCDTU's militancy was now in sync with that of the political opposition parties.

In anticipation of the coming stand-off, the president accused 'some union leaders' of using 'the opposition's methods of fighting the government,' implying they had colluded with the opposition political parties habitually branded by the state media as agents of foreign interests. Moreover, the president threatened to revive the Councils of Workers' Collectives that would substitute trade unions in relation to the state ('STK v protivoves profsoiuzam?', *Belaruski chas*, No. 7, February 19, 1999). These organs of workers' self-management had been actively promoted by Gorbachev to incentivize labor productivity and to balance the influence of enterprise directors. This time they were part of a plan to subordinate workers directly to the state. In the meantime, in line with the course on the further extension of the neo-prebendal control and sticking to the pre-emptive strategy (V Silitski 2006), the president issued the decree no. 2 'On Some Measures for the Regulation of Activities of Political Parties, Trade Unions and other Public Associations.' The 'measures' were a requirement to re-register all civil society organizations according to the new rules. As the unions regrouped for a counter-attack, the time bomb of the decree was ticking.

The last attempt to escape 'the noose'

Despite the threat of mass protests formulated by trade unions, the president's decree no. 29 was adopted in July 1999, together with the new Labor Code which conflicted with the decree. Unions responded with a nation-wide protest that happened in September under the slogan 'For

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the right to work and decent wages!' Expanding the agenda from the labor law to the falling living standards and thus targeting the core of the president's legitimacy, it was the last large nation-wide labor protest in Belarusian history, gathering approximately thirty thousand people throughout the country (ASM 2000, 49). Led by REWU's leader, half of that number marched in Minsk, including a 5000-strong column from the industrial *Partizan* district, while the rest gathered in other cities and towns, including 2000 people in Homel, the stronghold of the ASM union. Groups of political party activists joined, including the opposition Communist party members, whose flag was not welcome by the unions' leadership (a thematic issue of *Belaruski chas,* October 2, 1999).

This demonstration could have brought to memory the events of April 1991 by its geographic scale, if not by its impact. Given that the active preparation went on for a month and included a mass information campaign and centralized organization in the vast Federation empire of regional and local unions, the mobilization was not impressive, if we recall that ten years before *Partizan* district alone had been able to mobilize more than the whole country in 1999. The reasons for this included the lack of unity between the two federative union bodies, FTUB and BCDTU, and the Federation's own ideological and strategic miscalculations.

Although the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions called for the active support of 'the actions of Belarusian trade unions' (*Salidarnasts,* No. 32, September 27, 1999), its member organizations withdrew from the demonstration when they learned it would coincide with that of the Federation, thereby spreading confusion among potential participants. This decision was determined by BFTU's ideological allegiance to the liberal-nationalist opposition, which reemerged with the coming of a new generation of opposition politicians after the failure of the 'alternative elections' of 1999. One of them was Viktar Ivashkevich, an old member of BPF

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and a new liaison with the labor movement via the Free Trade Unions[90], elected Vice-President of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions in 1999. The opposition parties and BCDTU invested themselves in a 'Freedom March' in October 1999, a copycat of the then fashionable anti-Milosevic demonstrations in Serbia, which gathered around 30 000 participants and was violently dispersed by the police. BFTU, having withdrawn from politics after the ban in 1996, came to the fore again and became the first and the easiest target for the presidential administration.

The policy of temporary alliance with the enterprise management that some unions, primarily Bukhvostov's ASM, adopted, now backfired. Many directors asked workers not to join the protest or stopped their plants altogether to discourage centralized departure from their premises. Local union organizations, whose leaders were on good terms with the directors, were passive in mobilizing workers. If mobilizations did happen, the management asked the protesting workers not to write the names of their enterprises on the posters for the fear of reprisals (*Belaruski chas,* issues from October 2 and October 8).

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[90] Ivashkevich edited a newspaper '*Rabochiy*' ('The Workers') which since 1997 circulated among the members of Free Trade Union and the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers. I copied 16 issues of this newspaper from Stsiapan's personal archive. To the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic archive of labor organizations' literature.

Figure 2. 'Contract is a noose for workers,' a sign from the protest on September 30, 1999 (source: Belaruski chas, October 2, 1999)

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This protest popularized the slogan ‘Contract is a noose for workers’ (see Figure 1), that would later become a common trope referring to the contractual employment and reflecting an ideological framing of the class struggle as the struggle against a ‘feudal’ dictatorship. At the same time, the mood of the protesters expressed resentment with the obverse side of the paternalist legitimacy of the government: splitting of the image of the ‘people’ into ‘pure’ and ‘undeserving.’ The union newspaper reported that people who came to the protest were indignant at the contempt with which the president treated them: a young worker said he was

fed up with the state media portraying them as lazy and misled, in need of guidance (Yegorov, A. 'Budzie zhyt' Belarus', *Belaruski chas,* No. 52, October 2, 1999).

An article in MAZ's company newspaper *Avtozavodets* (September 29, 1999) by a pro-management author offers a further glimpse into the ideological struggle in the workplaces on the eve of the protest. The author warns MAZ employees not to end up as hostages of the "local political 'shouters' and foreign forces," meaning the trade unions, and specifically FTUM. It was them, the article reminds, who had advocated the market transformations that led to economic collapse in the early '90s. Therefore, the author goes on, the workers should be grateful to the current government for avoiding privatization and keeping their jobs. While trade unions claimed that the decree on the fixed-term contracts would decrease work guarantees, according to the author, the exact opposite was true: the new law would increase work guarantees by punishing undisciplined workers. Those who worked well, the author concludes, would enjoy high wages and job security.

This idiom of contrasting the hard-working and the undisciplined, initially applied by the president to the bureaucrats within the framework of populist rhetoric, as an opposition of 'the people' and 'the corrupt elite,' is now being turned against 'the people' themselves. Now, 'the people' are also divided into 'the pure' and 'the corrupt.' I will trace the splitting of 'the people' in the evolution of the government's populist rhetoric in the next chapters. For now, it is worth noting that it surfaces in moments of a crisis of legitimacy.

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This protest, even though less impressive than it could have been, still scared the authorities. Minsk city government cancelled several trains and buses from the towns around Minsk and the presidential administration was guarded by the special police forces (Aleksandrov, S. 'Slyshyt li vlast' golos trudiashchikhsia?' *Belaruski chas*, No. 54, October 8, 1999). It was

clear, however, that the government was not ready for a frontal assault on labor, which still held important 'strategic heights' and 'fortifications' (Gramsci) of civil society. What it chose instead was a series of preventive blows, tactical retreats and decisive blows. Immediately after the protest, Lukashenka retaliated by threatening to ban the payment of union membership fees through enterprises' accounts[91] (*Belaruski chas,* N58, October 22, 1999) and started enacting a set of decrees passed that year that would change the rules for non-governmental organizations, hitting the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions in the first place.

Neo-prebendalism against non-FTUB unions

In what follows, I will build on oral histories and documents that I obtained from one of my key informants, Stsiapan, as well as from other activists associated with the BCDTU, to show how the president's counter-attack impacted these minority unions.

After his strike committee, Stsiapan joined the Free Trade Union primary organization in one of the MAZ subdivisions in 1993, when the union's membership stood at 93 people. After the suspension of the Free Trade Union of Belarus for its participation in the Minsk metro strike (see Chapter 2.3), several industrial union organizations, including Stsiapan's, left FTUB and established a Free Trade Union of Metalworkers in October 1995. FTUM took a sizable share of FTUB members and secured its presence on the largest industrial enterprises in Minsk, including MAZ. Afterwards MAZ's Free Trade Union was growing steadily: from around a thousand members in 1996[92] to around 1500[93] in 1999.

That was when the president's decree no. 2 came into force. The law required a re-registration of all civil society organizations under the new rules, conditional upon the approval of a special

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[91] According to some reports, he used this tactics to suppress a trade union at the Haradzets collective farm, which he chaired in the '80s (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 18).
[92] Interview with Stsiapan from 12/2/2015
[93] 7% of the plant's total employment, which is above average for FTUM's share in the automobile industry

governmental commission with an unclear status (Y. Kryvoi 2017, 122). Primary organizations became structural divisions of a trade union, which meant they had to be registered with local authorities, which in turn required a legal address. This was a crucial problem according to FTUM's lawyer[94], because no employer was willing to offer a legal address to an 'independent' or 'free' union. As trade union organizations that are not affiliated with FTUB are often refused premises within an enterprise, they must rent private office-type real estate, while the assignment of the real estate purpose was yet another untransparent procedure. Additionally, criminal responsibility was introduced for representation on behalf of a non-registered organization, further endangering unionizing even in an informal manner. Finally, members of a republican-level organization, even if it was registered, could represent workers in the court but could not take part in collective bargaining.

In the summer of 1999, the administration of MAZ was already acting as if its FTUM primary organization stopped its legal function, although the decision on re-registration was still pending (*Rabochiy,* July 1, 1999). Stsiapan and other union members were causing the management trouble, accusing it of non-compliance with the collective agreement and agitating their co-workers to join the protests against the contractual employment. Finally, on December 9, 1999, after the protests caused by the threat of fixed-term contracts subsided, MAZ security service raided FTUM's office and confiscated its property[95]. In a week, around 1000 workers gathered at the administrative building of the plant to demand the returning of the union's premises, but were almost immediately dispersed by the police and unidentified men. Seven union members, including FTUM union's chair, Stsiapan, and the chairman of BITU, who had come from Salihorsk in a show of solidarity, were detained. Most of them were sentenced to

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[94] Interview with VL from 27/11/2015
[95] FTUM leaflet, Stsiapan's personal archive

administrative fines[96]. Stsiapan's court decision indicates that they were charged with holding an unsanctioned public gathering[97].

Thus, FTUM lost its legal address at MAZ and, hence, its registration with the city district authorities as a primary trade-union organization. Two subsequent attempts to register in 2000 and 2003 similarly failed[98], prohibiting Stsiapan until this day to ever represent his union, to access the MAZ premises, and to hold gatherings. Within the same timeframe, four other FTUM organizations lost their registration over legal address issues, including on the giant Minsk Tractor, Motor and Instrumental plants. Its sister organization Belarusian Free Trade Union fared even worse: from 1999 to 2004, 25 of its enterprise-based primary organizations and 3 regional organizations lost registration (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 106–15). Consequently, the number of BFTU's primary organizations fell from 1000 in 1995 to 20[99] enterprise-based groups in 2005 (Alfer and Kozlov 2012, 12).

Besides the issue of a legal address, from 1999 to 2015 the decree mentioned above stipulated that in order to register a trade union organization in an enterprise or in an organization, a minimum of 10% (but not less than ten people) of employees were necessary, and a minimum of 500 members in most of the regions/districts, if a union wanted to register as a territorial organization. Although since 2015 the minimum number of employees for an enterprise has been set to 10, the weakened opposition unions could not register a single new one. On the contrary, FTUB's primary organization at '*Polotsk-Steklovolopno*,' that rented an office at the enterprise's premises, was denied prolongation of its rental agreement in 2017, and the union sued the employer over the office issue.

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[96] FTUM leaflet, Stsiapan's personal archive
[97] Court decision from December 22, 1999 (Stsiapan's personal archive)
[98] As follows from the official administrative decision from Stsiapan's personal archive
[99] The numbers are approximate due to the lack of reliable statistics.

This strategy applied against organized labor, namely the use of presidential decrees to deprive smaller trade unions of organizational resources, could be understood as an extension of the neo-prebendal form of domination to organized labor, that could have been successful only after the subjugation of state bureaucracy who controls organizational resources. Additionally, this strategy was ideologically acceptable, as these 'alternative' unions were represented as foreign to the body of 'the people' because of their contacts with the nationalist opposition and foreign states and organization. Indeed, after Stsiapan's union was expelled from MAZ, he and his colleague went on a tour around the US and European embassies in Minsk, trying to attract the attention of the 'global community.' MAZ's pro-management newspaper *Avtozavodets* (December 22, 1999) used this occasion to delegitimize the unions in the eyes of the plant's workers.

This strategy could not have worked with the Federation of Trade Unions. With their mobilization capacity, resources related to the provisioning of welfare and the remnants of Soviet-inherited legitimacy, they were both hard to attack and too precious to lose as a potential resource. In 2000 Belarusians, dangerously, started trusting trade unions more than the president (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 68). However, the FTUB leadership's attempt at a game with the highest strategic stakes provided the presidential administration with an opportunity for an attack.

Transformismo against FTUB

As we remember from Chapter 2, Lukashenka personally offered the chair of the FTUB Uladzimir Hancharik a place in the Caesarist coalition already in 1995, which the union leader refused. The authorities gave him the last chance for co-optation in 2000 by offering him a lucrative public post in exchange of the dismissal of the most radical union leaders, including ASM's Bukhvostov and REWU's Fedynich, who kept stirring popular discontent with regular

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social protests (Bukhvostov 2013). Hancharik refused again and decided instead to go into politics independently.

The opposition groups nominated FTUB's leader, along with a nationalist politician, to run for president in 2001[100]. Hancharik exceeded the nationalist candidate in polls and got the backing of the US ambassador, which earned him an image, spread by the pro-governmental media, of a nationalist and a collaborationist who wanted to bring NATO bombs onto Minsk (Andrew Wilson 2011, 195). Thus, organized labor rose to the forefront of anti-authoritarian struggle in Belarus, winning hegemony over the nationalist liberals but losing it in the eyes of the rest of the population. As a result of the vote, the incumbent beat Hancharyk with 75.7% against 15.7% according to official numbers and 57-58% against 28-29% according to alternative polls (Andrew Wilson 2011, 198).

The pro-incumbent media campaign against the chair of the FTUB spilled over to labor organizations in general. The message of this campaign, resembling a Walmart-style anti-union propaganda, proclaimed that the only protector of the workers was the president, while union bosses only cared about gathering contributions (Golubev et al. 2004, 17). The presidential administration even entertained plans to create alternative state-run union-like bodies (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 121), similar to its setting up of government-organized civic organizations.

The repressions came with the government's ruling 'On measures to protect the rights of trade union members' (December 2001) that banned the non-cash payment of union membership fees, making good on the president's threat from 1999. Formerly, employers transferred 1% of workers' wages to their unions' accounts; the calculation was that, given their small wages,

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[100] Leader of the Agricultural Workers' Union Yarashuk (Rus.: Yaroshuk), now the chair of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade-Unions, also wanted to run for president but could not gather enough votes (personal communication by Ihar, June 2017).

workers would not pay their fees in cash. In a neo-prebendal manner, disloyalty was punished by cutting one of the unions' sources of rent. Although the law contradicted the Constitutional Court ruling, the Labor Code, the Trade Union Law as well as ILO conventions, it was enacted and brought a considerable outflow of members from the FTUB and the loss of unions' financial standing: 14 union organizations with 120 000 members left the Federation in one year (Golubev et al. 2004, 20).

The law banning non-cash contributions harmed the union functionaries, and the FTUB's chair Hancharik had to resign under their pressure. After a brief interregnum of a relatively independent leader, the senior enterprise management, who had considerable influence in the FTUB and was already subsumed under Lukashenka's authority, elected the former deputy chief of the president's office as chair of the country's largest labor organization. The non-cash transfer of fees was immediately reinstated in appreciation of the new FTUB policies. Symbolically, the Federation was allowed to change its name from the grammatical monstrosity of 'Federation of Trade Unions, Belarusian' to 'the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus', since the country's name could only be used, after a special decree from 1999, by the state bodies (Golubev et al. 2004, 18). During his address to the congress of the Federation in 2002, Lukashenka called trade unions one of the pillars of the state, together with local councils and a state-supported youth organization.

The demise of the dissident ASM and REWU followed. The Party of Labor, formed by ASM and REWU in 1993 (see Chapter 2.1), supported Hancharik in the elections, which caused controversies among local union committees and, combined with pressure from the government, led to the deposition of ASM and REWU's leaders. With their party polling below 2% (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 68), they could not secure external support either.

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One reason for the fall of the reformist unions was that their Party of Labor could not present an ideology powerful enough to challenge Lukashenka's populism. Researcher and activist David Mandel, who communicated with ASM's leader Bukhvostau in 2004, summed up his position: 'Let the liberals do their dirty work; we'll be in the opposition to defend the workers' (Mandel 2004, 241). The party's traditional pro-labor populist demands ('socially-oriented market economy with different forms of property') had already been appropriated by the president, as the unions themselves admitted, and the new pro-market and pro-democracy elements ('state support for entrepreneurship', 'conditions for domestic and foreign investment') adopted as a compromise with liberal and nationalist politicians were not popular among the voters.

The other factor behind the ASM's demise, according to Mandel, was a tactical alliance with the directors of state-owned enterprises. In a private conversation with Mandel, Bukhvostau admitted that the unions had to protest against the government's pressure on the management and 'stand together with them against the government' (Mandel 2004, 233). This tactic backfired again, just as it had during the protest of 1999, as it lowered the morale in the union organizations that were at odds with the management and allowed those already on good terms with the directors limit their protest mobilization for country-wide events. Ironically, the MAZ ASM union chair who toed Bukhvostau's line and defended his director against the government before 2001, withdrew his organization from Bukhvostau's union after the director reconciled with the victorious Lukashenka (*Rabochaia solidarnosts',* March 18-24, 2002). Many local union chairs followed his example upon the insistence of the management.

Thus, the leaders of ASM and REWU left FTUB together with the activists that stayed loyal to them. An ASM group formed an independent branch union and then merged with REWU to establish the Belarusian Trade Union of Workers of Radio-Electronic, Machine Building,

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Metalwork and Other Industries (REPAM), officially registered, but soon deprived of registration. They split in the mid-2000s, and in 2010 the members of ASM joined the formerly rival FTUM. If in their best days, in the early '90s, ASM had 220 000 members and FTUM had 6000, during my fieldwork their successor union counted around 550 members[101] and did not have legally recognized organizations on enterprises. Two cells existed on MAZ, although without a legal address. Their website cites 20 more 'primary organizations' or rather informal groups in all of the country's provinces.

Thus, the Federation of Trade-Unions was co-opted into the passive-revolutionary mechanism, as a new kind of 'transmission belt' from the Caesarist president to the workers. However, it was not allowed to regain the influence it once had as the Communist party's 'transmission belt' in Soviet times: it was not essential for workers' welfare, and with the introduction of the post of a deputy director for ideology, it also lost its ideological function. Now, it is a legacy union of second order, bearing the legacy of the passive-revolutionary transformism rather than that of the union debates of the 1920s. In the next two chapters I will analyze the role that FTUB played in the introduction of the fixed-term contract system and in mitigating the consequences of the 2011 crisis.

The unions that are now gathered under the umbrella of BCDTU underwent a loss of status, membership and bargaining power in the course of the next years (see Table 2 below). They kept losing access to the workplaces of their members, their activists were harassed with the threat of non-prolongation of their fixed-term contracts, and their public activities were constrained by the anti-protest laws. In the next sections of this chapters I will analyse how these adverse processes transformed these representative labor organizations.

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[101] As of 2015, according to FTUM's official documents. According to personal communications, many of the union members are not active, don't pay the fees or show up on meetings.

Table 3. Membership of Belarusian trade unions (1999-2019)

	1999	2005	2011[102]	2017-2019
FTUB (total membership)	4,400,000[103]	4,000,000[104]	4,000,000	
REWU (part of FTUB before 2004)	100,000	700	1500	2,200-2,500[105]
ASM (as part of FTUB before 2004; merged with ASM after 2010)	185908[106]	500	-	-
FTUM	3000[107]	500	600-800	560-1000
BFTU	6,000	1000-1500[108]	950-1000	500
BITU	10,000	8000	7,000	6,000-5,200[109]

3.2. Opposition labor organizations' capabilities after 2004

The above pressures, expelling unions from the shop-floor, depriving them of bargaining capability, discrediting them ideologically, and crippling them financially, changed the strategic conditions for their functioning and their organizational nature. In this section I will explore the organizational and ideological consequences of the marginalization of non-coopted unions, starting with a trip to the Minsk Automobile Factory in an attempt to distribute Free Metalworkers' Union's leaflets.

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[102] According to (Alfer and Kozlov 2012, 10) and trade unions' websites.
[103] According to (Holubew and Khadyka 2003, 14).
[104] According to (Golubev et al. 2004, 21).
[105] According to trade union's website http://praca-by.info/.
[106] Informatsionno-spravochnyi material, Minsk 2000, 52.
[107] Salidarnasts, N46, 19 XI 2004, Elena Iakzhik, 'Zheleznyi profsoiuz' (interview with Vladimir Drugakov).
[108] According to (Golubev et al. 2004, 29).
[109] According to the trade union's website http://belnp.org/.

On November 7, 2015 I arranged a meeting with Stsiapan in the central union office. He was late, and I waited for him in a small rented room on the third floor of a rundown building that also hosted travel agencies, a hostel, an animation studio and a range of other small businesses[110]. Only a few visitors would drop by the office throughout the day, mostly to consult with the lawyer or pick newspapers, surprisingly few people for the central office of a national union organization.

Figure 3. The hall of the building that hosts FTUM's central office

This is a drastic contrast with the headquarters of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, a multi-story House of Trade Unions in the center of Minsk, owned by the Federation and serviced by the dedicated union-affiliated company. The Federation's sectoral and territorial organizations are hosted in similarly large premises owned by FTUB in the regional capitals, and its primary organizations are offered premises by the company's management for free.

FTUB's rival, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, inhabited an office it rented in a residential building on the outskirts of Minsk. It hosted the organization's permanent staff, served for the reception of visitors and held small events, like FTUM's council meetings that needed more space than the union's own office could offer and which I would attend on

[110] In the last months of my fieldwork FTUM's main office moved into even smaller room further from the city center.

Stsiapan's invitation. For the purpose of general congresses, BCDTU would also rent larger commercial premises.

A day of a clandestine union activist

Stsiapan arrived around noon, and we started preparing for a trip to MAZ, where he had to meet members of his union organization, give them fresh union papers for distribution and gather membership fees. We had to meet the contact person at 4 pm after his shift, at a tram stop near one of the gates of the Minsk Automobile Factory. Stsiapan did not have permission to enter the factory's premises, and would not dare engage in a public activity, such as spreading bulletins, right in front of the gates, where he was once arrested.

We arrived at the Minsk Automobile Plant metro station half an hour ahead of the agreed time and took a longer road to the factory gate discussing the current situation at the plant. Despite the plunging car sales, the factory had on its books a 'house of culture,' a fitness center, a sauna etc. The president made the plant take responsibility for two agricultural companies (Stsiapan called them 'collective farms') and two kindergartens. Stsiapan criticizes this decision: 'They are firing 150 people but have money for recreation.' The Belarusian 'socially oriented capitalism' relegated welfare functions to the enterprise level, similarly to the Soviet experience, but deprived trade-unions of control over many social and cultural facilities. Unlike the Soviet state, it does not provide housing, recreation and day care facilities for workers. Richer enterprises can offer some of these benefits, but only to a limited extent and on a need-proven basis (Danilovich and Croucher 2011, 255).

While approaching the meeting point, Stsiapan briefly told me about his comrade, whom I will call Artem. They had a long-lasting friendship and cooperate in 'business trips' to Ukraine. Semi-legal trans-border trade allows them to supplement their incomes up to 1000 USD per month. Artem was a 55 year-old, youthfully looking guy who had worked 25 years in MAZ

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and was then a fitter in a service department. 'I see that you are not a KGB-guy,' he told me after Stsiapan introduced me to him. When I asked him how he could tell, he explained that a KGB officer would not have a pony tail (which I sported back then and was often mocked for it by younger workers), would be shaved and would wear a black suit. Indeed, I did not fit any of these criteria.

This joking precaution signaled the legally ambiguous situation in which the members of FTUM ended up due to the legal constraints discussed above. Stsiapan did not have the right to distribute newspapers, Artem was hiding his membership in the FTUM from the management, and unions were often infiltrated with KGB agents (see the REWU case in Chapter 6). When I invited them for an interview to a typical post-Soviet 'pizzeria,' Artem did not agree to be recorded and since then I didn't use a recorder while talking to rank-and-file union members. When we entered, Artem made sure there were no familiar faces around, and during our conversation Stsiapan repeatedly asked him to lower his voice.

Artem was a member of ASM, and in 2012 joined FTUM. Although asked to retroactively register as a member since 2009, he insisted on the true date of joining the union. His FTUM membership was not known to the management, and he did not belong to the FTUB-affiliated union: instead of making a gesture of leaving it, he did not apply for union membership after changing departments. Recently he was asked by the FTUM to recruit three more members, but he could only find two.

Our conversation circled around the power relations in his department, the union's history, and the contractual employment system, to which I will return in the next chapter. Artem's political views, however, are worth mentioning here, since they are indicative of unionized workers' imageries of power. Artem described himself as a 'republican' and asked me to bring him

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Hungarian forint coins without the word republic (‘*Magyar Köztársaság’*) on the tail side[111]. He donated 25 euro to Catalonian republicans but praised George W. Bush for ‘bringing democracy to Iraq’ (‘the only way democracy can be established in authoritarian countries’). He considered the French president Hollande ‘Putin’s whore,’ Obama ‘a KGB guy,’ and supported Ukrainian far right groups in the Donbass conflict. Not surprisingly, he saw an armed uprising as the only way of political change in Belarus. Artem rejected any cooperation with ‘the regime’ and recalled his own participation in 2010 post-election protests.

This ‘republicanism’ sounds as a calcified *perestroika* mentality, that takes the dominant tropes of the media-distributed ‘state ideology’ (geopolitics over domestic politics, states instead of classes, force instead of debates) and turns them upside down. The utopian ‘armed uprising’ is a widespread phantasmatic scenario among opposition-minded activists, disappointed in more mundane ways of influencing the political situation. I encountered this same vision in a daydream-like novel written by a young worker with anarchist sympathies, whom I had the chance to interview on another occasion[112]. In his post-apocalyptic novel staged in a not-so-distant future, a group of young Belarusians set out to fight the authoritarian regime, suffer persecution and disappear in the woods, where they form a clandestine resistance. Similar tropes of self-destruction or escapism into a clandestine ‘*partizan*’ existence haunt the stories of established author K. Charukhin, whom I quote in the epigraph introducing this part of the dissertation.

Ideological climate was not clearer when we returned to the office. Political opponents in 1991 and competitors for the influence over workers throughout the 1990s, FTUM veteran Stsiapan and the former ASM leader Aliaksandr Bukhvostau now shared a semi-underground existence.

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[111] ‘Magyar Köztársaság’ was replaced with ‘Magyarország’ (Hungary) after the changes in that country’s Constitution in 2012.

[112] As he explained, this text lays out his philosophy ‘for the laymen.’ His novel was printed in an obscure publishing house, and I decided not to reference the book here to preserve the anonymity of the author.

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Stsiapan, a former member of BPF movement still exposing nationalist sentiments, valued his boss, a Marxist, whose *nomenklatura* past was a good school of union organizing: 'Now everything works beautifully, we have some kind of a plan, this is normal trade union work… And if we drink together and have a dispute over some other topics, it's normal[113]'. Indeed, a meeting of the FTUM Council I describe below started with a strict old-school protocol and finished with honest conversations over vodka and home-made *zakuska.* As if to reflect the predominance of symbolical existence over the material, the section of FTUM's website dedicated to official documents and templates is richer in content that its 'activity' section[114], while the latter mostly mentions trade union's council meetings, visits of foreign guests, and new issues of the FTUM's bulletin.

During the meeting I attended, I did not witness ideological disputes even over drinks. Members of the FTUM more willingly discussed the ongoing conflict in Donbass—all the more so that Minsk hosted the peace talks—or Belarusian medieval history than current Belarusian politics. Stsiapan carefully stressed that their trade union was not a political organization, and its priority were workers' rights. His boss repeated almost the same phrases during our first, rather official, meeting, although as we later talked in the union's office he sounded proud that he was an MP from the Party of Labor and lauded the Swedish unions' political achievements, as if to acknowledge that the two realms were more difficult to separate in reality. Stsiapan denounced trade unions' attempts to participate in Belarusian politics as collaborationism with the anti-Belarusian, pro-Moscow regime, while FTUM's chair, an experienced politician who had not abandoned his ambitions, considered contemporary Belarus far worse than Russia, a sort of totalitarian neoliberal state akin to Franco's Spain.

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[113] Interview with Stsiapan, November 25, 2015
[114] http://www.spm-by.org/content/17/hronika-spm/1/

Calling himself a Marxist, Bukhvostau did not agree with the slogan ‘Labor is not a commodity!’. On the contrary, as a union leader, he considered it his duty to stress that labor power is indeed a commodity, and class struggle should consist in fighting for a fair price of this commodity. What he was forced to do instead, as it followed from his reasoning, was to fight against non-standard employment, which he described as ‘shackles,’ ‘slavery,’ ‘institutional limitation of freedom,’ and against a quasi-fascist regime. Following this logic, ‘free’ trade unions in contemporary Belarus first needed to wrest the very luxury of waging a class struggle on the free market, under the bourgeois democracy. But before ‘the liberals do their dirty job,’ trade unions’ existence is tied to the common struggle of the civil society against the encroaching state.

NGO-ization of trade unions

An excerpt from Aliaksandr Bukhvostau’s speech during a FTUM council meeting sums up the ideological-cum-organizational form common of non-FTUB unions:

> We need to establish a civil movement that would control how the authorities fulfill their promises, take them at their word. We need to gather information about people’s grievances locally, concentrate and spread it. We don’t have access to objective information, but we have started gathering it on the enterprise level and publish in our newspapers. Our main task is to work with general public. Our trade-union cannot perform traditional union tasks, we are excluded from collective bargaining, thus we need to work with people. We have people in the Technical University, 4-5 people who pay their fees. One of them came to pay the fees and said: ‘Most importantly, you act as a scarecrow for the administration’ [‘a torch’ – an ironic voice from the audience]. We should not be over-politicized. Our only ideology is the fight for workers’ rights, we don’t fight for power. We shouldn’t go underground, we should plan public events, spread leaflets. We should continue campaigns against the contract system, our brothers from IndusriALL insist on this within their fight against non-standard employment. So, we should gather signatures.[115]

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[115] Fieldnotes, 12/11/2015

First thing to be noted, unions lost contact with their members and with their immediate workplace conditions. Local enterprise news needs to be summarized in a critical manner and published on FTUM's website and in its bulletin '*Rabocheye slovo*' ('Worker's Word'), the main means of communication with rank-and-file union members, according to Stsiapan. While I was waiting for Stsiapan in the office, another union member brought the MAZ newspaper '*Avtozavodets*', a valuable source of information for FTUM, deprived of direct access to the company's premises. The Union's chair handed me a copy and commented: 'Finally, they started publishing plan fulfillment reports; their output dropped by 44% since the previous year'.

Secondly, most members of BCDTU also belong to one of the FTUB-affiliated unions and conceal their union belonging; many entertain only occasional contact with their union and don't pay fees regularly. Bukhvostau complains of a 'consumerist' attitude that union members have to their unions.

Thirdly, the effect of the trade union regulations introduced in 1999 is noticeable in the demographic composition of the alternative unions. The four inhabitants of the FTUM office were retired and less than a quarter of the union members were younger than 35, but most of those I met were around fifty and more. At the time of my fieldwork, all the opposition union leaders had held presiding or senior positions in their unions since their establishment, and all of them were past retirement age. This demographic physiognomy is also common for other BCDTU unions: the Union of Radio-Electronic Workers, the Free Trade-Union of Belarus, and, to a lesser extent, of the Independent Trade-Union.

Finally, given the need to pay for the office space, lack of own assets, and the problems with fee collection, most of the non-FTUB unions relied on financial help from abroad. The presidential decree from November 2003 was meant to undercut this support, stipulating that

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international financial help for trade unions could not be used for meetings, marches, demonstrations, picketing, strikes and even the organization of seminars under threat of banning the receiving body. Additionally, foreign help should be approved by the state. The law was passed in the context of media and administrative pressure against NGOs: from 2003 to 2005 247 NGOs were banned and the government set out to create the Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations or 'state civic society' (Andrew Wilson 2011, 202). I chapter 6 I briefly touch upon a recent prosecution of the REWU leader in a related case.

Given the above limitations, much of FTUM's activism focuses on legal advice and court representation, reinforcing the service-consumer type of relations. Its legal service was established in 2013, and FTUM's lawyer admitted that around 55% of the cases dealt with by union lawyers were not labor law-related but concern family, housing or even criminal cases[116]. I found a similar situation in REWU.

Ihar, an experienced journalist and former trade union organizer who at the time of my research kept his distance from both pro- and anti-government unions, said he doubted REWU could even be called a trade union: 'Free legal help does not make a trade union.' Although he admitted he didn't know much about the internal workings of the union, he could form his opinion based on information from human rights circles, where REWU was closely integrated. According to him, the figure of two thousand members that REWU declared from year to year was hardly verifiable. He had information that many REWU members were activists of political parties that needed a 'legal cover' for their activities, but he could not imagine how a union could work while 'chasing people from different regions,' who were not united by

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[116] Interview from 12/11/2015

relations of production. A member of BITU from Salihorsk also agreed that 'REWU is a social and human rights organization rather than a trade union.'

REWU offers its central office in Minsk for meetings with opposition political organizations and human rights NGOs, and its regional organizations sometimes share their premises with opposition political parties. For examples, the building that hosts REWU's Homel regional organization is the seat of '*Polesskaia 52*' civic and political center (commonly known as 'the opposition house' in the city) and is also occupied by '*Viasna*' human rights center, the United Civic Party, and a city branch of the republican organization 'Legal Initiative.' REWU's office in Rechitsa also hosts the United Civil Party. In fact, throughout my research I met more political and NGO activists in REWU's offices than union members or workers, which points to a peculiar civil rights, politically-oriented rather than classical unionist mode of operation. However, as opposed to FTUM, REWU had made an attempt to move form a service-provider union to a social movement union, as they gained prominence during the 2017 protests again the law on 'social parasites' (see Chapter 6).

BCDTU's backbone, the Belarusian Independent Trade Union, is now the only opposition trade union that preserved the capacity to participate in collective bargaining on all levels. Although its membership dropped from approx. 10 000 in 1999[117] to around 6000 at the time of my fieldwork[118], it preserved registered primary organizations within the largest foreign currency earners of the country, '*Belaruskali*' potash mines in Salihorsk, Mazyr oil refinery, and 'Naftan' oil refinery in Navapolatsk, as well as on the large chemical industry producers

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[117] Report of BITU president Mr Babaed for the V congress of BITU, in *Salidarnasts,* 27 (July 12, 1999).
[118] Annual reports from BITU's website http://belnp.org. Since the beginning of 2019, approx. 800 members left the union over the pressure from '*Belaruskali'* potash company administration, and its membership may be currently estimated at 5 147.

'*Hrodna Azot*', '*Polimir*' (Navalopatsk), and '*Belshina*' (Babruysk). Its largest primary organization at '*Belaruskali'* had 4434 members in 2018[119].

Although BITU took its share of repressions in 1999-2004, it managed to preserve itself as a member of tripartite accords. In 2005, the president addressed the congress of FTUB and demanded its leadership, as well as that of the state's Oil and Chemistry Concern, to get rid of the independent unions. Afterwards, '*Belaruskali*' refused to conclude a separate collective agreement for 2006 with BITU, thus forcing the latter to join a four-party agreement together with the official union. This decreased the union's chances of getting a better bargain since the competition between the unions decreased. BITU, however, still retained its present in all the commissions working within the enterprise (Alekseichenko and But-Gusaim 2006, 11–13).

This came at the cost of BITU's relative depoliticization. Since 2002 it stopped participating *en mass* in the opposition demonstrations in Minsk and limited its public protest activity (Novik 2013a), although it continued with more conventional forms of protest. For example, in 2006 its Salihorsk organization managed to gather 2500 signatures, including from members of FTUB-affiliated union which otherwise refused to participate as an organization, for a petition to the president requiring to cancel the tax on retirement benefit. Within several months the president dropped the tax (Alekseichenko and But-Gusaim 2006, 17).

BITU's youth organization, with whom I communicated most in 2016, was unsatisfied with the relative passivity of the union and the predominance of the 'old guard' among its leadership. Some of the young miners regularly attend opposition rallies in Minsk, together with REWU. It was after one of these rallies that I joined a group of BITU members at an informal drinking

[119] Due to the outflow of membership, approx. 3500 as of April 2019, see Aleksandr Yaroshevich, "Shakhterskii profsoiuz pokinula tysiacha chelovek," Naviny.by (April 10, 2019), https://naviny.by/article/20190410/1554894540-shahterskiy-profsoyuz-pokinula-tysyacha-chelovek-govoryat-o-zhestkom

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event in one of Minsk's public parks. They told me the story of Aleh and the '*Hranit*' plant protest, which I will analyze in Chapter 5. They sounded bitter that their union had not been not able to direct the protest or protects its leaders, and with the bureaucratization within their union. From their accounts, BITU seemed to have adopted a more conventional strategy of collective bargaining and was even attempting to compete with the FTUB-affiliated union as a provider of social services.

I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the deficiencies of the non-FTUB unions' strategies through the eyes of former union organizers Ihar, whom I mentioned earlier and whom I had met in June 2017 on a semi-underground conference of Belarusian labor activists attended by a member of Argentinian MST party. This event was organized by Anatol, a member of SMOT, an organization that existed only virtually, who equally despised the county's leadership, the Federation's bosses, and the leadership of the non-coopted unions, whom he considered degenerated *nomenklatura*. The activists who attended this conference were a younger generation of opposition trade union members, generally critical of their leadership, and young left-wing intellectuals. As a result, it was not unusual to hear critical comments not only about the ruling regime but also about the opposition movement.

By this time, Ihar had migrated towards the human rights circles in Belarus, but still tried to offer us his own experience of trade union organizing from the times when he had worked with international trade union federations in Russia. BDCTU, however, was not willing to invite him as an organizing trainer. Meanwhile, he thought he had a lot to offer: he insisted that union activists should work on the level of the production process, know instructions and communicate with the line management. He disclosed his 'hypothesis' about a more successful strategy for Belarusian trade unions: they should look for common ground in cooperating with the management of the companies where they are present. Of course, these should not be

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antagonizing issues, such as wages or workplace environment, but questions of productivity, the preservation of enterprises and their interaction with public authorities. In this way, a union could prove prone to negotiations in relation to the management, and become visible for workers. What actually happened in Belarus, according to him, was that independent unions were self-marginalizing.

The consequences of this marginalization of non-coopted trade unions are illustrated by Ihar's story of a failed unionization attempted at a Belarusian Coca-Cola plant in 2006. Ihar[120] had helped set up the trade union there, and as I interviewed him, he described the mindset of BCDTU union leaders as 'tunnel consciousness,' that led their unions into a 'political ghetto.' According to him, they felt surrounded by enemies and prompted to interact only with like-minded activists and politicians, which prevents the unions to see new opportunities and increase their financial and human resources.

In 2006 Ihar was working for IUF[121], which had by that time reached an international understanding with Coca-Cola about non-intervention into the unionization efforts on its plants. Ihar brought his proposal to set up a trade union organization on Minsk Coca-Cola plant to the head of BCDTU. They reached a preliminary understanding that the future organizations would be part of the Free Trade Union, a member union of BCDTU. BFTU's chair, however, did not show much interest in organizing, so Ihar talked with the Coca-Cola workers and distribute leaflets on his own. Soon three workers expressed interest in organizing, and one of them, Andrei, joined FTU.

As it turned out, another worker that came to the organizing meetings was probably an informer for the management. Three days after the meeting, Andrei was fired. Although Coca-Cola

[120] June 7, 2017.

[121] The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations.

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happily transferred its workers to fixed term contracts when they were introduced by the president of Belarus, the management decided not to wait until Andrei's contract would expire and found two disciplinary violation in one day. Ihar recalled that the case was transparently fabricated and he thought it would be easy to reinstate the worker. The chair of BCDTU, however, had a different opinion: it was impossible to do anything about that case. REWU's leader openly asked for money to help with the case and to set up a primary organization in Coca-Cola. Eventually, IUF found 300 USD to pay for a BCDTU lawyer, who would take Andrei's case [122]. The court ruled to reinstate Andrei in his previous position, pay wages for the time he was out of work and compensate his moral damage[123].

Andrei, however, decided not to proceed with fighting for his rights or working on the plant altogether, and he quit the job soon upon returning. According to Ihar, BCDTU's chair sighed with relief: 'I told you it was impossible.' Since 2016, however, a primary organization of an FTUB-affiliated union was established at Coca-Cola, upon Lukashenka's direct order to the Federation to establish trade unions on private companies.

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[122] The details about the non-coopted unions' chairs attitudes are omitted in other accounts, e.g. in (Alekseichenko and But-Gusaim 2007)
[123] Communication on IUF's official website, accessed July 21, 2019, at http://iuf.ru/index.php?ss=&s=&s1=42&s2=63&s3=80&id=397&print=1.

Chapter 4. Preventive flexibilization. State, capital and the experience of precarization

As we saw in the previous chapter, the years 1999-2004 witnessed a crucial stand-off between the increasingly centralized presidential administration and the organized labor challenging its power, which ended in a deteriorated strategic terrain for labor organizations. The outcome of this battle was the cooptation of the Federation of Trade Unions into the system of prebendal domination on the one hand and the marginalization of the non-aligned smaller unions on the other. In this chapter I will look into the relations of forces and the imaginaries of power as they play out at the level of labor market and individual enterprises, reckoning that they were reshaped in a flurry of legislative and administrative initiatives between 1999-2004. This process turned the Belarusian labor market into the most flexible but also the most immobilized terrain in the post-Soviet space, marking the penetration of the passive-revolutionary process into the factory.

As in the previous chapter, I will start with the experience of my key informant. Stsiapan was transferred from an open-ended contract to a one year fixed-term one in December 2004. 11 years later, when I interviewed him, he could vividly recall how it happened: "I spotted a timekeeper walking around the shop and handing out contract notifications. She also gave me a paper: 'Sign here your consent form,' she said. I told her: 'I will not sign because you do not observe the presidential decree… Show me the contract itself.' She was surprised, started calling someone and then told me to drop by a timekeeper's office. There they offered me to make a protocol that I reject the contract, […] which I signed. Then she told me: 'That's it. You can say goodbye to the plant'[124]."

[124] Interview from November 15, 2015

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Eventually Stsiapan's shop foreman, who was also his friend, ordered the timekeeper to produce the draft contract, going against an informal order of the human resources office. Stsiapan signed it and spent the next 8 years worrying whether his contract would be renewed every year, especially as he was an activist of an unregistered trade union. His last contract, for 2012, expired right before his retirement, depriving him of a retirement benefit, for which he then had to sue his employer.

Stsiapan's colleagues at MAZ, like most Belarusian employees at state-owned and private businesses, experienced the same change in employment conditions throughout 2004. Since then virtually all public organizations and companies hired new employees under the new contract system, bypassing traditional open-ended employment envisioned by the Labor Code. This tour de force in employment relations virtually eliminated employment security based on open-ended employment agreements, which had been costly to terminate for the employers. According to official statistics (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2018, 304), the share of employment under fixed-term contracts, civil law contracts and informal employment in 2017 was 90.9%, out of which fixed-term, one- to five-year contracts, covered 89% of employees.

Despite the general trend of flexibilization of labor markets since the 1980s in the core capitalist countries (Kalleberg 2009; Vosko 2010) and the fast-tracked catching-up of the post-socialist economies, these fast-paced, rigid policies turned Belarus into the champion of non-standard employment, which some Belarusian scholars call 'ultra-flexibility' (Tomashevskii 2016, 64).

This is where the paradoxes that may obscure our understanding of the condition of Belarusian labor start. Although Belarus outperformed all first-world and post-Soviet economies in work flexibilization, it did not follow up with other neoliberal measures usually associated with this process. The introduction of flexible employment regulations in the early 2000s was not

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accompanied by either mass privatization or significant deregulation of business operations, or by an influx of foreign direct investment accompanied. Rather than an effect of the government's withdrawal from the economic sphere or of the pressures of the international competition, the Belarusian flexibilization of the labor market was enacted by a direct intervention of the president, who, bypassing the Labor Code, issued a decree introducing fixed-term contracts in 1999, which he enforced in 2004.

The second contradiction consists in the fact that non-standard employment in Belarus does not come in a bundle with other attributes of precarization, such as unemployment, lack of opportunities for training and mobility, or income insecurity (Standing 2011, 10). In fact, Belarus has had consistently low unemployment, plenty of training opportunities on the work place, and a wage grid pegged to a minimum family budget. Almost all workers have been covered by tripartite nation-wide, branch and enterprise-level agreements that set additional guarantees for income security.

Thus, the notion of precarity, as it was elaborated on the material of European and then first-world economies in the context of neoliberal globalization and occasionally applied to Belarus (Danilovich and Croucher 2011), is ill-fitted to understand the peculiar Belarusian path of work flexibilization. Moreover, it may mislead us, as the dominant theories of precarization rely on an implicit narrative of an epochal change in the nature of capitalism, defined as post-Fordist or post-work, thus reifying a particular trend in employment arrangements and bracketing the underlying shifts in class power relations (Doogan 2015). The Belarusian case does not fit such neat distinctions and epochal narratives, hence it demands a relational and historical explanation that takes into account the shifting balances in the relations of production and political power.

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Political science literature examining the Belarusian political regime also offered several explanations for contractualization. Proponents of a 'Sultanist' theory of Belarusian governance claim that the contract system is a way to make all citizens dependent on the state (Rouda 2012, 65). According to Wilson (2011, 217), the introduction of the contract system was a form of electoral technology to ensure president Lukashenka's victory in the 2006 elections, although it is not clear what it would add to the traditional ways of rigging elections. Lucan Way (2016, 141) thinks the contract system primarily targeted actual and potential opposition activists, who would face unemployment for supporting the opposition: indeed, by 2008, approximately a thousand opposition activists lost their jobs. This explanation relies on Silitski's theory of preemptive authoritarianism (Vitali Silitski 2005; V Silitski 2006), according to which fixed-term contracts was a preemptive tool to thwart a regime change.

My informants from the BCDTU unions make constant references to the contract-based employment system as the cause of their squalid condition: the precariousness of Belarusian workers scares them off from joining their unions and from mobilizing for protest actions. They often construe the state of the Belarusian working class as 'slavery' or 'serfdom' and compare the fixed-term contracts to 'a noose on workers' neck.' The bitterness of these complaints and the personalization of the cause of such condition witness to the echo of their defeat in 1999 and 2004, when they were not able to prevent the current situation with all means available to them. Their complaints about the contract system sound increasingly ritualistic, reflecting either the 'Sultanist' or the 'precarization' narratives but unable to mobilize workers around this issue.

The above explanations, including the emic understating of the contract-based employment, are indeed valid for certain moments in the process of introducing fixed-term employment, but

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they risk ascribing a pre-set plan to the presidential administration and the government while ignoring the influence of other actors.

In this chapter, I offer an explanation of the contradictory ensemble of labor and social policies in Belarus outlined above, based on the model of the passive revolution and Weber's notion of prebendalism, introduced in Chapter 2.4. I trace a specific conjuncture in which the Belarusian ruling coalition found itself in the early 2000s, the relation of class forces, and the interpretative mechanisms of the ruling power and the labor organizations. My hypothesis is that the policies leading to the introduction of fixed-term contracts have been determined by the internal logic of a passive revolution and repurposed throughout its development from the early consolidative stage to the stable period of 2004-2011: from a pre-emptive tool to the means of, in the first instance, managing productivity under state capitalism, and, in the second instance, preparing productive forces for further marketization.

This chapter starts with a historical overview of the policies that led to labor market precarization in the context of resistance from labor organization and the state's economic policies. I show that this narrative does not sustain either the neoliberal or the authoritarian explanations of these polices. Then I proceed to analyze the workers' experiences of work precarization and labor immobilization, focusing on the accounts of MAZ workers complemented by the evidence from workers and trade union activists from other companies. A set of relations that emerge on the shop floor does not fit either market despotism or bureaucratic despotism models. Finally, I propose an interpretation of the flexibilization/immobilization policies as a conjunctural measure of passive-revolutionary *neo-perestroika*.

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4.1. Plus contractualization of the whole country: the story of bureaucratic flexibilization

Similar to Ukraine and the Russian Federation, until 2004 Belarus complied with the largely Soviet-inherited 'standard employment relations,' a bilateral and continuous arrangement between an employer and his full-time employee, developed under the guidance of the International Labor Organization in the mid-war period and expanded in the 1960s[125] (Vosko 2010, 51–52). Before 2000, labor relations in Belarus had been regulated by the Code of Labor Laws[126], that envisioned open-ended employment agreements with substantial guarantees against dismissal as the basic form of employment and ensured employment security by an exclusive list of reasons for dismissal, obligatory severance payment, and trade-unions' rights to contest a dismissal[127]. Although 1992 amendments provided for fixed-term employment, their usage was limited to a list of positions and conditioned by technical and economic necessity, such as seasonal work and the performance of specific tasks. Part-time and agency employment was also limited. Thus, the main focus of class struggle in 1991-1999 was the level of direct and social wage as well as its regular payment.

These Soviet-inherited labor regulations were gradually surrounded by numerous additional laws regulating trade unions, collective agreements, and the resolution of labor disputes. Hence, in 1993 the government started working on a new Labor Code that would integrate the totality of labor regulations and harmonize them with the draft Labor Code of the Russian Federation. The new labor law project was based on sociological research, approved by the

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[125] Belarusian SSR joined the International Labor Organization in 1954.
[126] Adopted by the government of the Belarusian SSR in 1972 and amended by the government of the Republic of Belarus in 1992.
[127] In case of dismissal for organizational or economic reasons, an employee should be warned two months in advance and received a severance payment worth three months of average wage.

ILO and, although more market-oriented than the Soviet-inherited Code of Labor Laws, preserved the essentials of the standard employment relations (Tomashevskii 2009, 52).

In parallel to the work on the new Labor Code, which started before the presidential elections of 1994 and continued afterwards with the same group of experts, the president started his own intervention into labor regulations, which began with the decree targeting the participants of the transportation strikes in 1995 (see Chapter 2.2). It continued in 1997, during the initial phase of what I call his Caesarist project, with a presidential draft decree regarding fixed-term contracts. Its initial version, negotiated with the trade unions, restricted the categories of workers that fall under it, basically neutralizing its effect on employment security, but the last version adopted in 1999 lifted all restrictions.

In the beginning of 1999, marked by the spillover of the Russian default and the second peak of labor militancy, as the Parliament was debating the draft Labor Code, the government accepted for consideration the president's draft decree no. 29 entitled 'On additional measures to improve labor relations and strengthen labor and performance discipline.'

These two pieces of legislation fundamentally contradicted each other. Whereas the Labor Code treated a fixed-term employment agreement as an exception possible under certain circumstances, the president's decree allowed hiring any worker on fixed-term, one- to five-year contracts without any limits. If the Labor Code stipulated that a fixed-term employment becomes permanent when employment relations *de facto* continue upon expiration of the fixed-term agreement, the decree provided for an automatic termination of employment upon expiration of the contract without any further justification or consent from a trade union committee. Prolongation of a such contracts is left upon the employer's discretion, who can also cancel the contract due to violations of discipline. The Labor Code construed switching an employee from an open-ended to a fixed-term agreement as 'deterioration of employment

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conditions' and 'a change of essential working conditions', thus demanding justification based on technological, organizational or economic necessities, but the decree constituted itself as its own condition of necessity by allowing employers to switch any of their employees from an open-ended agreement to a fixed-term contract upon one month's notice and with a material compensation that had only upper but not lower limits (not more than five additional vacation days and 50% wage increase).

Besides simplifying hiring and firing, the fixed-term contract system contained an element of what I call labor immobilization: a worker employed under a short-term contract could not unilaterally terminate it. According to the Labor Code, an employee working under a fixed-term agreement needs either his or her employer's consent to terminate their contract (article 37, so called 'mutual agreement of the parties') or a proof that there is a reasonable excuse to do so, e.g. moving to another town or health issues, or the employer's breach of labor law (article 41). This immobilization tendency would be aggravated by a series of other laws and amendments.

A bureaucratic shock therapy

At the moment of passing the decree no. 29, labor was still too strong to let the draft take effect. Since the beginning of 1999, both the Federation and the Democratic Congress had been organizing mass protests, information campaigns and issuing legal recommendations for their union organizations on how to avoid contractualization of their members (see introduction to Part II). Additionally, human resources departments of state enterprises were not prepared to introduce new employment arrangements, the directors did not see much purpose in enforcing it, and local budgets did not have funds for the compensatory wage increases. Thus, within five years of its adoption, the decree was enforced only in a limited manner, primarily for state

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administration, managerial and professional jobs, a process strictly opposite to the dual labor market theory and the distinction between the salariat and the precariat (Standing 2011).

The unions' framing of the contract system was premised on their intransigent political opposition to the government, which forced them to negate its ideological justification rather than criticize from the point of view of workers' interests. Instead of pointing at the contradiction between the avowedly socially-oriented governmental policies and the market-oriented nature of the contract system, the unions responded with their own contradictory message: the contract system is only 'good' under 'good' market economy.

A regular contributor to the Federation's newspaper aptly summarized this framing by comparing fixed-term employment to forced labor in GULAG and contrasted it with Bismarck's labor code which was in force in Germany under the Soviet occupation (Yegorov, A. 'Niecha na zerkalo peniat', koli…' *Belaruski chas,* no. 8, February 26, 1999). It was an ironic commentary on the official 'socially-oriented capitalism,' ostensibly modelled on Germany but, as the author implied, copying Stalin's approaches. The underlying message is that Belarusian economic system is only mimicking Western capitalism, it is essentially Eastern and Stalinist. Another author, using a mix of Marxist and anti-Soviet idioms, wrote that the old management, who were former communists, would only use the contracts to create closer informal ties among themselves under the threat of losing jobs ('the superstructure'), while tyrannizing their workers ('the basis'). Thus, the contract system would solidify the bureaucratic 'superstructure' but harm the labor's 'basis' (Zhuk, V. 'Khoroshee zerno – v prokhuiu pochvu,' *Belaruski chas,* July 30, 1999).

Facing resistance on the labor policy front, the presidential administration focused its efforts on weakening trade unions on the organizational and political levels (see Chapter 3). The president returned to his decree in a noteworthy speech on a regular seminar for public

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administration officials, held in November 2003, in which he ordered all the enterprise directors to transfer their companies to the contract system by June 2004 (Popkov 2004, 110).

This order and a corresponding government's directive would be quoted by employers while transferring everyone, from cleaners to professors, to fixed-term employment. According to officials' reports, by the presidential deadline 70% of the workforce was covered by the fixed-term contracts (Danilovich and Croucher 2011, 248).

The tempo of contractualization was truly breakneck, a bureaucratic shock-therapy. The sectoral ministries and the regional governments issued orders to switch all employees in their respective sectors to fixed-term employment with one to two months' notice and sometimes without a compensation. Thus, to give a few examples, the state forestry and timber industry concern, which included both public and private companies, ordered to transfer all its employees to fixed-term contracts in a month with an informal demand to conclude the contracts for one year ('Ne nalomat by drov,' *Belaruski chas,* January 30, 1999). Vitsebsk regional government expected all budget-funded organizations to contractualize all their employees in one and a half months ('Kontrakt – uravnenie s neizvestnymi,' *Belaruski chas,* March 5, 1999). Mahilou healthcare workers were transferred to one-year contracts amidst ongoing and planned lay-offs ('Pokorilis bezzakoniiu?' *Belaruski chas*, March 16, 1999).

FTUB, although already coopted into the power alliance, engaged in bargaining and litigations over the mass contractualization. The General Tariff Agreement stipulated 30% basic wage increase and 3 calendar days of additional vacations, while the sectoral and local collective agreements also addressed the issue of contracts based on general recommendations of the Federation. The Union's legal inspectors could sometimes successfully revert contractualization or challenge the most blatant violations (*Belaruski chas,* March 23, 2004,

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11). But essentially the unions were bypassed by the contract system, based on personal contracts between individual workers and their employer.

Eventually, after the personal address of the president of the Federation of Trade Unions to the president of Belarus, the Ministry of Labor and the Federation decided on a joint monitoring of the contract system since 2005[128]. The government and the presidential administration used this monitoring, which is kept away from the public, to formulate amendments to the initial decree in order to prevent major popular dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the status quo in the employment security did not become significantly higher: as of 2007, 43% of the population disapproved of the contract system against 19% who accepted it (Morgunova 2010, 104).

Even general descriptive statistics on the share of workers on fixed-term has not been publicly available until 2017. The situation could be approximated when, on the eve of the financial crisis in 2008, a representative of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection reported that 85% to 90% of real sector employees and 100% of public sector employees worked under fixed-term contracts (Chubrik et al. 2009, 17).

Despite the government's assurances that this decree was 'intended to establish firmly a market economy in the country' (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 102), nothing of that kind was happening around the turn of the millennium. Until 2007 privatization was basically frozen, state-owned enterprises were protected from mass lay-offs and supposed by cross-subsidization. And yet, Belarus' economy had embarked on a steady growth path already in 1996, several years before Russia and Ukraine, and kept high growth rates throughout 2000-2008 (8% yearly on average, above both CIS and Europe and Central Asia region). This growth

[128] https://www.belta.by/society/view/monitoring-praktiki-primenenija-kontraktnoj-formy-najma-provoditsja-v-belarusi-s-2005-goda-73254-2012, accessed July 20, 2018.

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was exceptionally inclusive, leading to a reduction in poverty and inequality unprecedented among CIS countries[129] and a steep wage growth: between 2001 and 2004 wages grew 2.5 times (Haiduk 2008, 152).

In parallel to the president's activity in the sphere of labor regulation, the government was working on a project of fundamental amendments to the Labor Code. This work, started barely after the Labor Code entered into force in 2001, stalled in 2003, probably due to the president's own activities in this field, and restarted in 2005 on the president's initiative. The amendments, finally adopted by the parliament in 2007, changed 2/3 of the Labor Code (Tomashevskii 2009, 56).

Labor regulation, nevertheless, remained a contradictory bricolage, with presidential decrees contradicting the Labor Code and the government's laws. According to a REWU union lawyer, although the 2007 Labor Code amendments added a clause on fixed-term contracts, the decree no. 29 remained temporary and existing in a parallel legal reality to the Labor Code[130]. A labor law specialist from FTUM added that the Labor Code was changed again in 2010-2012 so that it corresponded to the decree; however, serious discrepancies remained: the Labor Code allowed two reasons for dismissal: restructuring of production and workers' faulty deeds; the decree, however, provided that the contracts can be denied renewal except in the cases of pregnant women and workers close to the retirement age (with the former the contract is being concluded for three years as a rule)[131].

Theories of authoritarianism do not explain the gap between the passing of the decree no. 29 in 1999 and its enforcement five years later, after the independent organized labor was either repressed or coopted into the ruling alliance. Theories of political-business cycle, that predict

[129] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/602921520877070059/pdf/Belarus-SCD-03072018.pdf
[130] Interview with Zhana, 26/11/2015
[131] Interview with Lozovskiy, 27/11/2015

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‘carrots’ in the run up to elections and referenda (Gaiduk et al. 2006, 85) do not explain why the mass contractualization campaign, hugely unpopular, preceded the referendum on lifting limits on presidential term held in October 2004.

This process also does not look like a political effort to promote class interests of a certain faction of national capitalists or international businesses, since the main driver behind the introduction of labor flexibility was the presidential administration. If anything, this story of labor regulation reflects a conflicting interaction of state agencies and groups of influence inside the presidential administration under the pressure of organized labor.

Since the state remains the largest employer in Belarus, it is worth looking for the rationale of introducing the above labor changes in the ‘abode of production.’

4.2. Experiences of precarization/immobilization

In November 1999 the general director of MAZ ordered that the heads of the plant’s divisions create a list of workers who substantially influence productivity of the divisions and with whom contracts would be concluded as a matter of priority. FTUM construed this policy as targeting primarily literate and active workers who may demand better work conditions and higher wages[132]. Stsiapan’s colleague recalled that in 1999 there was a department-level voting on the contract system in MAZ initiated by trade unions, and then almost all workers rejected it. Since the idea of fixed-term contracts was not popular among workers, the MAZ newspaper, which usually reflected the management’s point of view, tried to downplay the situation and calm down its readers by assurances that only pensioners and newly hired workers would be put on fixed-term contracts (*Avtozavodets,* October 22, 1999). Simultaneously, the plant’s newspaper launched a smearing campaign against FTUM, accusing it of political adventurism,

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[132] FTUM leaflet from Stsiapan’s private archive.

scaremongering and even disproportionate violation of discipline by its members, as if implying that they protest against the president's decree on the improvement of discipline because they were lazy and loved drinking (*Avtozavodets,* July 21, 1999).

Even after a 'coup' in FTUB (see Chapter 3.1), the Union initially took a rather critical stance towards the contractualization campaign. Its official message was that 'both the employers and the unions understand that the contract system itself is acceptable and beneficial in the developing market conditions,' but an indiscriminate and blanket introduction of the contracts 'leads to a psychological instability in the collectives' and a negative attitude to the contracts in society, since some heads of enterprises use it as a means to get rid of the 'undesired' employees ("Kontraktnyi 'sindrom' i profsoiuzy," *Belaruski chas,* Januay 30, 2004).

For most of the year 2004 the Federation of Trade Unions led an information and legal campaign against what it defined as violations and recklessness in implementing the president's decree no. 29. Correspondents of the Federation's newspaper gathered numerous cases of abuse of power and confusion from the management and local authorities: Homel authorities substantiated fixed-term employment of the cleaning personnel with the 'introduction of new cleaning products,' Vitsebsk public service workers were offered 0.01% in increase in wages if any, a school teacher from Hrodna tried to negotiate her contract but was reprimanded for not signing it immediately… The editorial post box of the Federations newspaper '*Belarus chas'* was full of letters of complaint and the population largely disapproved of the contract system: according to an independent pollster, 55.1% were against it, while only 13.7% approved ("Novosti NICEPI" 2004, 72).

Non-FTUB unions, substantially weakened by 2004 as we saw in the previous chapter, took a different approach, mostly relying on public campaigns and legal actions. Free Trade Union regional organization in Polatsk and Navapolatsk, whose several members were refused

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contract renewals in 2004, held picketing together with representatives of other unions and collected signatures against the contractualization campaign (*Salidarnast,* April 4-9, 2004). FTUM's lawyer, then a member of ASM, recalled that[133] he was personally involved in technicality of gathering signature to repeal the decree, together with Free Trade-Unions and the Belarusian Independent Trade Union. They gathered 50 000 signatures, organized a meeting of a legislative initiative group, elected a committee and went to Minsk city government. The reply they got was that the meeting was organized improperly, with less people than declared, although a KGB agent who spied on them saw the number had been valid.

As elsewhere, from January 1999 until October 2004, contracts were concluded in MAZ mostly with the management and the newly hired skilled workers. After the mass contractualization campaign of the spring 2004, however, in October MAZ general director issued an order to transfer all workers of the plant to fixed-term contracts by the first of December[134]. This meant changing the conditions of employment for some 25 000 employees of the plant in just one month, which left very little room for negotiating the terms of the contracts. As expected, everyone refusing to sign a contract would be fired, and those who signed would get minimum 10% wage increase and one additional vacation day (these norms would later enter the collective agreement).

This was an opportune time for flexibilizing the labor market: 2004 was the year of record economic growth in Belarusian economy fueled by the expansion of its Russian market. MAZ increased its production, 80% of which is exported to Russia, by 20% to 30%, depending on the item. Real wages at MAZ grew by 18% in the first 9 months of 2004, reaching 248% of the

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[133] Interview with Lozovskiy, 27/11/2015
[134] General Director of RUP 'MAZ' Gurinovich V. A. Order No. 969, dated October 27, 2004 (from the personal archive of Stsiapan).

minimum budget for a family of four and exceeding the limits set by the collective agreement (*Avtozavodets,* Novermber 12, 2004). This heightened workers' expectation of increasing welfare and lowered their will to protest. According to REWU's lawyer[135], many workers were lured into the new contract system by the promise of 30% rise in salary and 5 additional days of vacation. When people realized what are the threats of the new system, it was too late.

By that time ASM primary organization at MAZ, according to Stsiapan, 'was over' after the changes in registration procedure and the split in FTUB. FTUM lost its official status, and its impact on workers decreased (see Chapter 3).

Stsiapan's colleague from FTUM, Uladzimir, who was a CNC machine tender in MAZ's stamping department in 2004, told a story similar to Stsiapan's[136]. He also recalled being the only worker from his department to see his draft contract, offering a 10% wage hike and one extra vacation day. Arguing that he tends to three machines, he demanded a 30% wage raise and a five year contract, but after a month's negotiation and despite his past connections as a shop foreman, he only succeeded in obtaining five years' term instead of the one year offered and no other bonuses.

Upon receiving a copy of his draft contract, Stsiapan started negotiations with the highest management. He found that according to the terms of the contract, the signees would get a 10% increase in wages and one additional vacation day. The 10% increase was planned for 2004 anyway, so the administration may use the new contract terms to save on the general pay rise. Stsiapan wrote to the director asking for a 30% wage raise and fours extra vacation days in exchange of mentoring newly hired workers. The response came negative, and he had to sign the new contract, winning only one extra vacation day. He was asked for how long he needed

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[135] Interview with Zhana, 28/11/2015
[136] Interview from 14/11/2015

the contract and he chose five years. His foreman commented: ‘Stsiapan, think with your stupid brain; if you win this case, first your guys [members of the union] will run to do the same, then everyone else’.

Even upon signing the contract, he had to insist on getting his copy, again, using the pretended loyalty to the president. Stsiapan taught his co-workers to demand draft contract referring to the presidential decree: “Do you respect the president? -Yes. - Then give me the contract, because thus says his decree. Or maybe you are in opposition to the president. - No, I am not in opposition. Here you are, take the contract but don’t tell anyone I didn’t give it to you two years ago.”

The length of the employment contract depends on both worker’s objective value and his or her skills in navigating the informal rules. Artem was also allowed to choose for how many years he wanted to conclude his contract and he has always been signing it for the maximum term of five years. He is a tenured worker, is valued by the management, and earns a decent wage, judging by an equivalent of 700 USD that he received for the last paid leave. He tries to keep his shop foremen in check by writing complaints to the higher management. Thus, he got rid of his previous boss, a ‘Lukashist’ as he called him.

The contract system drastically changed the relations of forces on the shop floor. Instead of asking workers for additional or informal services, like teaching newly hired employees or fixing outdated equipment, a manager can simply threaten not to prolong the contract. Bargaining over contract term is skewed towards the management, as workers often do not have access to their draft contracts, and if they do, they have to negotiate the terms individually, without help from trade unions. According to Stsiapan, the informal bargaining power of the immediate management over workers increased: ‘Since you are my cousin, I give you five more vacation days; and you, Marusia, will get 50% more wage, since we slept together’.

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A union lawyer summed up the atomization effect of the new laws: 'From one dormitory workers have been moved to isolated rooms[137].' After a decade of labor militancy, unmatched in some respects in other post-Soviet states, Belarusian labor returned to the atomized state under which a worker faces the boss alone. Neither more powerful unions, affiliated with the Federation of Trade Unions, nor often unregistered opposition unions like Stsiapan's, can influence negotiations over the terms of individual contracts. As a former journalist recalled, upon joining a state TV company he asked union representatives whether they could help him negotiate better contract terms. The union admitted it was powerless in this respect, and my informant refused to join the union. Not long afterwards his contract was not renewed due to his anti-government stance[138].

According to World Value Survey data for 2008, only 2 countries out of 33 were below Belarus in what regards the 'freedom of making decisions in taking a job;' Belarus also had the lowest mean job satisfaction score and one of the lowest 'satisfaction with job security' score (Westover 2013, 28). A survey on the perception of 'the most urgent problems' demonstrate that throughout the 2000s the fear of unemployment exceeded that of poverty, in spite of a continuous fall in registered unemployment:

Table 4. Subjective perception of precarity

	1998	1999	2000	2002	2004	2006	2007	2008	2009
Fear of unemployment	29	43	39	49	50	37	38	36	40
Fear of impoverishment[139]	50	78	71	61	58	20	35	38	43

[137] Interview with Lozovskiy, 27/11/2015
[138] Interview with Ihar, June 27, 2017.
[139] Based on the surveys of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, summarized in (Morgunova 2010, 98). Percentages of the sample naming unemployment or impoverishment as the most urgent problem; several categories may be chosen.

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Registered unemployment[140]	2.3	2.1	2.1	2.9	1.9	1.1	1	0.8	0.9

As can be seen from the table, the fear of impoverishment was declining throughout the 2000s from the peak of the crisis 1999 year in line with the economic growth, slightly increasing in 2007-2009 probably due to the hydrocarbon row with Russia and the crisis of 1999. The fear of joblessness, on the other hand, peaked in 2004, the year of economic growth and the debates around the blanket contractualization. Unemployment continued to preoccupy Belarusian workers more or roughly the same as poverty despite a threefold decrease in the registered unemployment (if we take it as a proxy for the real unemployment).

The psychological effects of contractualization diminish workers' willingness to either join unions or engage in protests. As a union activist observed, workers 'do not sleep, do not eat. They are anxious whether their contracts will be prolonged or not. Besides, it is impossible to quit a job they don't like[141]'.

The fixed-term employment contract makes it harder for a worker to change their job at will, thus it immobilizes the workers as much as makes them flexible. This practice is common in both on state-own and private enterprises, especially in retail chains.

Artem, another member of the Free Metalworkers Union, said he would use his union membership as an exit strategy, a 'black spot[142]'. If he needed to leave the job, he would reveal

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[140] Unemployment rate according ILO methodology was not available for these years; data for the registered unemployment rate are taken from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2012, 182). According to some estimates, changes in registered unemployment and the real unemployment move in the same direction (Gaiduk et al. 2006, 69).
[141] Interview with Pokhabov on 26/11/2015
[142] Reference to Stephenson's 'Treasure Island', a novel popular among Artem's generation.

his membership and start agitating, fighting for better working conditions etc. Then, he anticipated, the management would offer him to leave and would agree on good terms.

His colleague Uladzimir adviced his co-workers to negotiate the termination of the contract with the boss and, if this failed, to come out as a Free Trade Union member or simply stop going to work. Lawyers from Radio-Electronics Workers' Union suggested that workers should check their workplaces on a daily basis and then file a complaint to the governmental labor inspection agency about an employer's non-compliance with the workplace security rules or the job description[143].

While Stsiapan pointed to the workers' dependency on their immediate bosses, an activist from Radio-Electronics Workers' Union [144] recalled a case that signals a more systemic immobilization, which he described as 'telephone right'. A member of his union, in an attempt to leave his job a Barisau Tractor Electric Equipment plant, negotiated a place at Plastic plant. However, upon a call from his workplace, his application was declined.

Even if it is hard to leave at will, it is harder to stay on the job. If Stsiapan could eventually sue the employer and get back his retirement benefit, his friend Uladzimir's case was more severe as he was fired in the middle of the economic slump of 2009. Although he had also reached his retirement age, he wanted to stay in his workplace as many of his colleagues worked well into their mid-fifties. As a union leader he was commenting in the nation-wide media on the situation in the MAZ in a critical manner. The plant switched to a 4-day and then 3-day work week, take-home wages dropped by one third and the mood in the locker room changed from '[criticism of the government] is all bullshit, the president gives us wages!' to complains about the need to switch to a diet of lard and potatoes. In Uladzimir's words, the management looked

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[143] http://praca-by.info/library/item/6804-kak-uvolitsya-do-okonchaniya-sroka-kontrakta-kogda-nachalstvo-ne-otpuskaet?fbclid=IwAR0gqBx8s7FhwUifPuYmxM8ZbhlFmT25TsTjZldqV4f0OQdgHFgGvhXHFnY
[144] Interview with Pokhabov, 28/11/2015

at his activity 'not at all philosophically.' A couple of days after his interview was published, he got a notification that his contract would not be renewed. Afterwards, he could only find work as a loader, and later was employed as a school teacher.

Opposition trade unions and NGOs in Belarus, who have to face the negative consequences of and fight against the contract system, frame the policy as a combination of Feudal and Capitalist elements, stressing the first or the second term depending on their political alliances.

According to the 'Feudal' interpretation, the contract system restricted workers' liberties to enter into contractual relations and assimilated it to 'serfdom', 'slavery' and a 'noose on the workers' neck.' This interpretation was spread by liberal newspapers, such as 'Belarssian market', which wrote in 2004 that 'workers got into feudal dependence from their bosses on state enterprises' (Titov 2004). It was also supported by human rights groups who assimilated contracts to forced labor (Kirakosyan et al. 2014) and liberal experts who referred to a breach of ILO's Abolition of Forced Labour Convention and to Tsarist times or Stalinism (V. Kryvoi 2014). They invoked other evidence to this interpretation, like the compulsory work for graduates of state-funded student positions in the universities or the law against 'social parasites'. This interpretation is dominant among members of FTUB and is more readily supported by REWU union. Its chairman Fedynich[145] expressly compared fixed contracts to serfdom in an interview and one of the most known REWU lawyer from Homel has been specializing in cases of forced labor.

References to the 'Feudal' idiom are also present in the discourse of FTUM, although its ex-ASM faction, represented by Bukhvostau, tends to rely on a 'Capitalist' idiom: in an interview[146], he called the contract system 'the most serious blow [to the labor movement]'

[145] Interview from 28/11/2015
[146] Interview from 26/11/2015

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since 'the condition for the renewal is to leave an independent trade union and comply with all the master's whims.' Thus, he refers to it as a form of 'non-standard employment', but also 'slavery' and 'shackles' on workers' feet. Overall, FTUM tends to follow their partners from IndustriALL in fighting against non-standard employment. In 2017 Bukhvostau organized discussion groups among union and left-wing activists around Guy Standing's book on 'precariat' (Standing 2016).

If the premise of the 'Feudal' interpretation is that Belarus is not a capitalist country in need of market reforms, the 'Capitalist' interpretation relies on the belief that a properly functioning market society would lead to labor security rather than precarization. Fixed-term contracts are then a sign of corruption of Belarusian capitalism. The common premise of both of these interpretations of the flexibilization policies consists in the persuasion that these are deviations from a properly functioning capitalist labor market, where freedom to choose jobs and bargain for wages would bring higher prosperity.

The factory regime that emerged from the application of the fixed-term contract system on Belarusian enterprises resulted in a combination of the worst features of market and bureaucratic despotisms, to use Michael Burawoy's classification (Burawoy 1985, 181–83). The Belarusian factory regime preserved the direct control of the state over the production process and the 'relations in production.' But if a Soviet factory allowed for a certain level of autonomy of the labor process and consequently a strong informal bargaining position for the workers, the Belarusian post-Soviet state managed to successfully diminish even these advantages by reducing employment, work and wage security that Soviet labor enjoyed to a larger extent. The market elements of a specifically Belarusian factory despotism are reproduced by the state in the form of atomization of labor, the neutralization of trade unions on the factory level and an enhanced psychological sense of precarity.

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4. 3. Passive revolution against labor

Having considered the political context of the contractualization and its impact on the workplaces, I will reconstruct the logic behind the adoption of this policy. The contract system was initially a disciplining tool for the bureaucratic 'vertical', as evidenced by the fact that only state officials subordinate to the president were transferred to the contract system by the late 2003, while the rate on state enterprises was then 8.5% (Popkov 2004, 110). Additionally, the first draft of the decree no. 29 that appeared in 1997 essentially reiterated threats of dismissal for the public servants and managers who did not pay wages in time, first formulated in the decree of 1995 immediately following the transportation strike; this early draft, however, did contain a list of employees who were eligible for contractualization. Thus, the first function was related to the initial stage of the Caesarist rule, which would tie, in a prebendal manner, the public servants and the higher management of state enterprises to the will of the president and make them personally responsible for the most burning social issues, such as arrears.

When trade-unions emerged as a major political threat to the president around the 2001 elections, the contract system was occasionally used as a punishing and then pre-emptive tool, as evidenced by the politically motivated layoffs. The same instruction issued by the Presidential Administration that suggested establishing state-subordinated alternatives to existing trade-unions, was calling for intensified introduction of contracts (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 121). Even before the 2004 campaign, the contract system was used to target members of the opposition unions. Thus, in 2003 the ILO commission recorded a general practice of primarily transferring FTUB union members to fixed-term, usually one year, contracts with an understanding that they will not be renewed (ILO Commission of Inquiry 2004, 147–48). Thus, the second purpose turned out to be political repression targeting organized labor.

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The third immediate purpose and the impetus for the renewed contractualization campaign in 2004 was economic. During the seminar for public administration officials in November 2003, the president addressed 500 'elite managers' who represented more than 58 000 of their lower-ranking colleagues, and reminded them of his promise to double citizen's welfare in 2005 in comparison to 2000, blaming his 'cadres' for failing to reach a 10% GDP grow rate. Thus, he prohibited raising utility prices and quoted strikes and complaints from numerous enterprises as evidence of state managers' failures. This was inadmissible, he said, since it could be used by "the so-called 'free' trade unions to increase tensions in workers' collectives and discredit state policies" (Popkov 2004, 107).

If the first two uses may be described as extending the prebendal mode of governance (see Chapter II) to the state bureaucracy and selectively repressing organized labor, the third use extended the application of the contract system to the whole labor market thus further undermined workers' solidarity, flexibilized the labor market, drastically changed the balance of power on the shop-floor and ensured the relative immobility of labor. Thus, the prebendal system was spread to the whole working class.

Here, the influence of the 'directorial corps[147]' should be counted in. The chair of the Federation of Trade Unions, himself firmly coopted into the Caesarist coalition by 2004, related that some 'undiligent' directors of state enterprises, when responding to the president's accusations about the bad organization of labor and production processes, said that the problem was with the workers who lacked discipline. They demanded contracts to discipline workers, but after having gotten the decree, they did not know what to do with it: 'Then these undiligent

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[147] An expression denoting directors of state-owned enterprises that existed in the Soviet Union since the 20 and persisted in semi-official parlance in Belarus.

directors nodded at the workers in front of the president, now they nod at the president in front of the workers' (Kozik 2004).

Here we need to recall that this 'directorial corps,' that had some ambitions for privatizing their companies in the 90s, had been subjected to the prebendal domination in the initial phase of Caesarism. They were not only deprived of the possibility of personal ownership, but also made personally responsible both for the performance of their enterprises and the welfare of their workers. Since 1997 a director could lose his or her job over wage arrears. Thus, extending prebendal domination to the whole working class was a form of concession to this 'directorial corpse' that balanced the pressure it suffered.

In this way, the Caesarist alliance was trying to solve the puzzle that Gorbachev failed to address in the initial stages of perestroika, and which haunted Lukashenka as a 'Gorbachev complex.' (Chapter 2) During Gorbachev's presidency, a combination of workers' informal bargaining power on the shopfloor and their inability to transmit their grievances in an organized way led to a lack of motivation and discipline, and hence to low productivity. Gorbachev's solution, namely introducing councils of workers' collectives, differentiating wages and allowing rent-based and cooperative forms of production, coupled with relative political freedom, led to labor protests that undermined the very system that led to the reforms (Filtzer 1994). As Miller's (2016) comparison of the USSR to China showed, political liberalization before market reforms blew up perestroika together with USSR.

Lukashenka seemed to have learnt this lesson, inspired by the contrastive Chinese example, and was solving the labor problem in a manner different from Gorbachev's. If the latter tried to use workers against the directors and the ministries, while offering the industrial lobby subsidies, Lukashenka engaged in a different balancing act. He disciplined the ministries and the directors first, and then offered them a docile workforce. Informal bargaining and the lack

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of discipline were crashed by the withdrawal of employment security. Changes in ‘relations in production’ came before the changes in ‘relations of production.’

Management and workers were bound in personal interdependence under the supervision of the presidential administration, and their relations were mitigated by the coopted Federation of Trade Unions. Whenever a director would try to redirect workers’ anger to the president, the trade union would step in to point the finger back to the boss.

This whole balancing act was used for a slow optimization of the public sector of the economy, the system of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Although the contractual employment was not used for mass lay-offs, there is indirect evidence based on the reasons of dismissal that it helped shed the employees with less costs to the firms[148]:

Table 5. Why do people become unemployed (2000-2011)?

Reasons for lay-offs	2000	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Voluntary and mutual agreement	31.5	26.9	31.4	32.3	28.3	34.1	27.5
Organization close, workforce reduction	6.8	8.7	5.7	3.5	3.3	2.5	2.6
Other	46.4	49.7	57.1	58.8	61.5	58.6	65.3

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Since the introduction of the fixed-term contracts, there has been a noticeable reduction in the share of the registered unemployed who were fired due to workforce reduction or liquidation of the employer’s organization that entails compensatory severance payment (from 8.7% in 2005, when most of the one-year contracts from the previous year should have matured only in mid to second half of the year, to 2.6% in 2011). The ‘voluntary or mutual agreement’ share remaining constant (but changing its nature due to the limited reasons under which a worker

[148] Data on the distribution of the registered unemployed by the reasons of losing their jobs, from (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2012, 211)

can leave his job), the ‘other’ category expanded its share from almost half of the cases of dismissal in 2005 to 65.3% in 2011. This category includes workers fired due to violations of the discipline and non-prolongation of their contracts, among others (footnote in National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2012, 212), that is using the grounds provided by the decree no. 29.

This slow-paced numerical adjustment of the labor market led to a relative rise in the lower-paid sector of economy, populated with small private companies, competing among each other mostly in the service sector (Morgunova 2010, 100). There has been a significant outflow of employment from the mostly state-owned industrial enterprises (estimated 81.7% employed in state-owned or -controlled companies in 2011) to the sectors with a higher share of private employment (27% of those employed in construction and 36.8% of the employed in trade and repair services worked in private companies in 2011[149]).

Table 6. Share of employment in selected branches of economy (% of total employment)[150]

	2000	2005	2010
Industry	28.1	27.5	25.4
Trade and repair	10.3	12.4	13.7
Construction	6.7	7.2	8.7

If the members of the opposition trade unions seem to be crude materialists in believing that the flexibilization of the labor market cannot precede full-fledged free market with minimal state intervention, the government seems to be economic constructivist and Gramscian in believing that it is a political decision that creates economic freedom and not the lack of

[149] The official statistics on ownership structure of employment does not correctly represent the state’s participation in a given economic sector. The above calculation constructs private ownership as that of ‘non-state legal entities’ and ‘foreign entities’ from (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2012, 50).

[150] Based on the data of the National Statistical Committee (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2012, 55)

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political intervention. By the mid-2000s all the elements for a flexible labor market were available: cheap dismissal possibility, atomized labor force and docile trade unions, ready to be used in the case of external shocks.

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Conclusions to Part II

After the crackdown on the transportation workers' strike, the second turning point in the history of class struggle in Belarus happened in 1999-2004. After the tactical-level clash of 1995, Caesarism took to reshape the strategic terrain for labor, introducing formal and informal rules that would thoroughly reshape labor relations: on the shop floor, on the organizational level and on the level of political struggle. A set of decrees from 1999 introduced fixed term contracts, new rules for the organization and registration of trade-unions and their financing, and after a protracted war of positions, the direct bureaucratic intervention subordinated the gigantic structure of the Federation of Trade-Unions to the state bureaucracy.

From the perspective of union activists, this was a certain coherent plan, developed by the government and incrementally implemented, to subdue workers and their organizations under the state and managerial control. As one of my informants put it, 'all these laws, together with the law taxing the unemployed, will work in a complex: a scheme is being outlined to systematize all this.' Although my analysis shows that bureaucratic flexibilization was a contingent outcome of the passive-revolutionary policies of the presidential Caesarism, not directly representing any class's interests and responding in an ad-hoc manner to the pressures from labor and the international market, the developments in recent years may lend themselves to the unions' teleological interpretation.

The first negative growth of the Belarusian economy in twenty years, the shrinking of the economies of its main trade partners, and the revision of gas and oil trade policies with Russia posed serious challenges for the Belarusian model. The state's response had to be cautious; even so, the gradual increase in pension age and an attempt to tax long-term unemployment led to the street protests in spring 2017.

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So far the bureaucratic facsimile of neoliberal precarity served both to boost the productivity of state-owned enterprises and to furnish docile labor for the small private sector. It remains to be seen whether the Belarusian *neo-perestroika* will end in a more significant sell-off or in a restructuring of public companies either in collaboration with Western and Chinese capital, or, more likely, under the coercion of Russian state capitalism. In all of these cases, the established labor prebendalism that I described in Chapter 4 will be a great stimulus for a possible new wave of accumulation by dispossession.

I argue that bureaucratic labor precarization can be interpreted as expansion of the passive revolution into the relations of production. Thus, since 2004 the totality of Belarusian society, all social groups from the high-ranking bureaucrats to the workers and pensioners, was subsumed under a passive-revolutionary *neo-perestroika*: a gradual development of the forces of production under the tutelage of the state with the prospect of successful incorporation into the neoliberal global competition. The two challenges that Gorbachev failed to overcome in his initial project, the introduction of market elements into labor relations and the pacification of labor, are successful met by Lukashenka's *transformismo* towards labor organizations and the spreading of the prebendal control to the factory level.

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PART III. POPULAR PROTESTS AGAINST STATE POPULISM

Belarus-watchers and researchers have noticed that something changed in the relationship between Belarusian authorities and its population after 2011. Some diagnose the ‘end of Belarusian miracle’ (Rouda 2019, 256), while others proclaim the end of the social contract (A. Wilson 2016), and consequently the crisis of legitimacy of the Belarusian government (Merzlou 2019).

External shocks from the changed global economic and geopolitical conjuncture underlie these developments, although not in a linear manner. The Great Recession reached the export-dependent Belarus through the shrinking of the Russian and Ukrainian markets, but Belarus weathered the crisis significantly better than its neighbors with a 0.2% growth in 2009. A mix of expansionist and protectionist policies instead of austerity sustained income growth in the next two years (Medvedev 2010, 202). In parallel, the government proceeded with a controlled liberalization of its economy: the ‘golden share’ was scrapped, Belarus joined most of Eastern Europe in introducing a flat income tax, and simplified the tax system and business registration, thus overtaking Poland, Turkey and China in World Bank’s ‘doing business’ rating (Ioffe 2014, 96).

The turning point was the 2011 currency devaluation crisis and a two-year recession (-3.8% and -2.5% in 2015 and 2016) that led to a protracted stagnation of incomes and profits. Both of these were deferred effects of the Great Recession as refracted through the geo-economic and geo-political cracks in the Russia’s claimed sphere of influence. The recent GDP recovery at the rates of 2.4% (2017) and 3.7% (IMF estimate for 2018) does not seem to break the trend, as it is endangered by the changes in terms of oil export from Russia and the growing public debt.

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These external shocks precipitated changes in the internal course of the Belarusian passive revolution. The repertoire of economic, social and ideological tools shifted towards the authoritarian neoliberal model of state capitalism. The influence of China, both materially and ideologically, became evident: Chinese specialists were consulted on how to deal with the currency crisis and they warned against unconditional foreign investment (Ioffe 2014, 195). In the realm of welfare provision, the Belarusian government generally followed World Bank's recommendations (The World Bank 2011) that included hardening budgetary constraints in agriculture and liberalizing the agricultural market; cutting energy subsidies to the households and introducing targeted subsidizing; further reform of social assistance, and a pension reform implying increase in the retirement age.

Three trends can be identified in the post-crisis period of the Belarusian passive revolution. Firstly, the Caesarist ruling alliance shifted the center of gravity of its inter-class balancing act towards private capital. Secondly, the measures directed towards labor market flexibilization underwent amendments and systematization, placing labor even more firmly between the discipline of prebendal factory regime and the monetary punishment for dropping out of employment. Thirdly, the populist idiom of domination mutated from projecting an imagery of loyal citizens entitled to their share of nation's wealth to a further purification of 'the people' by pitting the deserving workers and entrepreneurs against the undeserving 'parasites'.

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Since 2014, Belarus has stepped up cooperation with international financial institutions, and implemented successful monetary and fiscal policies leading to low inflation but swelling foreign debt (from 52.3% in 2013 to 69% of GDP projected for 2019[151]). The deregulation of business activities and investments in IT industry were accompanied by a raise in pension age, utility prices and a partial withdrawal of utility subsidies (for citizens not employed in the

[151] Gross external debt according to IMF estimate, in *Republic of Belarus. IMF Country Report No. 19/9,* 38

economy and not registered as unemployed). Wage growth on state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was tied to productivity growth, subsidies to SOEs phased out and employment 'optimized'.

The crisis year of 2011 was proclaimed the year of entrepreneurial spirit, and the economic program for 2011-2015 declared that 'entrepreneurship is important in raising economic competitiveness, timely reacting to changes in demand for goods and services, and being an additional source of jobs and the middle class as the foundation of social stability' (quoted in Yarashevich 2014, 1711). The program's promise for the working class was more flexibility of employment.

The Belarusian Ministry of Labor has been busy issuing recommendations on the flexibilization of labor market. Praising forced part-time jobs and unpaid leaves as forms of crisis management, the Ministry came up with detailed 'recommendations on implementing flexible forms of employment' as a 'key tendency in contemporary labor markets' (Ministerstvo truda i sotisalnoy zashchity Respubliki Belarus 2011). This new ideology of neoliberal populism was radiating from the Presidential Administration to the intellectuals and the media. Students' papers from the Academy of Management under the Presidential Administration praise flexible forms of employment as a solution for young employees and a road to the formation of the 'creative class' (Bazhina 2014). Researchers in state-run departments of Sociology and Economics claim that labor management is approaching Western practices and advocating even more flexibilization of labor markets as a form of adjustment to 'the contemporary economic order' (Sokolova 2015; E. V. Vankevich 2013; Podgrusha 2011).

In line with the pro-business shift of the governmental policies, the Labor Code was amended again in 2014, belatedly translating the president's demand for higher labor market

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flexibility[152]. This amendment cancelled the remaining limitations on fixed-term contracts for employees of individual entrepreneurs or micro-organizations, exonerating such employers from compensations for concluding or early terminating such contracts (Tomashevskii 2016, 66).

Putting this recommendation in practice, fixed-term contracts were increasingly used as a tool of cheap dismissal. The pro-government Federation of Trade Unions was alarmed that the share of dismissals for reasons of personnel restructuring was only 1.6% of all dismissals in 2016, while the most widespread reason was the non-prolongation of fixed-term contracts or a substantive changing of work conditions (which an employee would expectedly not accept) ("FPB obratila vnimanie na problemu skrytogo sokrashcheniia rabotnikov" 2016).

The deepening of work flexibilization was accompanied by the increasing immobilizing tendency. Thus, a decree issued in late 2014[153] allowed for an early termination of an employment contract due to vaguely defined 'discrediting circumstances,' the record of which was to be kept for a minimum five years. According to a legal expert, this record will adversely affect the employability of a person fired under this law: "an employee becomes 'branded' for… five years" (V. Kryvoi 2014). This decree additionally shortened the term of notice about changing working conditions to seven calendar days instead of a month, as it was before.

The most recent addition to this labor immobilization trend, the decree 'On the prevention of social dependency,' was introduced in 2015 and rewritten in 2017 after mass protests. Popularly known as the 'anti-parasite law' and threatening with financial liabilities for long-term unemployment, it caused the largest social protests in two decades. I analyze these protests

[152] First expressed in the president's directive 'On development of the entrepreneurial initiative and stimulation of business activity' adopted in 2010 as a tentative response to the crisis of 2009.
[153] 'On Strengthening the Requirements for Managers and Employees of Organizations'

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from the perspective of trade unions' participation in popular mobilization and framing of the anti-government slogans in Chapter 6.

Reflecting these geo-economic and policy transformations, Belarusian state ideology shifted from a Chavez-type inclusive populism to something resembling a neoliberal populism comparable to that of Fujimori and Menem (Weyland 1999). The Belarusian official populist ideological frame mutated towards the split of the official discourse between the neo-liberal and the conservative lines (Jurkevits 2019, 32–33). 'The pure people' as a populist idiom are increasingly fashioned as hard-working and entrepreneurial, but also as responsible for their wellbeing and their social reproduction within the family, which is stressed as a resource for the elderly. Demographic challenges have increasingly been quoted as a justification both for a pension reform and the 'anti-parasite law.' 'The people's' image is purified by excluding a vaguely defined category of 'social parasites,' who do not deserve the state's support either morally, or economically.

The president started depicting the projected image of the people as spoiled by the state. In his annual address[154] to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly, Lukashenka exhorted: "So harness and pull! Only then you will be rich. And every night, going to bed, every citizen of the country and its guests, residing here at least temporarily, has to think: 'What did I do this day to demand from Lukashenka a higher salary, pension or benefit?'" (quoted in Jurkevits 2019, 28).

Since 2012, the official discourse about the pension system started mutating from an emphasis on keeping the current retirement age despite economic challenges to subtle references of a possible pension reform, incentives for early retirement and personalized pension plans. Finally, by the end of 2015, performing a balancing act between the harsh realities of the

[154] April 19, 2013.

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economy and the wishes of the ordinary but deserving citizens, Lukashenka decided on the increase in retirement age from 55 to 58 for women and from 60 to 63 for men (Jurkevits 2019, 29–30).

Reflecting the mutating state discourse, the Belarusian population changed its attitude towards the state and their self-perception. As a Belarusian esearcher noted, from 2009 to 2019 public opinion of Belarusians about their country "evolved from the proud 'I love Belarus' to a shamefaced 'well, you know what I mean'" (Chubrik 2019). This 'you know what I mean' reflects people's disorientation in the face of the state's eroding paternalism and its ambiguous signals promoting entrepreneurialism.

On the one hand, Belarusian citizens still feel entitled to the state's welfare obligations: over 95% of the population expect the government to provide free healthcare, free education and employment opportunities. On the other hand, there is a strong feeling that the state does not deliver: only 56% believe the state actually provides free healthcare, 39% think the same about free higher education, and only 14% see the state really guaranteeing employment (D. Urban 2019, 15). Consequently, over 40% of the population stopped relying on the state and claimed they are individually responsible for their fate, as opposed to around 20% in the pre-crisis years. This increase in self-reliance coincided with the internalization of pro-market values: from 2008 to 2018, the share of respondents strongly believing in market reforms more than doubled (from 12.4% to 27.3%), while the total share of partially and fully pro-market oriented respondents rose from 35.8% to 46.8% (D. Urban 2019, 19).

This ambiguous popular reception of the new dominant populist idiom informed the popular protests against state populism that I analyze in the two following chapters. Leaders of the workers' protest in *Hranit* factory, analyzed in the following chapter, expose entrepreneurial self-identification and feel being undeservedly slighted by their management. They use over-

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identification with the neoliberal side of the dominant ideology in protest against the deepening labor prebendalization. In contrast to this, the protesters against the 'anti-parasite law' from Chapter 6 identify with the image of the people as loyal citizens dominant in the 2000s and defy being purged from the popular body as undeserving parasites.

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Chapter 5. Broken Solidarities: Workers' Protest at the '*Hranit*' Plant

Aleh, the most publicized hero of the '*Hranit*' workers' protest, was explaining to me the theory of finance self-help guru Robert Kiyosaki while we ate our lunch in Café 'Amsterdam' in the center of Salihorsk, a city of potash miners and the richest city in Belarus, imitating the capital's middle class infrastructure of expensive cafes, shopping malls and entertainment centers. We met in late November 2015, four years after he helped initiate the protest at '*Hranit*' plant in Mikashevichy and three years after he had to leave the job and moved to Salihorsk in search of better employment opportunities. Sporting a business coat on top of a T-shirt in a deliberate smart-casual style, he ordered coffee and cheesecake and kept his mobile phone within reach, trying to look like one of the regular visitors of this place: managers, foreign trade representatives speaking Spanish and Chinese, and young hipsters.

Between answering the phone calls from his clients and bosses, he tried to show me what the 'cash flow quadrant' was. "You probably have not heard of the cash flow quadrant, – he told me while drawing the 'quadrant' in my notebook, – but this is a really cool thing, I am dealing with it for a long time, so I know what it is. There is a guy, Robert Kiyosaki who wrote the book 'Rich Dad Poor Dad' and who is the first among successful people to share the secrets of success". Aleh was very articulate in describing each slot of the quadrant: two slots on the left representing active income and two on the right side who receive passive income. You get active income in exchange of your time: 'There is such a notion as hourly cost rate here,' - Aleh mentioned a familiar Belarusian notion pointing to the first slot where wage workers reside, '- and here are the self-employed small businessmen, who work 24 hours a day'.

Aleh's skillful explanation is due to his years of education at a private AMWAY 'business school' which purportedly gave him the proper mindset to move to the right hand side, where

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‘the system works for businessmen and they create workplaces’ for the people on the left hand side of Kiyasaki’s scheme. ‘This is a mental transition,’ – he said, as he moved his finger from the left to the right side of the picture in my notebook.

‘- But so far you are here?’, I asked pointing at the ‘self-employed’ slot on the left.

‘Yes, I am here, but I am investing, I started literally a week ago. And I am developing here,’ - he said, as he pointed to the most valuable ‘passive’ slot, the investor’s.

Aleh makes sense of the cartography of his class trajectory using the simplified terminology of an American businessman and best-selling self-help author, which weirdly resembles the classification of contradictory class locations by Erik Olin Wright (Wright 1998, 50). However, if Wright, along with other mid-20th century Marxist theorists, was grappling with the question of the ‘middle class,’ Kiyasaki focused on rentiers. Wright’s solution to the problem was to introduce contradictory class locations, while Kiayasaki created a new slot in addition to traditional classes of workers, capitalists and petit bourgeoisie, that of ‘the investor.’ Brushing aside the question that Wright would have asked, namely that of the control over means of production (money and physical capital) and labor process, Aleh’s guru is focused on the source of income. The ‘investor’ is the one who is ‘exploiting the system’ and that is what Aleh strives for. He had to leave the upper left-side slot of the worker, a dump truck driver at ‘*Hranit*’, and could not find a job after he was fired in retribution for his role in the protest, then got stuck in the other ‘active’ slot of the self-employed sales representative. Then, not being able to assert himself in the first ‘passive’ station of the businesspeople, he started investing in a project of the transportation system of the ‘sixth technological paradigm,’ which to me sounded like a Ponzi-scheme.

Aleh’s fascination with financial entrepreneurialism resonates with the recent Belarusian state ideology of responsibility and self-reliance. Since 2011, the official year of entrepreneurial

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spirit and the year of Aleh's rebellion as a truck driver, both the official discourse and the public opinion re-evaluated their attitude to businesspeople. From branding liberalism as 'an ideology of injustice, profiteering, and individualism[155]' and comparing businesspeople with fleas[156] to officially recognizing cryptocurrencies and further liberalizing the business environment in 2017, the state started representing entrepreneurs as model citizens. This transformed public opinion: nearly half of the respondents surveyed in 2019 considered private businesses more efficient than public enterprises and morally justified as honest labor (Chubrik 2019).

This macro-ideological change is refracted through Aleh's personal and work trajectory. For all intents and purposes, Aleh is a precarious worker who misrecognizes himself as 'developing as an investor'. While working as a truck driver in '*Hranit'* he belonged to labor aristocracy and had aspirations to become a head of his transport division but fell prey to the prebendal factory regime with its managerial and market dictates. After being fired he became a full-time member of that fraction of the working class that can be called 'precariat' proper. He felt frustrated that he could not fulfill his leadership potential in the Belarusian Independent Trade Union and disenchanted by workers' inability to resist back in '*Hranit'*. In compensation for these frustrations and over-identifying with the neoliberal line in the official ideology, he thought of himself not as a victim of reprisals or as a precarious free-lance salesman, but as an investor on the track of tricking 'the system' and jumping into the 'sixth technological paradigm'. 'Once you felt freedom,' he explained, 'you would never want to return to serfdom'.

A trope common among opposition trade unions, serfdom was his designation of wage work, under constant supervision and whims of a boss, although usually it paid better than he would get at his two jobs as a sales representative. Although Aleh's work did not stop during the lunch break, he talked with disdain about wage workers who had to sacrifice eight hours of their life

[155] From Lukashenka's speech in 2003 (quted in Yarashevich 2014, 1705).
[156] Lukashenka's televised address in 1995 (Feduta 2005, 467).

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to 'serfdom.' 'Bankruptcy is temporary,' Kiyosaki's slogan stuck in his mind, 'but poverty is forever.' However, he could still recall with passion his leadership role in the 2011 protest, the training he got during seminars on trade-union organizing and his battles for leadership in the Belarusian Independent Trade Union. He tried to persuade me that workers could have changed the situation had they been more courageous and the current trade union leadership less treacherous.

Aleh's situation is a symptom of the new passive-revolutionary strategy that the Belarusian government has spontaneously developed in the situation of a prolonged stagnation. The 2011 crisis and the protest at Mikashevichy plant indicated a turning point in the general balance of class forces in Belarus. Started as a response to the falling real wages in the aftermath of the crisis, the protest of some two hundred workers of the construction material plant '*Hranit*' took the shape of work-to-rules and the establishment of a new trade union organization. The protest's initial success evinced the limits of the previous passive-revolutionary settlement, according to which the Belarusian working class expected rising wages with the rise of plant's output. The protest's ultimate failure, on the other hand, indicated that the Belarusian ruling elite had successfully mobilized bureaucratically enhanced market disciplining tools instead of direct coercion.

This was reflected with extreme clarity in the class trajectories, worldviews and life choices of the activists involved in the struggle, the group of Aleh's close friends. The story of the 2011 workers' protest at the '*Hranit'* factory in the southern Belarusian town of Mikashevichy shows that the prebendal factory regime coupled with the crisis of the government's legitimacy was conducive to the workers' decision to rebel.

The other side of this story is the Independent Trade Union's inability to respond to workers' grass roots mobilization in a sustained manner. Having undergone the government's assault

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relatively intact in the 2000s, BITU got entrenched in an economic-corporate level of class struggle competing over perks for already privileged workers of chemical and oil industries with the FTUB-affiliated union. Its leadership's skeptical attitude to expanding the union's network of primary organizations and the clash with the union's youth organization over this question showed internal causes for the crisis of Belarusian organized labor.

5.1. Shattered promises of prosperity

The 2011 protests by '*Hranit'* workers is a focal point in which several processes at the level of relations of production and political domination intersect. First, the year 2011 is marked by a crisis, which was a deferred and cumulative result of the Global Recession, its reverberations in Russia and complications in trade and political relations between Russia and Belarus. Secondly, the economic crisis translated into the crisis of that model of domination which has been worked out by the Belarusian authorities in the previous years of economic growth. Thirdly, the case of the protest at '*Hranit*' flashed out the limits of workers' organization and imaginaries of resistance. Finally, this case showed how precarization can be instrumentalized by the management and by state officials, and how it is dealt with by the workers. In the rest of this section I will elaborate on these intersecting processes as preconditions of the labor unrest which I analyze in the remainder of this chapter.

The preconditions for the 2011 crisis had been building up during several previous years. In January 2010 Russia introduced new export rules, whereby 2/3 of the oil exported to Belarus was taxed and the 'special duty' removed. As a result, margin profits on selling refined oil products went down from 32% in 2006 to 13,68% in 2010. Tolling operators, one of the biggest sources of foreign exchange for Belarus and the biggest tax evaders for Russia, lost interest in their copperation with Belarusian Mozyr and Navapolatsk oil refineries, and their output was reduced by 30%. Thus, the inflow of foreign currency into the Belarusian budget dropped,

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endangering the stability of the national currency. 2011 was also the low point in the country's relations with Russia that resulted from a series of scandals over gas pricing and the privatization of the Belarusian oil transportation system. The government started searching for alternative oil sources in Venezuela and Azerbaijan, Gazprom staged a mini-gas crisis, and Russian media launched a campaign against Lukashenka (Balmaceda 2014, 170). At the same time, preparing for the of 2010 elections, the government raised the minimum wage, the average wage in state-controlled enterprises (46.1% in a year, four times faster than productivity) and propped the Belarusian ruble by borrowing money (Alachnovic and Naurodski 2011, 4).

The piling up of political contradictions and economic overstretch led to the dire situation of 2011. The rules on oil sales, which changed for the worse for Belarus in 2011 yet again, and higher gas prices led to the lack of foreign currency and negative current account balance. Fearing hyper-inflation, the government sold 50% of '*Beltrangas'* oil transportation company's shares to Russia's '*Gazprom'* obtaining for that long due service a $3 bln loan and a reduction in gas price. In the beginning of the year queues lined up in front of exchange offices as the government imposed limitations on buying foreign currency. In March, for the first time since the '90s, the National Bank introduced multiple exchange rates (Balmaceda 2014, 172).

In late May, the Belarusian ruble lost 56% of its value against the dollar overnight, making average wages (in dollar equivalent) fall from $530 in to $320[157], while real wages went down by 24% since January. A similar devaluation happened in October, pushing the average wage below $270[158]. Adding anxiety to disappointment, the head of the national statistical office announced that around 600,000 workers had been dismissed or transferred on unpaid leave (Balmaceda 2014, 173). The retail price growth outpaced that of any other CIS country while

[157] Or even to $200, if calculated according to a black market exchange rate.
[158] Author's calculations based on official data.

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the government liberalized market price formation on some of the formerly regulated 'socially significant goods'; half of the population had to switch to less expensive goods (Horbach 2011).

The social consequences of the financial crisis led to an abrupt crisis of legitimacy for the Caesarist coalition: according to unofficial polls, the president's support dropped from the all-time high of 53% in 2010 to the record low of 20% in September 2011 (Ioffe 2014, 85). This minimal legitimacy in the eyes of the workers was based on a promise of ever-increasing incomes, expressed in the magical figure of a $500 wage repeated by the president on numerous occasions, and welfare opportunities tied to the place of employment[159]. This legitimacy, however, was brittle as workers' expectations from the state exceeded their evaluation of what was delivered to them, while the mechanism through which they were inserted into the state-capital-labor nexus, the fixed-term employment system, was perceived with discontent (Gaiduk and Chubrik 2009). According to independent surveys, Lukashenka's support correlated with the population's income, but the latter does not influence the low support and negative trust in the opposition (Ioffe 2014, 72). Thus, when the fetishized $500 wage was reached in 2010 only to abruptly disappear overnight on May 23, 2011, a profound sense of betrayed expectations ensued.

The nascent 'middle class', composed of well-paid wage workers and petit entrepreneurs, already accustomed to accessible imported goods and a relatively comfortable lifestyle, was hit hard. According to some scholars (Ioffe 2014, 42), they contributed substantially to the currency crisis by buying almost $3 million worth of used German cars in early 2011 in anticipation of the announced rise in import tariffs pursuant to the rules of the customs union

[159] Given frequent bouts of inflation and devaluation of the Belarusian currency, everyday economic interactions are extremely dollarized. Practically every major transaction is carried out in foreign currency, and many goods and services are casually estimated in current US dollars. Every time I rented a flat or a room in Minsk, I paid in US dollars although the rental contract was concluded in Belarusian rubles. When new denominated bills were introduced in 2016 (1 new ruble to 10 000 old rubles), they were designed to look similar to euros probably in an attempt to boost confidence in the national currency.

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with Russia. After the crisis hit, participants in the middle class protests 'Revolution through social network' and 'Stop Benzin' faced detention but forced the government to reduce gasoline prices by 20%.

If 2010 was marked by only a few workers' protests, in 2011 the monitoring of labor protest actions attested 14 cases reflected in media reports (Chyzova 2013). The protest wave started in May at the Heineken-owned beer plant in Homel region, where workers refused to start work due to non-payment of bonuses (Naviny.by 2011). Although only two more similar disturbances happened at private companies and the rest of the cases took place in state-owned enterprises, in all other respects the Heineken protest was typical for that year. It lasted for a short time (several hours in this case, generally up to two days), involved one subdivision of the enterprise with dozens of people who organized the protest spontaneously over non-payment of monetary compensations, and was quickly and positively resolved with the involvement of local authorities avoiding major repressive actions.

There were two outstanding cases of labor protests in 2011 at Navapolatsk '*Naftan*' oil refinery and Mikashevichy '*Hranit*' construction materials plant. Both happened with the involvement of the Independent Trade Union of Belarus and faced a negative response from enterprise and state authorities. However, if an attempt of picketing at Navapolatsk was prevented by local authorities, '*Hranit*' workers demonstrated a remarkable protest dynamic: spontaneous grass-roots mobilization in strategic departments of the plant that led to the establishment of a representative trade union and months-long industrial action.

'*Hranit*' was not an obvious place to expect unrest. This state-owned enterprise produces construction materials out of the rock excavated from a ballast pit discovered in the mid-'60s near the Southern Belarusian town of Mikashevichy (currently, 14 000 inhabitants). Since the plant was launched in 1975, it has become the largest employer in town with a workforce of

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around three thousand. A major producer of ballast rock in Europe that works for the internal market as well as for Russia, Poland and the Baltic countries, it is a strategic enterprise that produces over 90% of the ballast rock in the country, contributes one third of the district's budget, and is directly subordinated to the Ministry of Architecture. Due to the expansionary measures in response to the crisis of 2009, including the stimulation of the construction industry, the plant preserved access to the national market, its profits were growing, and the government provided it with credits for investment in a new production line.

When the protest began in November 2011, Aleh was 33 years old and had been working as a dump truck driver for ten years. Five years earlier he had graduated from Moscow Mining University through distant education and started acquiring business skills at various private schools. Since 2008 he had been involved with the International Dexter Yager 'business school' specialized in multi-level marketing, which Aleh found 'highly ethical, teaching people financial literacy, proper relations in a group' and 'non-traditional way of doing business.' It was there that he got his ideas about success being based on investment and leadership skills.

At '*Hranit'* he was driving *Belaz*, the world's largest and heaviest dump truck produced by the Belarusian Automobile Factory. He had high authority among his co-workers, was the captain of the *'Hranit'* football team and was three times a republican sports champion. 'Bosses always invited me to drink at receptions, clinked glasses with me,' he repeated on various occasions when we discussed his work. He had aspirations of becoming the head of the dump track department.

His two friends, Lyonia and Valera, who constituted the core of the active protesters, are also natives of Mikashevichy and have been working at '*Hranit'* factory's production shop (now, the mining shop) as excavator drivers. Valera, who was the only one among them still working at '*Hranit'* at the time of our conversation (fall 2015), was an old acquaintance of Aleh, and he

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had come to '*Hranit'* in 2003. Lyonia is much older, he first came to the plant in 1989 and started working there as a welder. After three years of compulsory military service in the navy, he returned to the plant in 1992 and since then had been working as an excavator driver.

The organizational preconditions of the protest were not great. Lyonia still remembers the primary organization of the Independent Trade-Union on '*Hranit'* in the mid-90s, on the height of BITU's influence (see Chapter 2). It existed since the founding of Independent Miners' Union in 1991[160], but already in 1995 was in crisis. '*Hranit's*' management suspected Lyonia was a member of that organization and threatened to refuse him a place in the dormitory, although Lyonia did not actively participate in the union and soon the primary organization remained active only on paper. Some members of that old organization participated in the 2011-12 protest: Lyonia and Aleh mentioned at least two workers who joined the protest but apparently did not actively help in organizing it. What concerns an FTUB-affiliated Union of Construction and Industrial Construction Materials Workers at the plant, virtually every employee is its member[161], although many do not notice this or participate in its activities, which mostly consist of tourist trips and celebrations of national holidays.

The strategic national importance of the enterprise, the fact that its largest union was closely integrated with the management, and a relatively successful functioning of the plant in a crisis situation are ambivalent factors that both enabled protest mobilization and contributed to its eventual extinction. More important for understanding the form and the unfolding of the protests are the technical division of labor and the factory regime on '*Hranit*'.

According to the workers of '*Hranit*', the main production chain of the plant consists of the following phases. Drill operators in the open pit come first, boring holes for explosives,

[160] Nasanovich, L. 'Kali niama bol'sh viery afitsyinym structural,' *Narodnaya gazeta,* April 14, 1991.
[161] According to union's section on the plant's website: https://granit.by/trade_union/

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followed by shot-firers who make the rock available for loading, usually carrying out explosions once a weak. After sorting the rock and breaking down larger pieces, excavator drivers load it on dump trucks, and truck drivers carry it to the offloading point, where crushers break the rock into the pieces of required size. The chain ends with a shipping department.

These operations require different labor time to process a given amount of material, therefore some of them are more important than others in supporting a sustained workflow. This nuance becomes important when the question of work stoppage or strike arises. Excavator drivers assess that if drillers stop working, the production process can continue for about three months, and if shot-firers strike, the available mass of rock can be still processed for two months. But other operations that demand irreplaceable skills and are located higher on the production chain can disrupt the process almost immediately. Therefore, it becomes evident why excavator and *Belaz* dump truck drivers were the two groups that figured in the center of the protest.

Aleh worked in a transport park that consisted of four columns. He was in the first one, that of *Belaz* dump truck drivers. The other three were buses, cars and facility vehicles. The production shop, where Lyonia and Valera worked on excavators, was transformed into a mining shop in 2015. This change in the name was probably related to new regulations on calculating pensionable service and harmfulness. If before that any working time in the shop was counted as harmful, now only the actual hours of loading are counted as harmful activity but not, for example, the time of repair. An operator writes down the time excavator drivers started and stopped working, although, as Lyonia and Valera complained, they may experience all the environment conditions considered as harmful while spending non-accounted time in the shop.

Aleh, Lyonia and Valera described the practice of job insecurity, when they had to perform tasks that, according to orders or informal requests, were not included in their job descriptions. They called it 'work according to an order.' Some of these tasks may enter the job description

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with time. Lyonia, an excavator driver, gives his example: while his immediate task was to load the rocks on the trucks, he was asked to replace a 'tooth' of his excavator. Since a special tractor was not available for this task, he had to mount this 'tooth' himself, although it weighed, according to his estimates, 200 kg. The other activity, that of slingers, which included working with electrical and locksmith's equipment, was also customarily performed by the excavator drivers and later included in the task list. Valera, who used to work as a welder before getting the job of an excavator driver, told that his boss made him weld when the welder was busy. 'Once I worked with Yugoslavs, and their welder was ill,' he recalled, 'so their work stopped'. When Valera was still an assistant excavator driver, his foreman asked him to load alone, whereas the rule is to work only in a crew of two people, both with a certain level of qualification.

Another type of service the workers could be asked to perform is to work more intensively. For example, if an excavator driver fulfills all the formalities according to instructions, he can load three trucks per hour. However, an experienced driver can load up to ten trucks during the same period. In exchange for these informal and sometimes illegal services, workers could get a higher coefficient of hours worked and some protection from the foremen, and the foreman could register more working time, let the worker leave earlier or cover his back in case he committed some minor misdemeanor.

Although on the surface these examples of informal relations in production resemble the practices of a socialist factory, where workers made up for the shortcomings of their equipment or supplies with additional tinkering, the underlying relation of forces between the management and the workers in a Belarusian factory is radically different. In a Soviet factory workers enjoyed a relative autonomy of their production process because their management depended on the workers' favors to fulfill the plan and had limited disciplining tools in conditions of full

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employment and in the absence of a functioning labor market (Filtzer 1994, 6). In a Belarusian factory, informal tasks are performed by the workers as 'offers they cannot refuse,' rather than as favors, as they depend on the management more than the management depends on them: the prebendal factory regime that I analyzed in the previous chapter gives the management efficient disciplining tools in the form of fixed-term contracts and an expanded list of disciplinary violations.

As everywhere, the fixed-term contract system was introduced in '*Hranit*' in 2004 and following the same bureaucratic shock-therapy blueprint (Chapter 4.1). Recalling the conclusion of his first fixed-time contract, Aleh said that although at that time he did not know about trade unions, he wanted to see the contract and study its terms. The reply he got was similar to what Stsiapan from the previous chapter heard: 'Why are you causing troubles, everyone signs, and so should you.' Initially, workers received five-year contracts, which were customarily prolonged until 2009 and then again until 2014. Afterwards, the length of the contracts started to vary with the tendency to shorten. As Lyonia put it, 'If you talk too much, you will receive a three-year contract, if you behave, you will have 5 years.' He assessed the contract as 'the government's new trick to keep a tight rein on workers, because you understand that your contract comes to an end and you start to pipe down.'

In the next section of this chapter I will analyze how these structural preconditions – the specific roles of the different jobs in the production process of '*Hranit,'* and the informal, asymmetric relations in production – led to a short-term success in mobilizing for a protest and carrying out an industrial action that wrestled concessions from the management but ended in a defeat in the long run.

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5.2. Triggers and development of the protest

The idea of leaving the Federation of Trade Unions appeared already in 2010 when one brigade of dump truck drivers wrote applications for withdrawal. Annoyed with wage arrears, they decided to express their protest and found the existing union useless, so they approached Aleh, whom they considered trustworthy and close to the management, and asked him to help organize a protest action. Aleh could not come up with anything better than writing letters of withdrawal from the FTUB-affiliated trade union, which around 40 people did. They did not get support from other workers at that time, and the applications remained in Aleh's drawer until a year later.

In answer to my question why they decided on that specific form of protest, Aleh replied: 'It was such a spontaneous reaction, I cannot explain myself. We kind of knew that the trade union had to defend our interests, but it didn't. We acted like little children: if you do this, we will do that.' Lyonia added that the question of deductions from the wage fund to the trade union was determinant: 'In 2010… they transferred 40 000 [Belarusian rubles] from my wages, and then [the trade union] bought me presents [on the occasion of the New Year] for 2 000'.

Workers saw the existing trade union as an appendage to the plant's welfare infrastructure, and not even an essential one, as the plant itself was responsible for providing social housing, maintaining a health resort and a house of culture. Workers knew that the union was mostly distributing benefits coming from the plant's rather than from the union's own funds. Thus, losing membership in the union would not cost them much: if anything, they would save one percent of their already plummeting wages by not paying membership fees. Their membership withdrawal would be more costly for the union and the administration that 'work closely together' to ensure "healthy moral and psychological climate as well as a stable social-economic situation in '*Hranit's*' workers' collective, that would help the enterprise reach its

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goals in the development of the construction industry of the Republic of Belarus[162]." As the further development of the conflict showed, these were not merely words, given that the Federation serves as a coopted member of the Caesarist coalition.

Given these stakes, the gesture of renouncing membership in the FTUB trade union was a compromise between a prohibitively costly strike that could entail immediate dismissal and inefficient individual petitions to the union or the administration. Not confronting the management directly, this would send a signal to the state authorities.

The main concern for the protesting workers was a significant decrease in wages as expressed in US dollars after the Belarusian currency devalued again in October 2011. According to Aleh, as of December 2011 wages of *BelAZ* dump truck drivers were between 2700000 and 3500000 Belarusian rubles. Before the currency devaluation, this amounted to roughly one thousand US dollars, but by late 2011 the wages of dump drivers fell to $340. This was especially insulting given the management's propaganda of the plant's success of growing profits and expanding production facilities. Aleh added that some from the middle and top management increased their own wages to around 20 million rubles (over 2 000 US dollars at the time). For example, the chief engineer's salary was 27 million rubles or roughly $3100.

In addition to stagnating wages, the workers' rate of exploitation was raised by more subtle means. If before that a 30-minute lunch break was included into the working time of a 12-hour shift, in 2011 lunch time was exempted. The workers calculated that now they were losing a month's wage in a year. Work schedule for *Belaz* drivers was changed in such a way that they lost bonuses for extra hours.

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[162] From trade union's section in '*Hranit's*' official website: https://granit.by/trade_union/

Personal conflicts aggravated the perceived decline of wages and the actual increase in the rate of exploitation: 'A man can take some bad attitude if it is compensated by wage,' Aleh commented, 'but here the wages were shitty, and the attitude was swinish.' *Belaz* workers invited the head of the HR and Wage Department to ask why it was necessary to take away that half an hour lunch time. The manager replied: 'Because this is an order. Everyone is paid according to his education. I have two university degrees.' The workers recall her fingers were decorated with precious jewelry and she 'was swinging her arms dripping with jewelry' as she was explaining the cause. Workers also recalled other occasions of demeaning attitude of the bosses, up to calling them 'rabble' ('*bydlo'*).

What predisposed Aleh to lead the protest were probably his personal frustrated aspirations of career growth rather than ideological commitment to any sort of social justice ideology. He entertained good relationships with the management and his colleagues, thought of himself as a professional and a leader. He hoped he would become the head of the *Belaz* column, which his co-workers would support. But the top management decided to put another person, whom Aleh deemed incompetent, onto that place. The management ignored his application twice and their decision, according to Aleh, was determined by the connections of his rival's mother. On the background of his frustration with his career and falling wages, Aleh became disappointed with his prospects in '*Hranit'*. According to him, the last straw was a briefing before the shift in November 2011, when upon request from his co-workers he tried to pose urgent questions to the director. Instead of a reply, he got a snub: 'Who do you think you are here? You have ten foremen here, don't you?' Aleh repeated this story many times as a proof that it was the decisive moment for him after which he could not stay away from the course of events.

There are no exact data regarding how many workers decided to leave FTUB; the number could be as high as one thousand. If in 2010, according to Aleh, there were 40 applications for the

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withdrawal from the official union only from '*Belaz'* workers, a year later 164 more applications were submitted. The dump truck drivers were joined by other brigades: first, excavator drivers, then the shipping department and shot-firers. According to Lyonia, 70% to 80% of each brigade wrote applications. Truck and excavator drivers, however, were the most active. This could be explained by their close cooperation on the pit and personal connections among the most authoritative leaders of the protests. Whereas Aleh led the '*Belaz'* drivers, Lyonia was the first to withdraw from the trade union in the excavator brigade. The number of only registered applications for withdrawal reached 304.

Although the decision on the form of the protest was spontaneous, workers were under the impression that it would hit hard the management. The withdrawal applications were submitted in the first days of December 2011, which was precisely when the new fifth production line was launched in the plant. The management reported to the ministry and hoped for bonuses and other rewards. They tried to persuade workers to wait with their applications until the start of the new year, but the protesters disagreed. Since '*Hranit*' is a republican-level enterprise and an important foreign exchange earner subordinated directly to the government, signals about the unrest could be transmitted through the Federation of Trade Unions directly to the Presidential Administration, which would not hesitate to use disciplinary measures against the management. In order to avoid this, the management gave the list of the workers who wrote applications to every foreman, who started pressurizing them to keep their membership in the union.

Encouraged by the initial relative success and irritated by the pressure from the management, the workers started to think of more sustained and institutionalized forms of struggle. At the time of writing their withdrawal requests, the workers were loosely organized and scarcely knew each other. Apart from negative experience with the plant's official trade union, they

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knew little about union organization and activities. Aleh recalls his friend telling him about the Belarusian Independent Trade-Union (BITU) at '*Belaruskali*' which he then researched online. He wrote a request to the trade union and asked them to call him back. Using the language of his 'business school' gurus, Aleh assessed the union as having 'ten grades on the scale of values'.

Two days after Aleh sent the letter, BITU's chair called back and invited the workers to the union's headquarters. Three days later, Aleh and nine other workers went to Salihorsk to meet the Independent Trade Union's leadership. Three other meetings followed in Mikashevichy, and there they decided to set up a primary organization of BITU at '*Hranit*.' They got 202 applications for membership.

A week after their trip to Salihorsk, on the night of December 24, the workers held an organizational meeting of the new trade union. Its preparation resembled a detective story. Initially it was decided to hold the meeting in the local House of Culture in Mikashevichy. All the prospective participants were notified. However, on the night before the meeting, the person responsible for the organization told Aleh that he was detained by the police in another city and could not help with the arrangement.

Through personal connections of a worker who lived in a village close to Mikashevichy, the workers obtained permission to hold a meeting in the village 'club' without specifying the purpose of their visit. Others were urgently notified of the change of venue. Workers who had cars were asked to park them close to the House of Culture but not to attract any attention. They had to pick up other workers and carry them to the new location.

The last-minute change of location turned out to be a happy coincidence: the management of '*Hranit'* learnt about the plans of the meeting, and '*Hranit's*' deputy director for ideology, the state's hand of prebendal control, accompanied by police, promptly arrived at the location.

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Since the event had not been agreed upon with the local authorities, the workers would risk both persecution from the police and administrative pressure from the plant's management. However, they found the House of Culture empty.

Workers gathered in the village, as Aleh recalled, 'a huge crowd of 300 people; the village had never seen so many people and cars, 50 of them.' The leadership of BITU and the union lawyers attended the meeting, and Aleh became the head of the independent trade union organization in '*Hranit*', although it was not yet officially registered.

Meanwhile, workers started to use the work disruption technique demanding an increase in wages to the previous level in US dollar equivalent, a return of the paid lunch time and an increase in remuneration for work on holidays. All the informal agreement on the cooperation between the workers and the management in order to organize smooth production process were disrupted. Lyonia organized the excavator drivers, who refused to work on Catholic Christmas, on Orthodox Christmas, and on two other holidays in the first half of the next year. Other protest actions included work-to-rules, the only tactics available since the Belarusian legislation makes strikes so cumbersome and potentially dangerous that they have not been officially recorded in the last twenty years. Lyonia recalls: "We came to our excavators but did not immediately start to load, while GAZ [trucks] were already waiting. We examined our vehicles, and this could last 1.5 hours when earlier it took 5 minutes. If something breaks, we stopped the excavator, called the locksmith, the electrician. 'Can't you connect these wires yourself' – 'No, guys, sorry, god forbid anything happens, call the repairmen'. The electrician could well have been doing some really necessary job, but he had to come to us". If earlier he could have loaded ten cars in an hour, now it was three or four. The workers called this tactic 'failing the plan.'

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Lyonia's brother used to work as a foreman at '*Belaz'* brigade. Aleh, working under his supervision, refused to 'work according to the orders' and do the job of locksmiths or electricians. He also refused to over-fulfill the norm of rock transportation: if the norm was 24 trips, he just went to sleep even if two hours were left before the end of his shift. "Even if we had good relationships with the foreman, I would reply: 'The situation is such that we are creating an independent union, I want us to be heard. So, sorry, but I did fulfil my norm'".

These forms of protest brought short-term positive results. Before resorting to their prebendal power, the management tried to save the situation and avoid admonishment from the state authorities. Immediately after the new trade union organization was established, '*Hranit's*' administration and the plant's FTUB-affiliated union held a meeting on improving the situation of workers' incomes[163]. Compensatory wage increases were approved, but the chair of the local FTUB-affiliated union was fired together with the head of plant's human resource department. If at the start of the strike Lyonia was getting an average of 1.3 million rubles ($150), after four months of work-to-rules he got 6 million ($689). The *Belaz* drivers got their wages raised from 3 million to 6-8 million in May 2012 and to 15-17 million in November that year. They also achieved fourfold compensation for the work on holidays.

Another short-term positive consequence was a wave of publicity that led to expressions of international solidarity and an attempt of imitation elsewhere in Belarus. Upon hearing about the protest in Mikashevichy, a historian-turned-woodworker from the '*Pinskdrev*' wood-processing factory agitated his coworkers to leave the FTUB union and organized an anonymous 'Workers' Council' that called for 10-minute technical breaks as a form of protest against the low wages and the despotic oversight in the factory. After the pressure from the

[163] Regional news website, January 6, 2012, http://regionby.org/2012/01/06/belorusskij-nezavisimyj-profsoyuz-dobivaetsya-registracii-pervichki-na-rupp-granit/

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management and KGB, he was fired and fled abroad, but his former employer had to go through financial and technical revisions from state and trade union inspectors (Teshenkov 2013).

'*Hranit's*' management was afraid of a similar danger, but Aleh's group was not anonymous. Compromising on workers' demands on the level of financial compensation, the management adopted a confrontational strategy towards the newly organized union. The new union's activists were asked to remain in the FTUB and some of them were promised the position of the head of the FTUB-affiliated union organization. Until mid-January the management's strategy consisted mostly in individual conversation with the workers who had written applications to withdraw from the official trade union and (or) to joined the newly created independent union.

'*Hranit's*' deputy president for ideology held individual talks with workers. Aleh told about his experience of such an interview that sheds light on the role of this figure in the structure of the prebendal factory regime. In the presence of *Belaz* brigade foreman, the deputy director for ideology put down Aleh's name on a piece of paper below two other names marked with 'plus' signs, while his name was marked with a 'minus': "I'll put you a 'minus', and our conversation will show whether it turns into a 'plus'". Aleh was not impressed either by the psychological pressure or by the promises to put him in change of the *Belaz* brigade or appoint him the head of the local 'official' union cell. He refused the offer because, as he later explained to me, he felt responsible for his co-workers who joined the new union and before the BITU.

Two months into the protest, KGB and the regional prosecution office got involved, a group of psychologists talked to the workers, and the problem of rebellious workers was discussed at briefings. The management invited individual workers for talks, during which they threatened to fire their relatives working at '*Hranit*' if they did not leave the independent union, or not to

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prolong their contracts, and pressurized the workers' family members to convince them to remain in FTUB.

The situation was ambivalent. On the one hand, workers depended on what was the main employer in town, and many of them were paying off loans. On the other hand, labor turnover spiked as many workers migrated to work in Russia where they could get twice as high a salary as in Mikashevichi. In spite of the pressure, after half a year of functioning, only ten people (according to my informants)—or seventy, according to '*Hranit's'* director[164]—left the newly established union organization.

Soon Aleh, the independent union's treasurer and his wife were fired along with ten other workers. Five of them were the only members of BITU union organization who were paying their trade union membership contributions through the plant's bookkeeping department. According to activists, the most common incriminating pretext was the violation of labor security rules which would result in a non-continuation of the employment contract. Lyonia also told me that his dismissal was motivated by violations of work security, although he was not even shown the report about it. The court supported his case and ruled that he was fired illegally. Subsequently, however, he could not find a job either in '*Hranit'* or elsewhere in town. Whenever he went to '*Hranit'* to apply for available vacancies advertised in front of the entrance, he got the reply that there were no free places.

The case of Aleh and the subsequent court proceedings regarding his dismissal were widely publicized. On the 10th of January he was summoned by the traffic police and accused of violating traffic rules. On February 14, he was deprived of his driver's license for half a year, and two days afterwards he was fired since without a license he could no longer work as a truck

[164] According to the general director of '*Hranit*' Eduard Havrilkovich, interview by *Virtualnyi Brest,* January 25, 2013, https://virtualbrest.by/news13219.php

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driver. He appealed to the court against his dismissal and stated procedural violations, such as the management's failure to inform him of available vacancies. After several court sessions, in September 2012 he was awarded a partial compensation for '*Hranit*' management's violation of the dismissal procedure, although he was never reinstated in his job.

In response, the independent trade union threatened with a warning strike over the dismissal of Aleh and the union's treasurer, the discrimination of union activists and the refusal to allow the official registration of the union. However, the threat never materialized due to the lack of support from the plants' labor collective. Neither did solidarity actions happened on other enterprises, even those where BITU had influence.

As seen from the above, the fixed-term contract system as the basic component of the prebendal factory regime was more effective in preventing further disturbances and pacifying workers in long-term perspective than 'soft' methods of persuasion.

Reprisals against worker activists stirred a wave of international solidarity actions that turned out to be more successful at this stage than local protests. The Secretary General of the International Trade Union Confederation sent letters to the Presidential Administration, to *Hranit's* management, to the Minister of Labor and to the Prosecutor General (International Trade Union Confederation 2012). She was joined by the Secretary General of the European Trade Union Confederation (2012). Solidarity protests and announcements were made also by the Russian Interregional Trade Union 'Workers' Association' and by labor organizations in Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

Notably, via Belarusian labor activist Anatoly Matveenko who covered the events in '*Hranit'* for Venezuelan media (Matveenko 2012), scores of Venezuelan and other Latin American trade unions and labor organizations also wrote a letter of solidarity with '*Hranit'* workers, protesting against the pressure put on the independent union and the dismissal of Aleh and Litvinko

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(Matamoros 2012). This was extremely effective, as it roughly coincided with Lukashenko's quest for alternative ways of procuring oil and assuring that 20% of it comes from sources other than Russia. Widely celebrated, a megaton of oil from Azerbaijan arrived to Belarusian oil refineries by the end of 2011 in an oil deal with Venezuela (Balmaceda 2014).

The letter, directed to the President Lukashenko, Belarusian state authorities and '*Hranit's*' management, gained wide publicity and was featured on the state television. Given the strong connections between Venezuela and Belarus and their ideological significance for the ruling elite of Belarus, this intervention contributed to alleviating the pressure on labor activists. Anatoly confided that this expression of support disoriented state authorities, who had just recently watched celebratory state news reports about Belarus successes in collaboration with Venezuela.

Union activists and workers agreed that the establishment of the independent trade union and the international pressure led to financial concessions from the state. '*Hranit's*' general director was *de facto* suspended. In May the chair of the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions came to Mikashevichy in person as an envoy of the presidential administration. Workers were hand-picked to be present at the meeting with him, where FTUB's chair promised to report the situation in Mikashevichy to the president and expressed his belief that an expansion of exports will improve their economic condition[165]. After the visit of the head of the regional government and the appointment of a new general director of '*Hranit*', a position directly subordinated to the presidential administration[166], workers' incomes improved. Wages were raised in May 2012, half a year after the protest erupted, to around $1000. By the end of that year, the wages of dump truck drivers rose to 14-17 millions of rubles, roughly $1500. One of the workers,

[165] A report by ONT TV-channel, May 22, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riqfLrbhDnM
[166] According to a regional news website *Silnye Novosti,* June 15, 2012, https://gomel.today/rus/news/belarus/26231/.

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who used to receive 7-8 millions, got 15 million rubles as of the end of December 2012. However, because at that time drivers were paid for the tonnage of rock transported, the drivers of the older trucks only got 5-6 million. Additionally, workers gained a fourfold increase in the compensation for working on holidays and the compensation for food, and fivefold increase in compensation for saving materials.

5.3. Unionism and self-reliance

After Aleh was dismissed with an effective work prohibition in his native town, he moved to Salihorsk, a city he had known since his student years and the seat of Belarusian Independent Trade Union. He remained the chair of BITU's primary organization on '*Hranit*,' which never acquired a legal address[167] and existed only virtually. All the declared members of this primary organization had been fired, only those who had not disclosed their membership kept their jobs at the plant.

Before registering as an individual entrepreneur, Aleh lived off the support from BITU and his own savings. Although still the largest and the richest trade union outside of FTUB with an official presence in the oil refining and chemical companies, the Belarusian Independent Trade Union was in a brittle situation. On the one hand, as a result of trade sanctions from the EU over labor rights violations, in 2007 the Belarusian government included representatives of the opposition union in a tripartite Council for Social and Labor Issues. On the other hand, the official trade union, BITU, was under a renewed pressure in recent years. It was excluded from a tariff agreement between the government and FTUB's oil and chemical industry branch

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[167] The issue of the legal address is discussed in chapter 3. In this case, the plant's management redirected BITU union activists who asked for a legal address to the ministry of agriculture that formally owned the plant's premises. A similar situation happened in 2009, when more than a hundred women from a Salihorsk garment factory established a BITU union, but their application for a legal address was rejected by the city government. After numerous attempts at registering a union, the employer restructured the factory, changed it names and corporate status (*Viasna,* April 6, 2011, http://spring96.org/ru/news/42455).

union; a group of engineers and technicians were forced out of its primary organization in '*Belaruskali*'; independent trade union in Navapolatsk, in spite of a modest growth of its membership, was left out of a collective agreement on the oil refinery company; Minsk city government convened a meeting with an agenda to neutralize opposition unions. Additionally, a week before Labor Day, when BITU's request for a demonstration in Mikashevichy was declined, Lukashenka criticized the opposition's 'fifth column' that wanted to destabilize the country by fueling workers' discontent[168].

The reaction of state officials looked menacing for the opposition union. Irritated by the new sanctions from the EU in response to the jailing of the participants of electoral protests in 2010, the president resumed his discourse of blaming 'the fifth column' of the opposition that supposedly collaborated with the West in an attempt to change the regime. Given previous episodes of labor unrest, opposition trade unions were also rhetorically relegated into the same category. Rumors in Mikashevichy accused BITU of receiving foreign aid, and the head of Brest regional government, while visiting '*Hranit*,' said that there would be no independent union in the plant.

All of these episodes illustrate that the Caesarist solution to managing labor discontent was that of pitting management, state officials and workers against each other. Lukashenka urged state officials to visit 'troublesome' enterprises and talk to people in order to avoid a 'political fight' on workplaces. Following this order, representatives of the Ministry of Architecture and representatives of the regional government visited Mikashevichy and changed the leadership of '*Hranit*'. This was an exercise of prebendal control over economic bureaucracy on behalf of

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[168] Cited by the news portal tut.by, April 17, 2012, https://news.tut.by/politics/284864.html

the workers: 'If a laboring man says something is wrong, I react. And you know how I react[169],' Lukashenka threatened, referring to his enduring practice of administrative and criminal persecution of the country's economic bureaucracy[170]. If enterprise managers are kept in check by state administration officials, workers should not ask too much from the managers: 'I made too much of a fuss over you [*nosil na rukakh,* literally, 'carried you in my hands'] all these 15 years,' Lukashenka said addressing workers, 'and now some of you stopped working. Therefore, my formula is simple: [...] no productivity, no money[171].' The mediator among these three sides would be the Federation of Trade Unions as a representative of the Caesarist power center. Workers' self-organization or representative trade unions did not fit this scheme.

Weakened on the national level, BITU's leadership was not prepared to see its new primary organization become the focus of such high-level concern. Its increased tensions with the government reflected in internal tensions within the union. Aleh became one of the leaders of BITU's youth organization, and the mood that dominated the informal group of young workers around Aleh was one of resentment against the older leadership of the union. Aleh and other young workers complained that the union was not supportive enough of the struggles of '*Hranit'* activists. In contrast to a solid and effective international solidarity campaign, there was no solidarity action in Salihorsk or other industrial centers with strong BITU primary organizations. A faction of the old generation was also dissatisfied with the lack of protest and solidarity mobilizations since the '90s (Novik 2013b).

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[169] President's press conference, Belarusian Telegraph Agency, April 21, 2012, https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-v-belarusi-budut-reformirovatsja-problemnye-predprijatija-video-98313-2012

[170] This was the second change in '*Hranit's*' management over five years. Plant's previous director was fired in 2007 over mismanagement of the investment, and the new one was charged with a task of expanding production and exports according to a state program of the development of construction industry. Performing successfully in economic terms, he resigned in the middle of the scandal with the workers' protest.

[171] President's press conference, Belarusian Telegraph Agency, April 21, 2012, https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-v-belarusi-budut-reformirovatsja-problemnye-predprijatija-video-98313-2012

Prior to the '*Hranit*' stand-off, BITU's 'old guard,' although nominally associated with the political opposition to the government, decided to withdraw from any active participation in political life. BITU's leadership declared that it was essential to preserve the union and expand it rather than risk persecution for the involvement in the electoral campaign for 2010[172]. The union stopped organizing public protest events, although its individual members participated in the general opposition demonstrations. And yet, the union's membership was falling, it lost one primary organization and failed to establish another. The new chair of the union, Mikalai Zimin, a veteran miner and a hero of the 1992 strike in '*Belaruskali*' (see Chapter 2.1), elected in 2011 (Dovnar and Yeroshenia 2011, 320–22), raised some hopes that he would reinvigorate the union's activity. He was active in supporting the Mikashevichy group in the initial stages of the conflict, and for the young and more radically-minded union members, his attitude concerning the '*Hranit*' conflict was a litmus test.

Zimin, however, followed a moderately conservative line of avoiding risky conflicts. In 2015, at the end of his term as a union leader, young members of BITU who worked in the Second Mining Department of '*Belaruskali*' supported Aleh's candidacy for the union's presidency. During BITU's tenth general congress, Aleh criticized the leadership for an exclusively office activity without reaching out to the workers. Older members in the leadership retorted that Aleh would not manage the responsibilities because he was young and inexperienced. Therefore, they suggested that he should run for the position of vice-president. A secretary of the union, a young worker who entertained good relations with the union's youth organization, held an online survey on BITU's social media page, and according to its results Aleh won the majority

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[172] An interview with the chair of BITU Vasil Korabau, *Salidarnasts,* May 8, 2010, https://gazetaby.com/post/svyazyvat-profsoyuz-s-politicheskimi-kampaniyami-ne-umno/28327/

of votes among five candidates. And yet, the delegates re-elected Zimin as the chair and the head of the union's organization in Mazyr oil refinery as his deputy[173].

In the run up to the tenth congress of BITU, Aleh said that his rivals in the union circulated rumors about him. He was very mad at the head of Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions Aliaksandr Yarashuk and at Zimin. While initially they extolled him as a symbol of the protest in Mikashevichy in 2011, he then fell out of favor with them. Aleh told me that Zimin called him 'recycled material.' This story of frustrated ambitions is remarkably similar to Aleh's earlier experience in '*Hranit*,' where his hopes for the foremanship of the *Belaz* brigade were crashed by the appointment of the management's favorite.

Aleh reflects the reform zeal of the young union activists by assimilating the Independent Union's leadership with the state bureaucracy. According to him, the management of '*Hranit*' was still Soviet ('*sovkovyi*'[174]), like much of the opposition unions' leadership. They would not develop because they lacked the inner qualities and values necessary for the global economy, namely leadership skills and openness to innovations. However, he maintained that even in conditions of state-controlled economy development is possible if you are a leader and you can prove it. I heard the same judgement about the opposition trade union leadership and opposition politicians during informal meetings organized by Anatol Matveenko, attended by the younger generation of BITU activists. Anatol was in fact even more radical in his evaluation: the leadership of those independent and free unions that emerged in the nineties are the same old communists, essentially an alternative nomenklatura that tried to privatize parts of civil society.

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[173] Field notes

[174] '*Sovok*' or its derived adjective '*sovkovyi*' is a derogative term referring to anything Soviet (the original meaning of the word *sovok* in Russian is a 'dust tray,' it acquired its secondary meaning due to its consonance with the word *sovet*, 'Soviet'). As an ideological trope of the post-Soviet liberal intelligentsia, it is closely related to the notion of *homo sovieticus,* i.e. a non-Western mental predisposition, developed in the '80s and '90s by émigré author Alexander Zinoviev and Russian sociologist Yuri Levada. It gained new popularity with the award of the Nobel prize to the Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich, whose ideological crusade was to diagnose and fight what she believed was *homo sovieticus* (especially in her *Second-Hand Time,* 2013).

Aleh's answer was that workers should embrace a new, flexible and entrepreneurial approach. 'Everyone has to bear responsibility for him- or herself instead of cherishing the Soviet ('*sovkovyi*') idea that someone will care about you,' he would preach, unwittingly echoing Lukashenka's words that he had enough of 'making a big fuss' about workers. Workers have to change their relationships with the employers and embrace the win-win partnership principle: Aleh gave the example of 'many companies that are listed by Forbes where people go to work with a smile on their faces.' The company, according to him, should involve its employees into the process of modernization and give them shares from which they would be able to receive dividends to the end of their lives. But there are no such businessmen in Belarus who would have 'very high system of values' (here Aleh used the same expression that he used to described BITU when he first heard about it).

In Aleh's mind this is reconciled with the idea that only workers organized in a trade union can fight the managers, who are '99,9% bastards.' He wanted to be such a leader, he attended seminars and trainings on union organizing in Saint-Petersburg, offered by the Dutch federation of trade unions. Having blended that knowledge with the wisdom he obtained in the 'business schools', he concluded that organized workers should understand that things could not go on as they used to: 'We have really moved to the fifth technological paradigm… Robots and machinery appears that simplifies that process of production. We don't have to just tolerate it, we have to understand it clearly and try learning something new. How to tend to the robots.' In this logic, Aleh admitted that restructuring companies and laying out of labor force was something of a historical necessity.

Aleh saw the signs of the future technological revolution coming from within the Belarusian state: 'Lukich[175] was not lying in his inauguration speech in 2015 that Belarusian economy

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[175] A pejorative-endearing name for president Lukashenka.

would develop along the path of innovations for the next five years.' And indeed, Belarus in cooperation with China opened a second special economic zone destined to be a business-incubator for high-tech firms, extended generous subsidies for high-tech investors and even legalized transactions in crypto-currencies. Aleh was overwhelmed with this hype in Belarusian and in international business media, but he was left out of these opportunities. Ever more surrounded by the gentrified environment catering to the new aristocracy of IT specialists and managers from outsourced high-tech firms, he probably felt he was not entrepreneurial enough. On his way to the 'investment' slot of the 'cash flow quadrant,' Aleh encountered Anatoliy Yunitsky, an engineer who proposed him the 'transport of the new generation.'

Aleh admitted he was 'really lucky' to find out about the Eco-Techno-Park near Minsk where Yunitsky's project is supposed to be realized—as lucky as he had been in 2008 when he started attending Yager Group seminars on multi-level marketing. This 'avant-garde of the technological progress' a couple of kilometers outside Minsk is called Skyway or Trans-net, a 'transportation system of the second level,' raised above the level of the earth and integrated with the internet. Yunitsky promised that with this transportation system the city transport would run at the speed of 150 km/h, the high-speed vehicles would reach 500 km/h and the cargo transport would go as fast as 150 km/h.

If during the late *perestroika* Yunitsky worked on the project of a 'string elevator' for delivering cargo on the earth's orbit without rockets, in Lukashenka's re-run of *perestroika* he turned his 'string' to a more modest horizontal plane. But if in the ideological agony of the dying Soviet Union such projects could still be financed by the state, the Belarusian neo-*perestroika* gives more space for a private initiative: Yunitsky's project is 'crowd sourced.' Aleh invested a sizeable part of his savings into this '100% sure' start-up. By now, this money

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is probably wandering in a network of off-shore accounts[176], but Aleh's dignity as an investor and not a slave to the state capital is preserved.

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[176] There is ample evidence in the media that the 'crowd investment' works as a Ponzi scheme under the cover of primitive but fancy looking hanging carriages displayed on a former military polygon near Minsk. 'Share sales' are managed through online platforms, although the shares are not duly registered. 'Investors' are encouraged to involve other people with a compensation calculated as a share of investment they attracted, but I am not aware whether Aleh did it himself. See, for example, a series of reports in Onliner: https://tech.onliner.by/2016/09/05/sky-way.

Chapter 6. The ‘Parasites’ Fight Back: Taxation of Unemployment and a Better Failure of Trade-Unions

In spring 2017 I envisaged my next fieldwork stint in Belarus as a quiet period of archival research, browsing through old trade-union and industrial newspapers and documents in the National Library. My previous findings did not forecast anything extraordinary: the chances of protests should have been minimal as market discipline was penetrating deeper into labor relations and the political climate was liberalizing. The peaceful presidential elections of 2015, the lack of protests against the pension reform accompanied by the first decline in GDP since 1996, and the rapprochement of the ruling authorities and the opposition within the new ‘security pact’ (A. Wilson 2016) counted as solid evidence for my (non-)expectations. My informants from the activist milieu were similarly skeptical about the prospect of massive public protests against the newly enacted Decree no. 3, the so called ‘Law against parasites,’ that stipulated taxing the long-term unemployed. Then came the news that thousands of people were taking to the streets in provincial cities and towns, protesting against this law and pressing other social demands.

Signed in 2015, the decree ‘On the prevention of social parasitism’ was only put into practice in early 2017. Roughly 450 000 people received notifications obliging them to pay the equivalent of a medium monthly wage if they hadn’t had a job for six months. The indignation against the law itself and against the official rhetoric of scapegoating ‘social dependents,’ the careless way it was implemented and other grievances over the shrinking welfare system sparked country-wide protests, their geographic spread, the number and social composition of the participants unprecedented in the recent history of Belarus.

Ever since I started fieldwork in early 2015, I heard workers and union activists voicing concerns that unemployment would be legally punished in Belarus. Some of my younger

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interlocutors in Minsk rushed to find low-paid jobs in public institutions like museums or as interns in industrial enterprises; others, mostly IT professionals, remained unimpressed by the rumors. Fines for unemployment had been discussed in the government since 2013, and the president signed his decree 'On the prevention of social dependency' in April 2015. The liberal-nationalist intellectuals and politicians branded this law a return to the Soviet repressive practices that targeted so-called 'parasites' and 'anti-social elements', while the radical trade-unions painted it as the new serfdom.

It was clear to me, however, that unlike the spuriously similar Soviet criminalization of beggars and 'speculators,' Lukashenka's campaign against 'social parasites' was aimed at tightening fiscal discipline, legalizing 'grey' economic activity and pushing workers to the low-paid job sector. My working hypothesis was that this policy was part of the longer trend of labor immobilization which complemented the precarization tendency present since the early 2000s as an extension of the prebendal strategy to dominate the working class (see Chapter 4.3 and introduction to Part III). These two trends had been going hand in hand for two decades, although they had been recombined in various proportions in the distinguishable modes of domination that the Belarusian passive-revolutionary process had undergone. As opposed to the widespread liberal interpretation of this law as a relapse into a Soviet anachronism, I considered this year's campaign against 'social parasites' as a re-routing of the Belarusian passive revolution towards hardening of the market discipline in response to the 2011 crisis and a corresponding refashioning of the 'populist dramaturgy' in the direction of projecting an image of the self-responsible and entrepreneurial citizens, not unlike to what Aleh from the previous chapter imagined himself.

The protests against the 'anti-parasite law' point both to the essential features of the Belarusian passive revolution and to a significant rupture in it after the 2011 crisis. Do these protests prove

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or refute my model of the passive-revolutionary trajectory? What do they say about the changing forms and idioms of contestation among the trade unions?

The spring protests of 2017 laid bare the mutating organization and mobilization strategies of the trade-unions. First unwilling to call for street protests, the opposition trade-unions initiated a public campaign against this law and provided the mobilization framework for the unrest, as I will show later in this chapter. In this sense, trade-unions were successful in organizing this partially successful protest campaign and in increasing their own membership and visibility. The significance of the unions was proven by the government's response to the spring unrest: if most of the protest organizers were briefly detained and fined, the independent trade unions bore the brunt of the repressions. Two of my informants, members of the Radio-Electronic Workers' Union, got four years of house arrest on tax evasion charges, and around 800 union members were questioned, some of them forcibly detained and harassed.

In contrast to the case analyzed in the previous chapter, where the Belarusian Independent Trade-Union proved impotent to empower or even utilize the wave of post-crisis workers' unrest, the Radio-Electronic Workers' Union (REWU) union was much more successful during the 'parasites' protests'. In this chapter, I will show how this relative success hinged on the changed strategy of the opposition unions' activities, namely their attempt to move from an NGO-like functioning to social movement unionism (Burawoy 2008).

The numbers of participants, their messages, and the scope of the 'parasite's protest' echoed in some ways the 1991 labor unrest analyzed in Chapter 1. Now, as then, thousands of un-affiliated protesters, only partially coordinated by the trade unions, pressed social grievances throughout the whole country. I was faced with a challenge to my theoretical model. Was it really the case that the market discipline model that had started to take shape after the 2011 crisis repeated Gorbachev's reforms, and resulted in the same social protest? I had to

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reconstruct my theoretical framework in light of this latest protest event. The summertime fieldwork I envisaged I would spend in the archives did not look so peaceful anymore: I changed my plans and went straight to talk to the trade union members who participated in the 'parasites' protests' in Minsk and in Homel, the second largest protest site and the place of the most vibrant activity of the Radio-Electronic Workers' Union (REWU).

My friend and informant Vitia, who studied political science in Minsk, spent the summer in his home city Homel. He was ideally situated to help me meet relevant people and understand the situation with trade unions and the 'parasites' protests' in Homel. Recently a turbulent chapter in his political biography had ended: a former Maoist interested in North Korean Juche ideology, he left the pro-government Communist party and joined its rival communist organization '*Spraviadlivy sviet'* ('A just world'). *'Spraviadlivy sviet'* is the institutional descendant of the Communist party of Belarus which did not support Lukashenka in 1994 and has since then been part of the opposition spectrum. After joining them, Vitia started working with trade unions in Homel. He mostly worked with the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers, many of whose members belonged to '*Spravedlivy sviet'* partly due to FTUM's leader Bukhvostau's Marxist persuasion, partly out of convenience: "the party needed members, the union needs an institutional 'roof,'" Vitia said. Precariously employed himself, he told me about his efforts to engage several new members to FTUM in Homel.

Vitia and the members of the Belarusian left were among the organizers of the 'parasites protests' in Homel. For his activity in agitating for the protests, he was accused of sharing extremist messages in social media and prosecuted along with dozens of agitators from the trade-unions. This made him contact the liberal wing of the oppositional NGO-trade union milieu in Minsk and Homel. Vitia asked for help with his case from a lawyer employed at the Homel chapter of the REWU union who was also an activist involved in both unions activities

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and human rights organizations. Although criticizing their political position, Vitia considered them honest and dedicated people. He helped me get in touch with them when I asked for the contact of those involved in the spring protests.

The very path through which I got access to the Homel groups of trade-union, human rights and political activists and the complicated life story of Vitia foreshadows what I would find later in the field: the independent trade unions' convergence with NGOs and their attempt to appeal to the wider population affected by the anti-welfare policies, which was an important factor in the union's mobilization success.

Thus, instead of sitting in the diamond-shaped National Library in Minsk, a symbol of the country's past prosperity, I was strolling past its miniaturized copy in the central park of Homel to meet Vitya after he finished his shift as a cleaner at a gas station. He complained that he earned only 230 Belarusian roubles (around 115 Euro) a month, which barely covered the rent. He also stressed that he had to take any job, like the one at the gas station, to avoid becoming a 'parasite'. His story is typical for a large share of the participants in the spring protests, who were mostly the people either not affected directly or affected potentially by the decree's menace.

6.1. 'We are not parasites!'

The scene for the government's 'anti-parasite' campaign and the popular indignation against it was set in 2014. Three years after the 2011 crisis, the stagnating Belarusian economy was hit by a ricochet from the war in the East of Ukraine and the ensuing sanctions against Russia. The shrinking Russian and Ukrainian markets, the plunge in hydrocarbon prices and the outflow of Russian capital caused the GDP of Belarus to shrink in 2015 and 2016 for the first time since the early nineties. Monetarist technocrats dominated the government and the central bank, focusing on an effort to stabilize the finances and the prices, while putting on hold the interests

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of the workers, pensioners and the industrial lobby. Thus, there was no monetary emission, the exchange rate has been liberalized, pension age and the utility prices raised.

The Ministry of Labor, known for its promotion of labor market flexibility, discussed taxing those who were not registered as either employed or unemployed already in the late 2013. The target was set at around 450 000 potential ‘parasites.’ However, the government and the respective legislative committee found it difficult to identify them (BDG 2013). In October 2014, president Lukashenko returned to this topic during the conference on labor and migration: ‘We need to stop this parasitism, 400 000 [people] should be involved in labor activities in the name of the revolution... We need to stop giving them goods for free’ (Melnichuk 2014). In spite of the revolutionary rhetoric, the law that the president demanded from the government had the clear goal of disciplining labor and cutting budgetary spending.

The reasoning behind this policy was clearly presented in *Belaruskaya dumka*, a journal issued by the Presidential Administration. A timely article with a commentary on the president’s speech (Prus 2014) pointed out imbalances in the labor market, the inefficient use of labor force and labor time which led to higher commodity prices and lower competitiveness of Belarusian enterprises. The article essentially concluded that there are four to five hundred thousand able-bodied citizens who avoided the state’s eye and prevent the efficient use of the visible labor force. This invisible population included those who got part of their wages ‘in envelopes’ and worked in internet trade, construction, and other services without being registered as individual entrepreneurs, or who worked abroad without an official registration (Prus 2014, 6).

President Lukashenka signed the decree no. 3 entitled ‘On the Prevention of Social Parasitism (Dependency)’ on April 2, 2015. This law demanded that the citizens who did not participate in financing state expenditures for 183 days in a year starting from January 1 would have to

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pay a deduction to the budget of appr. $240. Non-payment would be punished by a fine or administrative detention with obligatory public work (BDG 2015a).

This additional threat of financial losses added to the growing vulnerability of Belarusian workers. As a consequence of both the crisis and the governmental measures, unregistered unemployment, that had declined between 2007 and 2011, rebounded after the crisis to more than 260 000 people (O. Mazol and Tsiulia 2018, 6). The large state-owned enterprises with relatively stable jobs, high wages and welfare infrastructure had been firing more than hiring[177]. Since 2014, the top ten largest employers (with 8000 to 10 000 employees) in the country had been shedding labor force. Thus, the two largest employers in Minsk, the Tractor Plant and the Automobile Plant, lost between 10% and 12% of the workers, i.e. over two thousand people, between 2014 and 2016; the largest construction firm in the capital city, MAPID, lost over 20% of labor force. The same applies to regional companies: The Tire Factory in Babruysk, a provincial town where some of the most numerous protests would take place in spring 2015, lost almost 12% of labor force (1400 people); the largest oil refinery in the northern city of Navapolatsk shed 14% of its employees (around 1700 people). Other large regional employers, located in the areas most affected by the 2017 protests, like Salihorsk's '*Belaruskali'*, Homel's '*Homselfmash',* or Mazyr Oil Refinery in Homel region had virtually stopped hiring.

Additionally, many Belarusian migrant workers, predominantly from the eastern regions, either returned home or had to look for unofficial employment in Russia. Between 2014 and 2015 the wage gap between Russia and Belarus narrowed 3.8 times, and wages in several industries in Belarus had surpassed those in Russia. Specifically, by autumn 2015, wages in the Russian construction industry sunk below those in Belarus, causing a gradual outflow of labor from one of the biggest migrant labor markets for Belarusians. In 2015, construction businesses in

[177] The following calculations are made by the author based on the quarterly reports by the enterprises on the website of the Ministry of Finance: http://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/securities_department/results/results_oao/

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Belarus stopped hiring new labor and moved to curtailing labor force at the biggest enterprises (Ivanovich 2015). This hit especially hard the Eastern regions of Homel and Vitsebsk, that would give significant numbers of protesters.

The real wages stagnated in 2014 and went down in 2015 and 2016 for the first time since the '90s[178]. As the real income fell by 7.2% over these two years, the level of poverty went up, especially in the Homel, Mahiliou and Brest regions, with over a third of households below the poverty line in 2016 (A. Mazol 2017, 24–25). The share of unregistered unemployed was higher in the three eastern regions (Homel, Mahiliu and Vitsebsk) and in the western Brest region, amounting to more than 3% of their population (O. Mazol and Tsiulia 2018, 8). These are also the areas with the lowest average per capita incomes and the highest poverty rates, where people tend to be involved in the 'grey' economy of trans-border peddling and unregistered labor migration (O. Mazol and Tsiulia 2018, 10). This geographical distribution of the potential targets of the 'anti-parasites law' contributed to shaping the geographical spread of the protests to happen in 2017.

According to an expert of the liberal-minded Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (Eliseev 2015), there could be several categories that the law could target: people avoiding income taxes (100-200 000 smugglers, informal employees of private firms, freelancers etc.); labor migrants and Belarusian living abroad (220 000); marginals (15-30 000); the unregistered unemployed, (100 000 of those who can't find work for more than half a year); and those who have illegal income or depend on their relatives (10-30 000). The relevant authorities had to find a way to identify these people and send them notifications, given that they may be invisible in state statistics. Meanwhile, according to official data, the employable population that was not active in the economy in the end of 2015 amounted to 266 400 (O. Mazol and Tsiulia 2018, 2). The

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[178] Author's calculation based on official statistics of the Belarusian National Statistical Committee, belstat.gov.by.

almost 200 000 discrepancy between the number of 'parasites' announced by the president, which then had to be produced, and the officially registered figure presented the local executive authorities with a challenge. Their frantic search for 'parasites' caused numerous mistakes in issuing the tax notifications that then incited people's anger.

Two years after Lukashenka demanded taxing the social parasites and counted 400 000 of them, the tax ministry could identify only 50 000. By that time only 4 000 of them had voluntarily paid the tax, amounting to 1 mln rubles instead of the expected 450 bln rubles (Gatsak 2016). Shortly after, in the beginning of 2017, the executive authorities 'solved the problem' and found 470 thousand 'parasites' (10% of the employable population), but less than one in ten of them paid the deductions. According to my informants and the press, the notifications had been sent to everyone without much scruple, even to the disabled and the dead.

According to a survey held in 2014 and 2015 (Artemenko 2017), economically active Belarusians were less willing to resort to activism (create civil society organizations, participate in protests etc.) in response to the crisis, than to appeal to the authorities. In contrast, the unemployed were almost 18% less willing to appeal to the state and almost 18% more prone to participate in the protests. The state's response to the crisis changed the moods. On the one hand, the population that had been unwilling to protest felt betrayed by the authorities who started sending 'parasite' notifications without a proper database of the 'social parasites'. On the other hand, the unemployed, already willing to protest, felt even more anxious when faced with the threat of fines or forced labor. This came on alongside the geographically uneven economic problems and shrinking welfare programs discussed above.

Unfolding of the protests

Two types of organized actors tried to articulate and mobilize this popular discontent: the extra-parliamentary political opposition and the labor unions outside the state-controlled Federation

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of Trade Unions[179]. Opposition activists started campaigning already in 2013, mostly among their followers on social networks, and in spring 2015 they had over 20 000 signatures under their petition to withdraw decree no. 3. Apparently, the president's advisers drew his attention to this campaign, and Lukashenka promised he would watch closely how people react and would be ready to initiate changes in the law. He expressed concerns over possible irritation that the law may cause but said he would make sure the workers would support him since they would feel resentment seeing the expensive cars that the purported parasites drive (BDG 2015b).

Since the introduction of the 'anti-parasite' decree, REWU received many letters requesting to help understand the dangers of the new policy and counsel on how to avoid them. In the late 2016, the union initiated a campaign against the decree by convening a meeting in its Minsk office with the lawyers and activists of the opposition political movements and *Viasna* human rights group. They developed a recommendation on how to legally avoid paying the fine and a sample court claim if the payment notification had arrived. They also agreed to start a media campaign, a protest campaign and a collection of signatures to repeal the law.

Thus, in January 2017 REWU sent letters to the main parties and movements to coordinate their activities against the decree, but the opposition political groups had already set up an organizing committee to prepare the 'March of non-parasites' for March 15. REWU's leadership doubted that it would attract a significant number of participants since according to the union's survey people who came to sign the petition were not ready to take to the streets. REWU leadership was cautious to dissociate themselves from the radical image of the opposition political groups, stressing that they wanted only peaceful and constructive expression of their disagreement, nothing similar to the Ukrainian 'Maidan'. However,

[179] The Federation of Trade Unions remained loyal to the president and published a series of apologetic articles about the 'parasite' law in its newspaper '*Belaruski chas'* (http://belchas.1prof.by/).

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REWU's regional activists claimed people were ready to protest, and the Homel REWU organization had already submitted its application for a demo on February 19.

The petition and protest campaign of the trade unions and the opposition political groups contributed to a notable uptick in the protest activity in 2017 with at least 13 political protests with more than 500 participants as compared to 2 in 2015 and 4 in 2014 (Herasimenka 2017, 6). The bulk of the protest events happened between February 17 and May 1, 2017, and the most numerous of them took place between February 19 and March 19 in regional centers and smaller towns. The table below, compiled from media reports, breaks down the dynamic of the protests according to geographic spread, participation, organization, and the response of the authorities.

Table 7. Protest activity in February-May 2017

Phase of the protests	**Period**	**Cities (number of participants)**	**Organizers/participants**	**Response of the state**
'The march of enraged Belarusians'	February 17	Minsk (2000-2500)	Opposition organizations/dominated by political activists	Unauthorized; detentions the event
First wave of regional protests	February 19	Homel (2000-3000), Mahiliou (200-400), Hrodna (50-100), Brest (100), Vitsebsk (250)	Opposition organizations and trade unions/predominantly unaffiliated people	Authorized and unauthorized demonstrations, sporadic detentions and fines
	February 26	Vitsebsk (1750-2000), Brest (300), Babruysk (400-1500), Baranavichhy (300)	Opposition organizations and trade unions/predominantly unaffiliated people	Authorized and unauthorized demonstrations, sporadic detentions and fines
Second wave of regional protests	March 5-19	Brest (1000-2000), Maladzechna (500-1000), Pinsk (350-400), Rahachou (300), Vorsha (1000), Babruisk (650-1000), Minsk (1750-4000), Hrodna (1000), Slonim (300-500),	Opposition organizations and trade unions/predominantly unaffiliated people	A mix of detentions and dialogue with representatives of local authorities

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		Baranavichy (50-60)		
Opposition 'calendar protests' with an anti-decree theme	Freedom Day (March 25-26)	Minsk (1000-3000), Brest (200), Hrodna (150), Homel (500), Vitsebsk (100), Vorsha (100), Pinsk (150), Mahiliou (50)	Organized by political organizations/activist participation	Mass detentions
	Chernobil Way (April 26)	Minsk (450-500)	Political organizations/predominantly activists	Authorized
May Day	May 1	Minsk (200-300 [180]), Homel (100-200)	Parallel May Day-themed demonstrations by trade unions and political organizations	Authorized

The cycle of protests started with 'The March of Enraged Belarussians' in Minsk on February 17. With 2000 to 2500 participants, it was the largest public event since the 2010 post-election protests and was led by the opposition politicians who lost those elections. According to my informants and the media, this event attracted mostly the members and sympathizers of the opposition political organizations, who usually attend the opposition's 'calendar' demonstrations with a nationalist and liberal agenda. Although this event was framed as a protest against the decree no. 3, the organizers put forward a demand to hold free elections and gave the authorities a month to react, which set the time frame for the further protests. Despite their initial hesitation, Minsk REWU activists attended the 'March of enraged Belarusians' holding the union's banners. The union's leader spoke in the rally and announced that they had gathered 45 000 signatures in three weeks. This protest, although unauthorized, did not cause immediate police violence, but the organizers were summoned to the courts afterwards.

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[180] Does not include the participants of the celebrations organized by the Federation of Trade Unions, where the topic of the decree was not raised.

In the next stage, the protests spread to the five regional centers and further to smaller towns. If the first protest in Minsk attracted mostly the traditional adherents of the opposition's political organizations and was dominated by anti-president slogans, the following regional protests revealed social grievances that exceeded the demand to repeal the 'anti-parasites' law'. Homel, the second largest city with a rather calm political climate, stood out with around 2000 protesters on the streets according to most media reports, although my informants in Homel mentioned 3000. Subsequently, this city would provide the second largest mobilization numbers throughout the protest period. Significantly, as was the case with Homel, almost 2000 came out to the streets in the northern regional center Vitsebsk that lacked previous protest experience or strong support for the opposition. Judging from the protesters' slogans, the trend of articulating broader social grievances with the demand to repeal the 'anti-parasite law' continued.

Provincial mass mobilizations turned into an ideological battlefield between the authorities and the opposition politicians. The spreading of regional protests prompted local authorities to react: the first attempt to engage in a dialogue with the protesters happened in Brest in early March (Petrovskiy 2017), although there had already been cases of detentions and trials. The one thousand-strong protest in Vorsha was the most numerous event of such type in all district centers and the largest in this town since the fall of the Soviet Union. The deputy head of the local government had to come out to the protesters and accept their list of demands[181] that concerned the 'parasites' law' and low living standards, but the leader of the Christian Democrats who took the word steered the protesters towards the resignation of the country's political leadership.

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[181] Reported by REWU's website, March 13, 2017, http://praca-by.info/all-news/item/4014-narod-prevratilsya-v-kulak-kak-proshel-marsh-netuneyadtsev-v-orshe

Analyses of the protest slogans during the regional stage of the 'parasite' mobilizations show that their participants essentially rejected the post-crisis policies: de-industrialization (the closing of the factories, dismissals, the lack of workplaces); the dismantling of the welfare state (the increase of the pension age and the retirement-related minimal seniority, cutting subsidized loans for housing); and liberal market reforms (rising utility prices, liberalizing prices for staple commodities, wage and pension stagnation) (Petrovskiy 2017). This set of demands show continuity with the agenda of the working class of the mid-90s, which was then expressed by the much more powerful and organized trade union movement.

This powerful and unexpected batch of the protests made Lukashenka change the 'parasites' policy, although he had dismissed the first instances of unrest as being directed from abroad. Three weeks into the protests, on March 9, he announced that the law would be suspended until the end of the year and the inventory of 'parasites' would be corrected[182]. Lukashenka promised that local authorities would find work for the unemployed until May 1, under the threat of legal consequences, although he later explained that he had meant 'job bourses' offering public works[183].

On the other hand, the president laid the blame for the protests on bureaucrats: 'Those who now take to the streets, in the numbers of 200-500 people, and start shouting are not loafers... These are mostly people who are insulted that we sent them out these notifications out of the blue.' He urged the bureaucrats to allocate people space to express their grievances and to address these grievances in person. Most importantly, he said the deductions would not be made in 2017 and the state would return the money to those who already paid and found work

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[182] Tut.by, March 9, 2017, https://finance.tut.by/news534609.html
[183] REWU's website, March 14, 2017, http://praca-by.info/all-news/item/4041-lidera-profsoyuza-rep-budut-sudit-za-uchastie-v-marshe-rasserzhennykh-belarusov

in 2017. By May 1 all the unemployed should be given jobs and by the end of the year the average wage should grow to $500.

On March 15 Minsk rejoined the protest wave with up to 2000 participants. This time the event, organized by a coalition of opposition political organizations, was allowed by the authorities, unlike the parallel protest events in Mahiliou and Hrodna (with a turnout of 1000, a significant number for this city). The demonstration in Minsk, dedicated to Constitution Day, was dominated by the opposition leaders, including a member of parliament from the opposition United Civic Party[184]. The protest was nevertheless followed by detentions, with a group of anarchists detained with significant violence. Meanwhile, an MP appeared in front of the protesting crowd and promised help for the 'parasites.' In Hrodna, local civil servants engaged in a dialogue with the protesters, and some of their representatives met the city mayor.

These sporadic acts of repression, the limited economic concessions and the attempts at dialogue between the protesters and representatives of the government seemed to have discouraged further popular demonstrations in the regions. The rest of the demonstrations against the decree no. 3 would happen on the occasions of traditional holidays celebrated by the adherents of the national-liberal ideology and would be largely concentrated in Minsk with fewer participants in the regions. The demonstration on the Freedom Day, March 25, gathered around three thousand in Minsk and several hundred in other regional centers (Herasimenka 2017, 7). The opposition march of the 'Chornobyl way', traditionally held on April 26, although dedicated to the 'anti-parasite law' and allowed by the authorities, was relatively small in Minsk, gathering around 500 people. The leftist calendar counterpart, the May Day,

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[184] Tut.by, March 15, 2017, https://news.tut.by/economics/535448.html?utm_source=news.tut.by&utm_medium=news-bottom-block&utm_campaign=relevant_news

was paradoxically dominated in Minsk by liberal-nationalist politicians, and did not gather more than a couple hundred people.

The aftermath of the protest wave was the year's peak of political repressions: 700 people were detained, 149 got administrative punishments, and three opposition political organizations received warnings (Chausov 2018, 96). The government publicized in the state TV the detention of 16 former members of a group called White Legion, the right-wing youth organization Young Front, BPF and *Patriot* sports club, that were charged with setting up a clandestine armed group with an aim to overthrow the government.

The protest wave of the spring 2017 was an unprecedented unrest episode in the last three decades in many respects. In the history of Belarusian protests in general, it was the largest in its peak mobilization since the '*ploshcha'* protests of 2010. However, taken as a single event and considering its geographical span and the composition of participants, it surpasses any purely political protests organized by the opposition political parties. By these standards, it can be compared to the trade-union mobilizations of the early 1990s. Thus, it is essential to analyze to what extend and how the independent unions, after a considerable period of shrinking membership and tactical failures, managed to organize and channel popular discontent.

6.2. Union's better failure

Many analyses of the spring unrest by the liberal opposition and the pro-government sides portray the protest wave as a mechanical combination of the spontaneous expression of people's anger and the superimposed liberal-nationalist opposition agenda (e.g. Petrovskiy 2017; Herasimenka 2017). However, the independent trade-unions played an important role in the protests, to a large extent determining the mobilization numbers and the demands of the protesters. Their role was contradictory though, as they succeeded in mobilizing the indignant masses but failed to transform the popular 'passion-feeling' (Crehan 2016, 121) into a political

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program capable of competing with the dominant populist ideology, borrowing instead the liberal-nationalist agenda.

In this section I analyze this contradictory role of the independent trade-unions through the case of the Radio-Electronic Workers' Union (REWU), focusing on its Homel regional organization. I will show how their mobilization strategy contributed to the impressive scale of the protests but failed to transform the protest energy into a durable labor organization. I argue that these outcomes signalize an attempt of the independent trade-unions to move from marginalized NGO-like unions to social movement unionism (Burawoy 2008).

REWU entered the year 2017 with 170 new members countrywide, increasing its membership to 2235, and provided 1500 free legal consultations winning court cases worth $55 000 (Fedynich 2016). This end-of-the-year message from the union's leader signals some moderately good dynamics of the union, but most importantly its NGO-like strategy. Barred from the shop floor for many years (see Chapter 3), REWU cooperated with human rights groups and opposition political parties, attracting a new generation of young liberal-minded activists from a broader opposition milieu. One of the most dynamic chapters in this respect was the Homel regional organization, famous for its legal and public resistance against the 'anti-parasite' decree.

Through Vitia, I got in touch with a young activist from the Homel REWU organization, whom I will call Roman. Apart from the union activities, he was involved in human rights monitoring and humanitarian relief for internally displaced people in Ukraine, which caused tensions between him and some left-wing pro-Russian activists in Homel. He represented the younger generation of union activists, coming from an intellectual or creative background, networked with the liberal-national opposition circles and more skilled in civil rights campaigning than in trade-union organizing. Not long before our encounter, Roman had returned from Minsk where

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he met Miklos Haraszti, a Hungarian, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus. Thus, on our way to the REWU office we briefly discussed the situation around CEU which Haraszti apparently mentioned. This probably helped establish additional trust between me and the liberally-minded Roman, who had been arrested after the spring protests and had all the reasons to be cautious towards strangers.

The office of the Homel regional organization of the REWU trade-union shares a two-storey house with several other opposition political and human rights associations. Decorated with the nationalist white-red-white flag along with IndustriALL's banner, it is known as the *oppy*'s seat ('*oppy'* is a colloquial and somewhat derogative nickname for the opposition movements). Most of my encounters in Homel happened there through the mediation of REWU's regional leader Viktar and the union lawyer Leanid Sudalenka.

When our conversation with Roman turned to the union's history, he introduced me to the head of the regional organization, Viktar Kazlou. Viktar was personally involved in organizing the "parasites' protest" in Homel, which had been the second largest after the one in Minsk. He spoke in a clear but very low and coarse voice: not long before he had undergone lung surgery. However, this did not stop the prosecutor from incriminating him with swearing loudly in public, which is a punishable administrative offense in Belarus. Together with an administrative detention and a fine for allegedly resisting arrest, it constituted the punishment for his protest activities in February and March. Viktar sounded proud of his abilities to organize the gathering of signatures under a protest petition and to persuade people to attend the demonstration, as well as of the resulting increase in the membership of the union.

During our conversation about the protests, Viktar pointed at the table and said that at the very same table they had gathered around 5500 signatures against the 'anti-parasite' decree: "When people came here, we asked: 'Are you coming to the square?'; they responded: 'We will.'"

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This gives a glimpse into the importance of a traditional face-to-face agitation as opposed to the claims of the extraordinary efficiency of social-networks in mobilizing the protests (cf. Herasimenka 2017). As we will see later, the number of signatures gathered by the union activists correlated with the protest size, and people's personal interaction with the union's activists or members lead to a surge in union membership applications.

REWU activists gathered 24 000 paper signatures and 22 500 under the online petition[185]. The campaigners faced almost no aggression from the people they approached and only single individuals refused to sign. Some of them, however, were detained on charges of holding an illegal gathering, as was the case in Brest and Babruysk. In some cases people unrelated to the trade-union initiated the signature gathering: a couple from Homel collected signatures from their bloc of flats; a woman collected 750 signatures in her hometown and refused to hand them in to the opposition activists, bringing the sheets directly to the Homel REWU office[186]. The police detained a REWU activist in Babruysk and took away the thousand signatures she had gathered, but after contacting the signees to check the validity of their signatures, gave them back to her.

The analysis of REWU's petition campaign allows to assume that it was one of the significant predictors of the geographical spread, turnout number and framing of the protest mobilization. As it is evident from the table below, almost all of the protest locations had REWU groups involved in campaigning, while the four protest events on March 18 in towns without REWU representation were less numerous (up to 30 people) and organized in response to the police violence against anarchists. The number of signatures gathered in a particular region correlates with the number of protest participants in that region. Minsk and Maladziechna mobilizations

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[185] The petition together with the response of the Presidential Administration, as of January 27, 2019, can be found here: http://zvarot.by/ru/net-dekretu-3-o-tuneyadcax/

[186] Personal communication by L. Sudalenka.

are disproportionally numerous in relation to the signatures gathered in the Minsk region, since these protest evens had been mostly organized by the political organizations (‘half of my facebook friends were in Maladziechna’, confides a liberal opposition intellectual (Melyantsov 2017)).

Table 8. REWU participation in protest mobilization

Regional/local REWU groups	**Number of signatures collected by REP**[187]	**Protest turnout (date)**[188]
Homel region Mazyr Rechitsa Rahachou Kalinkovichi	5400 1000 1500	Homel: 2500-3000 (19/02/2017) Rahachou: 300 (12/03/2017)
Brest region Baranovichi Pinsk Drahochin Mikashevichi David-Haradok	2500	Brest: 100 (19/02/2017); 300 (26/02/2017); 1000 (5/03/2017); 150 (12/03/2017) Baranovichi: 300 (26/02/2017) Pinsk: 350-400 (11/03/2017)
Vitsebsk region Vorsha Polatsk/Navapolatsk Navalukoml	3500	Vitsebsk: 250 (19/02/2017); 1750-2000 (26/02/2017) Vorsha: 1000 (12/03/2017) Polatsk: 30 (26/04/2017)
Hrodna region Slonim Zelva Lida	3500 500	Hrodna: 50-100 (19/02/2017); 1000 (15/03/2017) Slonim: 400 (19/03/2017)
Mahiliou region	5500	Mahiliou: 200-400 (19/02/2017); 500-700 (15/03/2017)

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[187] Data from REP’s website http://praca-by.info/all-news/item/3924-aktivisty-profsoyuza-rep-i-volontery-sobrali-bolee-46-tysyach-podpisej-za-otmenu-dekreta-3
[188] Data gathered by the author from various media sources

Babruysk Horki Belynichy	1000	Babruysk: 400 – 1500 (26/02/2017); 650-1000 (12/03/2017)
Minsk region Maladziechna	2600	Minsk: 2000-2500 (19/02/2017); 2000 (15/03/2017); 2000-3000 (25/03/2017) Maladziechna: 500-1000 (10/03/2017)

Gains and losses of the union's mobilization strategy

Viktar confided that as a result of the successful protest mobilization and court victories, the Homel REWU organization added 20 new members, a significant increase for the 390-strong regional union. Later Viktar introduced me to a young worker who started coming to the REWU office, jokingly hailing him to our table: 'Here is one more loafer (*tuneiadets*)'. Other regional organizations of REWU also showed a significant influx of new members over the summer. A new, 28th union group was established in Polotsk and Novopolotsk, and the Vorsha organization grew from 14 members in the beginning of the year to around 200. By the end of the year almost 500 joined REWU as compared to 170 during 2016.

This positive dynamics of REWU membership in the years prior to the spring protests is explained mostly by the successful work of the trade-union as a service organization offering legal advice and representation in the court. Leanid Sudalenka became a labor law hero after he was fired from a state-run gas company over his support for an oppositional presidential candidate and joined the Homel REWU organization in 2006[189]. He acquired fame for winning cases in which workers were held responsible for the material damage incurred on their workplaces. This brought dozens of new members to the union, since the 'official' trade-unions would not defend their members in such cases. During my stay in Homel, four workers from

[189] Personal communication

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the dairy producer '*Milkavita*' joined the union and successfully challenged fines of over 400 euro, a sum larger than their monthly wage.

Sudalenka continued this activity in 2017, additionally representing people who challenged the 'anti-parasite' law. In February, he defended a resident of Homel in the first and only case against the 'parasite' tax, trying to challenge the legitimacy of the decree no. 3. The court ruled the case to be outside its competence, but the claimant was offered work and relieved of the tax by the local authorities.

Another evidence of the success of REP's community strategy is facilitating a dialogue with, and concessions from, local authorities. The case of Vorsha is interesting in this respect. Vasiliy Beresnev, an activist of REWU and Belarusian Helsinki Committee, shares the story of the post-protest Vorsha (Beresnev 2017). After the protests Lukashenka urged the authorities to 'raise the town from ashes' and Vorsha's district executive committee organized a 'round table' with five representatives of the protesters, elected during the meeting. The prime minister visited the town and promised modernization for the Instrumental plant worth 60 mln USD.

The 'round tables' involving the city administration and the activists continued. As a result, the authorities allowed demonstrations in various sites within the city, although they declined the registration of the primary REWU organization, allegedly because the private firm that agreed to provide the legal address refused to do so[190].

The Democratic Federation of Trade Unions was allowed to hold its May Day demonstration for the first time in ten years, although they were refused a march. Having gathered in a location different from the right-liberal unsanctioned event, the unions mobilized participants outside

[190] REWU's website, July 21, 2017, http://praca-by.info/all-news/item/4502-fedynich-ob-otkaze-v-registratsii-orshanskoj-pervichki-eto-oshibka-vlasti

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of the capital city and shared the events with left-wing organizations. Meanwhile in Homel, the left-wing organizers from the Greens and 'Just World' also received a permission to hold their May Day event for the first time in more than a decade. The trade unions did not appear to be among the organizers. The heavily policed demonstration attracted around 300 people[191].

The period of concessions continued throughout the summer but on August 3 Lukashenka declared that the decree would not be cancelled and increased the magical number of the taxable 'loafers' to 300 thousand, although he promised a more personal approach ("Doklad o demograficheskoy situatsii i sodeystvii zaniatosti naseleniya" 2017). He announced a version of the law for October, the same deadline as for a business liberalization package. This happened a day after REWU's Minsk office was searched and its two leaders arrested.

Although considered politically motivated by human rights activists, opposition movements and the international trade unions[192], the ensuing trial over the then chair of REWU Fedynich and the union's accountant Komlik, who were accused of tax evasion, uncovered some details about the mechanism of unions' NGO-ization. According to the prosecution, they opened private accounts in a Lithuanian bank in 2011, on which they received around 140 000 euro and 18 000 USD from foreign partners, including 3F (United Federation of Danish Workers)[193]. The prosecution also claimed that they had smuggled money into Belarus through other union members, used them for private purposes without paying taxed. One of the union members who testified against Fedynich and Komlik admitted to being a KGB agent; the accusation claims, based on testimonies and anonymous letters, that REWU members either didn't know

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[191] *Belorusskie novosti*, May 1, 2017, https://naviny.by/article/20170501/1493645281-pervomayskiy-miting-v-gomele-oratorov-i-slushateley-razdelil-turniket
[192] Website of Industriall, August 17, 2017, http://www.industriall-union.org/global-unions-call-to-support-independent-union-movement-in-belarus
[193] 3F established cooperation with Belarusian trade unions within the framework of the Danish Neighborhood Program
http://www.netpublikationer.dk/um/evaluation_danish_neighbourhood_programme_nov2016/index.html

about the financing scheme or suspected Fedynich of appropriating the funds[194]. A newspaper article, contested by the union, claims that they disguised part of the donations as union membership fees[195]. Both were found guilty and sentenced to four years of domestic arrest and fines.

The leaked testimonies also shed light on an episode from my fieldwork which I could not explain for two years. In October 2015, I called an informant from REWU union, who was an important source of internal workings of the union and on whom many other connections depended. He sounded irritated, and told me that he had left the union over 'personal disagreements' with its chair. His wife, a union legal inspector, had left with him. He refused to continue the conversation or meet: 'I introduced you to the boss, talk to him'. His wife, whom I managed to interview before, also stopped communicating.

The leaked documents contain an anonymous letter addressed to IndustriALL global union, whose author accused the union's chair of concealing the foreign financial aid, appropriating it and deceiving the donors. The anonymous author mentions the union lawyer, whom I referred to above, and claim she was fired over her demand of higher wages[196]. She was probably interrogated in 2016, before the start of the investigation, and testified in court against REWU's officials. According to her, she participated in the project with the Danish union 3F, received an additional remuneration within this project and help smuggle in money from the Lithuanian bank. The reasons for her dismissal from the union job are contradictory: the former union

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[194] *Belsat*, August 8, 2018, https://belsat.eu/ru/news/anonimki-na-fedynicha-zanimayut-tselyj-tom-v-materialah-dela-profsoyuzov/
[195] *Belnovosti*, May 21, 2018, https://www.belnovosti.by/politika/fiktivnyy-rep-fedynicha
[196] *Belsat*, August 8, 2018, https://belsat.eu/ru/news/anonimki-na-fedynicha-zanimayut-tselyj-tom-v-materialah-dela-profsoyuzov/

chair claimed she was fired over poor performance, but the lawyer insisted she was unsatisfied with remuneration[197] and left on her own initiative[198].

Thus, the wave of unrest was partially successful in eliciting concessions from the local authorities and postponing decree no. 3, as well as increasing the membership of opposition unions. The decree, however, would return in a more neoliberal form, while the repressions, although milder than in 2010, quelled the protest mood and tarnished the reputation of REP. Regardless of the criminal case against its leadership, REWU did not manage to form a sustainable protest-ready organized network akin to strike committees of the early 90s. The net balance of REP's participation in the spring unrest can be called a better failure, as compared to the unions' prior efforts. Still a failure, it was partially facilitated by the ambiguous political and ideological choices made by the union's leadership and activists.

6.3. The new dramaturgy of populism

Applying a Maussian perspective to the construction of legitimacy in contemporary non-democratic regimes, a Belarusian scholar suggests that the protests of 2017 indicated the failure of the paternalistic model of reciprocity (Merzlou 2019, 9). According to this perspective, a paternalist leader offers welfare benefits as a sort of a 'gift,' thus expecting loyalty and obedience in exchange. If the paternalist leader, however, fails to deliver the gift, the people (his 'subjects') can use 'sanctions' against him or, if these don't work, rebel. According to this perspective, Belarusians, living for a whole generation under the paternalist regime and identifying as its subjects, have developed a corresponding political culture that implied expectations concerning the welfare gift. As these expectations were betrayed when the authorities resorted to austerity measures and, population rebelled.

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[197] *Belorusskii partizan*, August 6, 2018, https://belaruspartisan.by/politic/433760/
[198] Website of Industriall, August 17, 2018, http://www.industriall-union.org/news-from-court-hearing-in-belarus

This Maussian perspective grasps an essential feature of the 2017 protests: a clash between two modes of domination and two populist idioms used to legitimize them. However, the underlying assumption that ascribes a uniform political culture rooted in a pre-industrial system of reciprocity to Belarusian society does not address the complex dynamics of societal changes, including the evolution of populist sentiments. If anything, it reflects an elitist disdain to the 'people,' widespread among opposition-minded activists and scholars. Popular demands did not just express the wish to return to some 'good old times,' but stem from those class interests that had been appropriated and partially fulfilled by the Caesarist regime in its pre-crisis development, and afterwards rejected.

It is worth pointing out that Lukashenka himself, other officials and the official commentators initially avoided phrasing the campaign in Soviet parlance. The official phrasing referred to 'dependency' (*izhdivenchestvo*), and resorted neither to references to 'socially useful labor' nor to the word 'loafer' (*tuneyadets*). Neither did the officials resort to the moralistic language of the 'parasitic way of life,' stressing instead the problems of the labor market, the efficiency of labor and the responsibility to pay for welfare: 'the obligation to contribute to the financing of the state', as Lukashenka put it (Melnichuk 2014). While the parallel Soviet policy had been directed against marginals and spontaneous entrepreneurs living off 'non-labor revenue,' and threatened them with a prison sentence (Lastovka 2011), the proposed policies of the Belarusian government strived, on the contrary, to legalize the shadow entrepreneurial economy while simultaneously relaxing the rules for small and middle-scale businesses.

Accordingly, the government broadened the range of the patented activities for the self-employed and simplified the regulations for individual entrepreneurs. Consequently, the number of the self-employed increased, as did the number of those employed by the individual entrepreneurs. However, statistics showed that the number of individual entrepreneurs dropped

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by 3.6% due to the legal complications, decreased purchasing power and increased competition from the retailer chains (Dubina 2016). Thus, the initial effect of the 'anti-parasite' campaign was that those working informally were drawn into the precarious self-employed market or into low-paid jobs in the private sector.

Introducing changes to his decree, the president returned once again to a quasi-Soviet rhetoric, mentioning 'the unemployed class' and 'socially useful labor', but the minister of Labor and Social Protection promptly clarified the 'essence and concept': there will be a list of services that are subsidized by the state but will come in full price for the 'parasites' (BDG 2017). Thus, under the quasi-Soviet rhetoric and together with business liberalization policy, the government proceeded with even more explicit anti-welfare measures. In January 2018 the president signed the updated decree which came into force in a year.

In response to the March wave of regional protests, the president stressed that the purport of the decree is first and foremost ideological and moral, not financial and economic: 'The state will not receive big money. The aim of this decree is to make those people, who can and should work, work[199].' However, 'the essence and the conception' remained strictly economic: 'If you do not support your state financially, do not participate in those measures [state subsidized services: healthcare, educations etc], you should go and pay [the full price].'

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The very dramaturgy of the hard-working citizens who deserve welfare benefits and the undeserving parasites is more reminiscent of the common sense of the 'American dream' (Crehan 2016, 138) rather than of Soviet work ethic. Regional comparison points to the fact that the Belarusian initiative to tax the unemployed has more to do with welfare practices in the 'disembedded' varieties of European capitalist states than with Soviet practice. Some have

[199] Official website of the president of the Republic of Belarus, March 9, 2017, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschanie-ob-aktualnyx-voprosax-razvitija-belarusi-15736/

noted the similarity with the Lithuanian welfare system, where a citizen must pay for the health insurance irrespectively of his or her employment status under the threat of a fine (Liasheva 2017).

If my analysis is correct, then the 'anti-parasite' campaign fits neatly into the market-oriented re-orientation of the Belarusian passive revolution, in terms of its mutating class balancing and the corresponding ideological coating. The pre-crisis mode of domination, which drew its legitimacy from the promise of ever-growing incomes, was exhausted. The promises of the magic $500 average wage disappeared, together with the image of the hard-working Belarusian people under the watchful eye of the leader. The dichotomy of the good hard-working people and the evil profiteers kept at bay by the state was gradually replaced by the new imagery of the frugal entrepreneurial workers and businesspeople versus the undeserving parasites.

The president's (possibly misheard) slogan 'Undress and work!' became viral among Minsk hipsters who literally undressed in their offices in an ironic flash-mob (Lindh 2016). Lukashenka, however, reacted to this gesture with a paternalist re-appropriation: 'As you joke on the internet, undress and work!'. He promised to provide work for everyone who needs it but finished his speech with a menacing question: 'Honestly, does everybody really want it?' ("Rabochaya poezdka v Mogilevskuyu oblast" 2016) This touching episode reveals a new quality of the Belarusian populism with a changed dramaturgy of the people and their other.

Entangled idioms of resistance

Many organic intellectuals of the liberal-nationalist opposition admitted that the spring events were not the pro-European, political rights-oriented and anti-populist protests they had hoped for. Instead, the protests were focused on economic issues and contested the elite's new economic and social policies. This is the same trope of the elitist disappointment with 'the

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people' that dates back to the impotence of the liberal-nationalist opposition to lead the workers' unrest in the early 90s (see Chapter I).

One may clearly see the mismatch between the popular idioms and those of the opposition political activists through a comparison between top-down liberal-nationalist protests and the 'parasites' protests' (attempted in Herasimenka 2017). A case in point was the liberal-nationalist campaign against the construction of a shopping mall near Kurapaty, a symbolic place of the national suffering at the hands of Stalin, which started simultaneously with the "parasite" mobilization. This campaign started at the construction site with sit-ins, chaining of the activists to the construction equipment and exhibitions. It stopped two weeks after the mayor of Minsk agreed to suspend the construction.

If the liberal-nationalist protest in Kurapaty had a clear leadership linked to the established oppositional organizations (Malady front etc.) but lacked a broader mass support due to its divisive ideology, the anti-parasite protests were more self-organized and had a more decentered leadership politically. A large share of the protesters came from small towns and from the groups that were considered to be the typical supporters of the ruling regime: workers and pensioners. Thus, the liberal-nationalist opposition was unable to mobilize a mass support of their own, but it proved equally unable to lead a spontaneous protest. By allying with the established opposition, the unions were caught between massless leadership and leaderless masses.

An expert at the liberal Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies noted the paradox: 'This is a curious situation when the right-centrists try to lead a left-wing protest' (Melyantsov 2017). Although the protests were visibly dominated by liberal-nationalist symbols and demands, most of the grassroots participants did not share the opposition agenda but rather wanted their welfare entitlement back. This observation echoes the concern of the leader of the 1991 workers

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protests Antonchyk, who talked about ‘a left-wing movement promoting right-wing ideas’ (Chapter 1). A quarter of century after their emergence, militant trade-unions seemed to be caught in the same initial contradiction.

This mismatch between the idioms of the political leadership and the idioms of the protesting masses is reflected in the uneasiness and ambiguity of the trade-unions’ engagement. On the practical-organizational level, trade unionists followed the popular common sense and organized around the citizenship entitlement: taxing unemployment is unfair because we already contribute to the state as consumers and as workers in the past. On the higher political-ideological level, however, the union leadership could not offer a coherent ideology that would built on the popular common sense because it would contradict their liberal political allies. A REWU member and an active organizer of the protests in Homel expressed it in the following terms: ‘[In general, the protesters] wanted to maintain things as they were... there was clearly a demand for populist slogans and simple solutions for complex problems. This was not a wave that would bring an understanding in society that one must take the responsibility for the processes in the country, that there is a need for radical reforms’ (cited in Herasimenka 2017, 6).

The demands of the protesters closely correspond to the pre-crisis mode of domination with its populist image of the people as deserving citizens, rather than to an abstract national-liberal agenda of democratic and market reforms. They reject the post-crisis turn of the pro-market passive-revolutionary policies point by point: de-industrialization (closing of factories, dismissals, lack of workplaces); dismantling of the welfare state (increasing of the pensions age and raising of the retirement-related minimal seniority, from which the maternity leave is excluded; cutting subsidized loans for housing); liberal market reforms (rising utility prices, liberalizing prices for staple commodities, wage and pension stagnation) (Petrovskiy 2017).

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This set of demands show continuity with the agenda of the working class of the mid-90s, which was then expressed by the much more powerful and organized trade union movement, but appropriated by the nascent Caesarist regime.

As in the case of the 1991 and the following protests, the liberal and nationalist opposition failed to achieve significant strategic gains given the trade unions' mobilizing capacity, but the rigid 'anti-regime' ideology which pervaded the whole opposition spectrum prevented the organizers from reflecting on this strategy.

The independent unions managed to organize the popular discontent and channel some of the basic spontaneous demands, working on the level of immediate popular political passions. The task in front of them, however, was essentially to formulate an alternative populist agenda, an alternative 'thin ideology' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) that would be powerful enough to challenge the dominant (although not hegemonic) state populism. Compromising with the liberal-nationalist political allies prevented them from doing so, thus limiting their ability to form a long-lasting political representation based on the broad popular support. Thus, REWU's 'better failure' shows the limits of their efforts to engage in social movement unionism.

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Conclusions to Part III

The aftermath of the 2011 crisis showed that the passive-revolutionary model of domination based on the promises of ever-growing incomes in exchange for discipline in production and on the streets broke down, and the Caesarist elites had to develop a new balancing act to withstand international and internal pressures. Now that the prebendal factory regime was firmly in place, it could be used as a means of squeezing out efforts from labor, punishing and preventing dissent. Wages in exchange of loyalty and patience are no longer warranted; they need to be deserved by a disciplined effort. Additionally, the prebendal system squeezes out troublesome or simply superfluous workers into the private sector, where they have no choice but become individual entrepreneurs or get employed in private businesses. The ideological correlate to this strategy is self-reliance and entrepreneurialism.

By the end of 2014, part of the workers in '*Hranit*' experienced wage arrears related to the shrinking Russian market. As of late 2015, Aleh told me that 'it is hard to earn even ten millions', which amounted to around $500. Moreover, since May 2014 workers had been compensated only at a double rate for working on holidays, while hazard pay decreased. Over the next two years the enterprise managed to expand its exports at the expense of its Ukrainian competitors that had cut their output; it thus avoided the consequences of the two-year recession in 2015 and 2016, but average wages remained at the level of $500.

The prebendal factory regime responded flexibly. Since May 2015, first the most active workers and then virtually everyone was transferred to one-year contracts. 2015 was Lyonia's second subsequent year on a two-year contract. This was a pre-emptive policy because, as Aleh assessed, 'they knew that there would be a deterioration of the economic situation and they provisionally assess the potentially dangerous persons.' As of November 2015, three more *Belaz* drivers had been fired, one in 2014 and two in the summer of 2015. Aleh described the

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last case: a worker who was in the official trade union, worked for 11 years, had 4 children and no reprimands, but got a notification that his contract would not be renewed. Unofficially, the cause was that this worker communicated with Lyonia.

Predictably, no disturbances happened on '*Hranit'* in 2015 and 2016. I met Aleh again in 2017 to hear him bragging about a site visit to Yunitsky's still unfinished 'string railway.' This visit would cost him $50. Now Aleh was unemployed, hanging only in the 'investment quadrant' of Kiyasaki's scheme, and afraid of getting on the list of 'social parasites,' which would oblige him to pay a fine equivalent to a monthly salary if he did not find official employment in the coming months. Tens of thousands like him would protest on the streets of Minsk, Salihorsk and many other Belarusian cities against this punishment for unemployment.

The adoption of the decree on the 'Prevention of Social Dependency' in 2015 was a response to the economic recession that started in 2011 and worsened after the 2014 crisis in Russian economy. Its aim was to find an additional source of budget funds and push the population employed in the informal economy into low paid jobs or self-employment. Besides, the decree was carelessly implemented and coincided with a set of other measures targeting the welfare system and relaxing the rules for business, which constituted the transition of the Belarusian ruling elite to the market discipline-based mode of domination. Combined with the growing impoverishment and precarization of work, especially in the eastern regions of Belarus, it led to anti-government sentiments even among the traditional supporters of the regime.

This discontent was expressed in a wave of protests in February-March 2017. Comparable in geographic span and the numbers of participants to the labor unrest of the early '90s, these protests were to a large extent organized by a coalition of independent trade-unions and opposition political groups, and facilitated by a relative liberalization of the state policing practices. They were met with a mixture of concessions and repressions. The ruling elite's

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response was geared towards dialogue with the protesters, while punishing selected organizers. The law that caused the protests, however, was not repealed but rather took a more explicitly neoliberal form.

Finally, in July 2019 as, I was connecting the trends of work flexibilization and labor immobilization in theory, the Belarusian state systematized them in practice. The Labor Code was amended to include the provisions of the decree no. 29 and other measures enabling market flexibilization, which is stated as a goal by its lawmakers, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and the president. The introduction of freelance work and temporary work at another workplace are supposed to simultaneously solve the problems of lack of qualified personnel and overstaffing without massive law-offs, and could allow for the outsourcing of labor force. Task descriptions are decoupled from workers' qualifications, which could allow employers to switch workers between various tasks. The list of grounds for dismissal is extended and some of them are vague (e.g. 'one-time serious violation of work obligations'). The automatic extension of fixed-term contracts for employees without disciplinary reprimands contributes to improving their employment security but also to limit their mobility.

If we compare the strategies of the opposition trade-unions during the post-crisis protests in 2011-12 and during the 'parasites' protests' five years later, we may conclude that on both occasions they failed to meet their goals, but failed in a different way, for different reasons and with different consequences. Their failure consists in a quick dissipation of the protest activity and a lack of success in satisfying the immediate demands of the protesters combined with the repressions of the activists. However, the unions failed differently in 2017 in the sense that they managed to coordinate their activities and work more efficiently with grassroot protesters. If the reason for the failure in 2011-12 had been the over-bureaucratized response to the grass-roots initiative, as it was evident in the case of '*Hranit*' protest, the reason behind the 2017

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relative lack of success was the reliance on a block with the opposition political organizations dominated by the liberal and nationalist groups.

As in the case of the 1991 national wave of labor unrest, the independent unions managed to organize the popular discontent and channel some of its basic spontaneous demands. However, if in 1991 they managed to formulate a populist agenda alternative to the late-Soviet *perestroika* ideology and powerful enough to successfully challenge the Communist Party, in 2017 they failed to live up to the task due to the reliance on the pre-fabricated liberal-nationalist ideological package.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

This dissertation began with the puzzle of Belarusian state capitalism, which challenges the existing interpretations of the Eastern-European postsocialist transformation. As opposed to to the expected compliance with the neoliberal model, the Belarusian state preserved its control over the heavily industrialized economy together with quasi-full employment and income equality. But contrary to nostalgic/exoticizing narratives depict it as the 'last Soviet republic,' Belarusian workers were subjected to work flexibilization coupled with anti-union repressions. I set out to explain this oxymoron from the vantage point of the Belarusian working class, focusing on the three following questions: What role did labor organizations play in the emergence of this state-capital-labor settlement? What were the mediating mechanisms for negotiating the relations between labor and the state-exploiter? And how were these relations and mediations reflected in the ideological plane, as ideologies of domination and the idioms of resistance?

I studied a network of marginal labor organization which have figured prominently in the key turning points of Belarusian social history, the mass labor-cum-political protests of 1991, 1995, 1999, 2011 and 2017, and in the key nodes of the state-capital-labor nexus, namely the processes of bureaucratic work precarization and labor immobilization. Extending out from this research site and building on the Gramscian theory of politics, I formulated a multi-scalar and dynamic model of passive-revolutionary trajectory binding the destinies of the working class and the state-exploiter. I started my research with the following hypotheses. First, the Belarusian government's economic model is vulnerable to labor's pressure, since the Belarusian government, acting as an employer, takes direct responsibility for the functioning of the enterprises and the well-being of their employees. Second, political repressions against labor must function as a 'functional equivalent' of the economic neoliberalization that

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undermined labor's capacity to resist in other post-Soviet countries. Finally, Belarusian labor was an agent rather than a victim contributing to the changing relations of production directly through social protests, and indirectly by pushing forward the country's political-economic development.

My analysis of the Belarusian case shows how an exploration of critical junctions in the unfolding of the state-capital-labor nexus can discern labor's contribution to the economic and political development of a social formation. The conclusion that I reached exploring the above hypotheses can be summarized as follows. The passivity of Soviet and post-Soviet labor is exaggerated: If considered in its totality, from the structural through the organizational to the political levels, Soviet and then post-Soviet working classes co-defined the shape of the economy and the political power. The ideological form that these processes took is the competition of populist idioms that circulated between the ruling power and the subaltern classes.

Summary of the findings

1. The first two chapters of this dissertation addressed the question of labor's role in Belarus's transformation from a Soviet republic to an 'island of populism in the sea of clan politics' (Matsuzato 2004). The main finding of this investigation was that labor's part was two-staged: from a conscious subversion of the Soviet system to an unwitting creation of a post-Soviet settlement.

1.1. How did the working class of 'the Vendée of *perestroika*' chase the communists out of the factories? My answer to this question relied on a comparative perspective on late-Soviet labor protests. What was common to them were in the contradictions of the late-Soviet society: they were a reaction to Gorbachev's attempt to discipline workers and increase labor productivity by commodifying labor and simultaneously enabling its political participation. In Gramscian

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terms, Gorbachev's passive revolution backfired in the form of the labor protests of the late *perestroika.*

What was specific to Byelorussia, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, was that the protests of the spring of 1991 were not focused in one area or in one branch of industry as opposed to economically fragmented and politically split Russian and Ukrainian parts of the USSR. Whereas in other parts of the Soviet Union, miners rebelled against the central communist government and allied with the strong local liberal-nationalist and ex-communist groups, Belarusians merely performed the negative work of delegitimizing and disorienting the Belarusian communist elites without viable substitution. Although strike committees in Belarus were organized to a large extent through grass-root networks closely linked to the nationalist Belarusian People's Front, such organization showed little concern for workers' economic interests or organizational capacities, did not construct its own mass following and had a small group in the Supreme Council. Thus, the Byelorussian working classes emerged as an organizationally strong agent with mass mobilization experience, an array of newly formed strike committees and trade unions, and the gigantic structure of the Federation of Trade Unions. It was unmatched by any other civil society organization, but crucially, it lacked political representation.

The ideological struggles of late *perestroika* were framed by Gorbachev's populist campaign against conservatives in the Communist party and an appeal to the Soviet people to deliver itself from the corrupt *nomenklatura* elites. My analysis showed that Belarusian workers readily accepted this identification as 'the people.' But in the course of protests, they included Gorbachev into the 'corrupt elite,' at times borrowing directly from the ideology of Polish *Solidarnosc,* thus engendering reformist, workerist, and nationalist varieties of populism. This competition for the re-definition of 'the people' from above and from below would accompany

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the transition to authoritarian populism, and the dynamics of social struggle in Belarus until now.

1.2. How did Belarusian workers unwittingly condone the rise of authoritarian populism? My argument is that it was through labor's contribution to an unstable equilibrium of the political field after Belarus gained independence. As I showed in Chapter 2, strong labor militancy and the threat of take-over by Russian capital prevented the first Belarusian post-Soviet government (1991-1994) from implementing large-scale privatization and market liberalization. Primitive capitalist accumulation was limited to small and medium firms in a symbiosis with the large state-owned industrial enterprises. Unlike in the neighboring countries where primitive accumulation took the form of oligarchic clan politics, they were not powerful enough to express their interests in the form of electoral machines. This derailed Belarus from the 'involutionary' road to capitalism taken by the Russian Federation and Ukraine; it upheld the structural power of the industrial working class but contributed to a situation of 'unstable equilibrium'—a condition for either a collapse of the state or a dictatorship.

Gramsci theorized a third solution for such an unstable equilibrium, that of a personalist leadership, which he called 'Caesarism.' Its function is to use the state power to pacify the parties to a generalized conflict but also to develop the social formation on their behalf. This is how I interpreted the emergence of the authoritarian populist regime in Belarus, after a political outsider—Lukashenka— won the newly established presidency in 1994. In Chapter 2, I analyzed this move as the start of the passive revolution—a Gramscian concept which I interpret as signifying a form of governance based on the partial fulfillment of the subaltern group's demands by the ruling power that does not directly represent the population. In Belarus, this came with an effective implementation of the striking workers' demands for re-payment of wage arrears and re-launching of state-owned enterprises. As my analysis of the strikes that

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happened in the summer of 1995 showed, the price for economic concessions was the repression of direct political representation of the subaltern groups in order to preserve the ruling powers' interests.

What was the power structure of this post-Soviet settlement and its ideological justification? Answering this question means understanding the mechanism of power relations between the Caesarist coalition and the subaltern social groups. I theorized this mechanism in Chapter 2 as the neo-prebendal system of domination over potential rival groups. As opposed to neopatrimonialism in Russia or Ukraine, neo-prebendal domination implies a relative prevalence of the pre-emptive threat of a financial, administrative and criminal punishment for misconduct over an immediate gratification for doing favors. The main tool of this prebendal domination was the rule by decree, which created a legal uncertainty for political forces, state administrative bureaucracy, economic management and nascent private capital. One of the features of prebendal dependency of state bureaucracy was a system of fixed-term contracts.

The ideological correlate of the consolidating stage of neo-prebendalism was a Peronist opposition between an image of the hard-working but undeservingly suffering people and the corrupt bureaucrats in a coalition with predatory capitalists. 'The people' were construed in this opposition as a classless group, while class-based organizations—trade unions—were relegated to the category of the corrupt/comprador 'other'. What concerned the labor organizations, the elements of class-based self-awareness that had existed amongst them on the corporate-economic level were articulated either with a 'third way' social democratic (Federation of Trade Unions) or national-liberal narratives (Free and Independent Unions).

2. The second part of this dissertation tackled the question of mediating mechanisms for negotiating the relations between labor and the state-exploiter in this authoritarian-populist settlement. The answers I arrived at were the state's bureaucratic intervention into the

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functioning of the workers' public sphere combined with the subjugation of the working class by a system of fixed term contracts. Theoretically, I describe these processes as political *transformismo* and the expansion of the neo-prebendalism into labor relations.

2.1. How did organized labor interact with the solidifying authoritarian populism on institutional and ideological levels? Trade unions in a coalition with the oppositional political forces formed a united front against the neo-prebendal power pyramid and engaged in a 'war of positions.' The presidential administration was faced with an even more difficult task than that of Gorbachev: labor had both relative autonomy in the labor process and organizational resources. Logically, its next step in the passive-revolutionary development was to extend the prebendal domination to the working class (in order to defeat its autonomy in production process) and to destroy its organization resources (in order to re-introduce atomization). I argue that this is the meaning behind the introduction of the fixed-term contract system on the one hand, and the cooptation of the Federation of Trade Unions into the Caesarist power block on the other.

I argue in Chapter 3 that the *transformismo* policy explains the bureaucratic pressure against the Federation of Trade Unions, which turned this organization into a Bonapartist mediating agency endowed with a partial force of neo-prebendal domination in relation to the employers. Simultaneously, a set of laws and informal orders, which I interpret as an extension of neo-prebendalism, led to the decimation of the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. This changed their organizational form into NGO-like nation-wide bodies with semi-informal membership and an insecure financial situation. The marginalized situation came with a set of idioms revolving around a feudal metaphor of politically oppressed serfs and calling for a popular rebellion, although retaining some class-based elements of identification.

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2.2. What are the mediating mechanisms on the structural level of labor relations? The prebendal factory regime, which is the essence of a series of presidential decrees introducing fixed-term contracts, destroys the autonomy of the workers and atomizes them by establishing personalized relations with the management. After the management and the bureaucracy had been subordinated to the Caesarist power, the neo-prebendal factory regime tied workers to the managers and provided the latter with a tool for increasing labor productivity and the profits of state enterprises. Having thus solved Gorbachev's puzzle, Lukashenka secured a relatively efficient functioning of state-run economy throughout the 2000s and a slow expansion of the private sector. Together with the marginalization of the non-coopted trade unions and political groups, it ensured the government minimal legitimacy and resilience through a series of conflicts with the West and Russia.

3. The last part of the dissertation focuses on how the system of domination erected around the prebendal dependencies and the populist legitimacy reacts to external shocks. Is this system capable of retaining its legitimacy? Are the subaltern classes able to challenge the domination?

3.1. How resilient was the system of authoritarian populism in the face of the Great Recession that manifested itself in Belarus in the financial crisis of 2011? The state's reaction to crisis manifested itself in rearranging the balance of forces in favor of national capital and efficient managers of state enterprises. The system of prebendal labor control was expanded through a series of decrees which increased the expendability of labor force and simultaneously tied it more closely to the employers. This was the essence of the so-called anti-parasite laws: on the one hand it increased workers' costs of losing their jobs and on the other it pushed the unemployed to take up lower-paid jobs or get self-employed. This perfected the system of prebendal control, which was finally systematized in the amended Labor Code in July 2019.

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Its purpose is to help restructure state-owned enterprises and provide docile and expendable labor for private capital.

Ideologically, in order to justify its re-balancing towards capital, the populist discourse re-defined 'the people' as deserving, self-reliant and entrepreneurial citizens, now pitted against not only the corrupt bureaucrats on top and foreign/comprador elements outside, but also the undeserving/lazy 'parasites' at the bottom. To continue the Latin American metaphor, the populist form of ideology shifted towards the neoliberal populism of Fujimori or Menem type.

3.2. How did the subaltern classes react to the neoliberal shift of authoritarian populism? As my analysis of the protests in 2011 and 2017 show, the popular response to this projected image of 'the people' consisted of either 'over-identification,' especially among labor aristocracy and broadly the middle class, who used the notion of entrepreneurialism to justify their claims for more autonomy (in the protests in '*Hranit*'), or a conservative retention of the image of entitled citizens (in the "parasites' protests").

My analysis of organized labor's capabilities showed that while the Federation of Trade Unions preserved its mediating function (in the case of '*Hranit*' conflict), the opposition unions showed ideological and institutional dynamics. For instance, the Radio-Electronics Workers' Union managed to capture popular resentment emphasizing citizenship entitlements on the practical-ideological level. It lost, however, on the political-ideological level by articulating popular political passions with the liberal elitist discourse.

Contributions, limitations and avenues for further research

I envisage this dissertation primarily as a contribution to the anthropology of class (Carrier and Kalb 2015) by applying and elaborating on the methodology of 'critical junctions' (Kalb and Tak 2006) in the context of political capitalism. Specifically, my research takes up the problem

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of uncovering the ways in which class-conditioned individual practices could be transformed into historical praxis without an assumption of class consciousness (Smith 2015, 72–74). This historical praxis, in the case at hand, is situated within the confines of a state capitalist social formation, which led me to study labor unions not as an object in itself but as a privileged research site from which I investigated the development and structure of what I called a state-capital-labor nexus. My research, therefore, further contributes to the fields of the anthropology and sociology of the working class, the political economy of state capitalism, and the debates over populism. In what follows, I will highlight these contributions, outline the objective limitations of my study, and suggest possible directions for further research.

Recent research on the political economy of labor movements attempted to overcome the fixation on the weakness of postsocialist trade unions and highlight organized labor's agency (Varga 2014; Pringle and Clarke 2011b; Bernaciak and Kahancová 2017). Contributing to this effort, I analyzed Belarusian labor organizations, which has been virtually absent from scholarly investigation, and explored the 'hidden strength' of Belarusian labor that manifests itself both as 'class in itself' capable of sporadic protest outbursts and as organized groups active in legal or social movement areas. Extending out from the capacities and practices of trade unions, I emphasized two other elements of the state-capital-labor nexus by applying the Gramscian concept of the passive revolution as a tool to analyze the co-evolution of the state and labor. This line of enquiry meets the institutional tradition of political science, as applied to the material of Latin America (Collier and Collier 2002) and subsequently extended to the post-socialist space (Collier and Schipani 2017). Although paying due attention to the fateful processes of the late *perestroika,* my Gramscian inflection of the 'critical junctions' method goes beyond the 'legacies of the past' and discovers the emerging phenomena of neo-*perestroika* through an investigation of structured contingencies.

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This was the import of the first part of this dissertation that showed how Belarusian labor protests in 1991 co-determined a specific trajectory for the republic's post-Soviet transformation. The structures that shaped the contingent events of April 1991 however, deserve further study as being themselves forged within 'primitive socialist accumulation' (Cucu 2019, 8–9). Like the Republic of Belarus that followed a unique post-Soviet trajectory, its predecessor Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic developed in an extraordinary manner. Carved out of several rural western districts of the former Soviet Empire after the October Revolution, it lacked natural resources, transport infrastructure or industry and was open to military threats from hostile Poland and Germany (Andrew Wilson 2011, 104–5). Thus, Stalin's industrialization in the '30s was limited and collectivization of agriculture was protracted and less painful than in the neighboring Ukrainian SSR (Savchenko 2009, 96). Whatever industry had been built there, was wiped out by the Nazi Germany's invasion during the Second World War that killed a quarter of the Belorussian population, displaced another quarter, and destroyed several hundreds towns and villages (Snyder 2010, 250–52). Nearly a blank slate at the time of the Soviet victory, Byelorussia underwent what I would call a 'second edition' of primitive socialist accumulation that resulted in a model Soviet republic with unparalleled economic growth throughout the '60s and the '70s, the most technologically advanced industrial infrastructure and breakneck urbanization (Ioffe 2003, 86–88). It was as if Soviet leadership was given a chance to re-run industrialization under a de-Stalinized and reformed real socialism.

The historical part of this dissertation leads to the hypothesis—which I plan to explore in the future—that the specificity of this 'second edition' of primitive socialist accumulation and its contradictions in the Belorussian SSR was an essential factor behind the country's no less particular primitive capitalist accumulation since the 1990s. The causality however, is not linear and is not rooted in an allegedly rural Belarusian mentality, a lack of national

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consciousness or the malicious influence of Russian neo-imperialism, as some authors claim (Eke and Kuzio 2000; Marples 1999). The causal link needs to be traced at the level of organic contradictions within Soviet socialist accumulation surfacing in the crisis of the late '80s and at that of the conjunctural processes linked to the workers' protests, the structure of communist elites and the forms and ideologies of the opposition as they emerged in Belorussian SSR during late *perestroika*. The place of labor in this process, in the history of the Soviet Byelorussia in general, is yet to be discovered.

A major theme of this dissertation, the twin processes of work precarization and labor immobilization, contributes to the multidisciplinary field of research that deals with the decline of the so-called standard employment conditions (Vosko 2010; Standing 2016), often conceptualized as precarization or flexibilization of work. While a significant group of scholars in this field see this process as an inevitable outcome of a technological or economic development (Doogan 2009), others understand precarity as an outcome of the class struggle from above. I focus on an overlooked case of the bureaucratic effort to flexibilize the Belarusian labor market. Thus, taking Gramsci's critique of economism (Gramsci 1971, 197) seriously allowed me to highlight the discretionary state's role in a process deemed to be contingent on market forces.

In exploring this state-imposed precarization, I limited the scope of my research to the industrial working class. However, many encounters in my field pointed to other promising lines of inquiry, such as the ultimate victims of precarization - the labor migrants - and those who profess to enjoy it as a form of freedom, the so-called 'creative class'. I came to Belarus in the middle of the war in Donbass, when tens of thousands of migrants poured from Ukraine into its northern neighbor fleeing the war, the military draft and the falling incomes. This wave of migration was amplified in the media and became one of the factors quoted by the

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government as a justification for the 'law on parasites,' which I discuss in the last chapter of this dissertation. I interviewed several migrants from Ukraine to hear their stories, which were remarkably different from what one can read in the ethnographies of eastern labor migrants in the West. Unlike the deskilling effects of the westward labor migration, a sizeable share of those going to Belarus were highly skilled professionals who found jobs corresponding to their skills, including in the civil sector or in IT. The migration between the post-Soviet states is a white spot in the area of migration studies.

The native young professionals, whom I had a chance to interview, also deserve a further study, although they had their share of attention by those eager to discover the coveted 'middle class' as a backbone of democracy. Belarus boasts a fast-growing and state supported IT sector, which now contributes 10% to the country's GDP and has produced several world-known companies, such as Epam, Wargaming and Viber (Astrasheuskaya 2019). But do the young professionals that earn four times the country's average salary yearn for democracy as assumed by the proponents of the middle class thesis? Straddling dependency on Western customers and enjoying domestic support from the government, this 'creative class' does not seem to be eager supporters of a regime change or politicized at all. From conversations with them, it seems that they reconcile the trust in markets and trust in government, reflecting the post-crisis entrepreneurial shift in the populist rhetoric of the state.

The study of new forms of labor organization, their agency and interaction with the state imply an investigation of the political economy of a non-democratic state, its role in organizing capitalist accumulation and setting strategic power constraints (setting Wright's 'rules of the game') for labor. Arguably, post-Soviet states, including Belarus, have been most persuasively analyzed by political scientists as patron-client, neopatrimonial or hybrid regimes (Hale 2018; Way 2016; Gelman 2008; Fisun 2019). These studies, however, focus primarily on elites,

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thereby blackboxing the rest of the population as elite's resources in the struggle for power. Marxist theories of the state, while grounded in class analysis, derive from the analyses of the 'normal' core capitalist states or degraded fascist dictatorships. My theoretical contribution to these debates consists in theorizing the gray zone of the so-called hybrid regimes by reviving the Marxist/Gramscian concept of the 'passive revolution' and developing its political dimensions as a specific form of a historical block that is not sealed by hegemony.

Although 'passive revolution' is an inherently comparative concept, I consciously limited my dissertation to only an implicit comparison between Belarus and its neighbors, namely Russia and Ukraine. In the course of my research, however, I have reached the conclusion that a systematic comparison between Belarus and contemporary China could be a promising topic for further research. The grounds for this comparison are historical, structural and geo-economic. From a historical perspective, this dissertation explores a hypothesis that the trajectory of the Belarusian post-Soviet transformation presents a *sui-generis* continuation of the original project of *perestroika,* unique in the post-Soviet space. As opposed to Gorbachev's failed attempt to emulate the Chinese experience after 1976, Lukashenka's strategy hinged on correcting the relative timing of reforms: he did not allow *glasnost* and democratization to precede marketization. Throughout Lukashenka's neo-*perestroika*, Belarusian ambassadors to China became influential economic advisors at home, advocating state-supervised marketization the same way as Western-educated intellectuals preached market fundamentalism in Russia and Ukraine.

From the structural point of view, Belarus and China are, respectively, a regional and a global success story of political capitalism, a political-economic system now regarded as a viable competitor of western liberal capitalism (Milanovic 2020). Moreover, China increasingly involves Belarus in its geo-economic orbit, cooperating on numerous bilateral projects and

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exchanging expertise. This cooperation exceeds financial help and trade, resulting in complex high-tech projects involving third-party private investment, like the Great Stone Industrial Park, projected to be the largest 'pearl of the Silk Road' in Europe, according to Xi Jinping ("China-Belarus Industrial Park Great Stone to Host Belt & Road Forum" 2019).

Given these similarities, the differences become even more intriguing. Like Belarus, China has an authoritarian populist government (Tang 2016) and evolves according to the logic of a passive revolution (Hui 2017; K. Gray 2010). However it has preserved a system of vertically integrated but horizontally competitive bureaucratic institutions (Harrison 2014), whereas the Belarusian Caesarist ruling alliance is institutionally shallow, lacking a ruling party, and based on a quasi-prebendal system of control (Chapter 2). Control over labor and the domination of an 'official' trade union further add to the similarities between the countries, as do the forms of alternative labor organizations that resemble NGOs rather than trade unions. The level of labor organization and militancy in China is, however, much larger than in Belarus, despite a virtual absence of the rural reserve army of labor in this country.

As I recorded complaints about state repression from my Belarusian informants in the summer of 2015, 250 Chinese workers employed by a Chinese company to build a paper factory near Homel attempted a march on Minsk in protest against three-month wage arrears (Yarivanovich and Bobkov 2015). As Belarusian police stood by and locals expressed sympathy with the audacity of the foreign workers, the ambassador of China met them halfway and settled the issue. Episodes like this present an exiting opportunity to explore labor's agency under varying forms of Eurasian political capitalism.

Uncovering of the 'hidden strength' of labor in the conditions of a political capitalism that hinges on providing prosperity while exerting bureaucratic pressure on labor is an endeavor intimately connected to the studies of populism. Margaret Canovan famously wrote that when

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the ‘two faces’ of democracy, the pragmatic and the redemptive, fail to work together, this opens an opportunity for a populist movement (Canovan 1999). The crack between these ‘faces’ widened after the crisis of 2008 and opened the door for various forms of populism. Scholars have variously identified the origins of Eastern-European populism in the grievances of those left behind by the postsocialist transformation (Kalb 2019), or in the failures of democratic political representation (Ost 2005), and warned of the populist forces’ anti-democratic potential (Müller 2014). Like democracy itself, populist rhetoric is Janus-faced, as it serves both to demand the return of the redemptive face of democracy and to justify the dismantling of its pragmatic liberal form. Most of the recent debates, however, deal with cases of populism constituted as a protest movement or an ‘illiberal’ government in response to the failure of the pragmatic liberal democracy. My research complements these debates by tackling a complementary question, that of an established populist force facing populist resistance, by systematically applying the recent discursive approach to the populist repertoire of a post-Soviet country. My addition to the studies of populism is the tracing trajectory of populist idioms as they travel from grievances of the subaltern to the dominant discourse and back.

My findings regarding the re-invention of ‘the people’ by the ruling power and the moments of breakdown of the popular self-identification with it are primarily based on qualitative data, given that the existing protest databases are limited in time and scope (Bulhakau and Dynko 2011; Chyzova 2013; Titarenko et al. 2001). A quantitative study of the dynamic interaction between the dominant and subaltern populisms may provide a more transposable model to answer the questions of first, what governing acts elicit protests and how the protesters formulate their disagreements and demands and second, what forms of claim-making are likely to wrest concessions. To address these questions, the materials gathered during my fieldwork may help gauge the ruling elite’s and the protesters’ interpretations of the core concepts of the aforementioned ‘dramaturgy of populism’ and inform the coding of the protest events for a

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database, methodologically similar to those compiled for Russia (Crowley and Olimpieva 2018) and Ukraine (Dutchak 2015, 146–47; Ishchenko and Yurchenko 2019).

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