

**The development and innovation of queer activism under the influence of totalitarian
state systems (case of Belarus from 2017 to 2023)**

by Ekaterina Donskova

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts in Critical Gender Studies.

Supervisor: prof. Andrea Krizsan
Second Reader: prof. Eva Fodor

Vienna, Austria 2024

Abstract

Shaped by external forces and empires that sought to make it into an eternal quasi-colony, Belarus is actively molded by various forms of political and social resistance. In the last thirty-five years, the Belarusian queer community became a particularly notable example of such defiance. This paper explores the entrenched authoritarianism of the ruling regime and the constant movements of civil society advocating for change. By discussing queer activism and its 2020 Revolution as a response to police homophobia and the perpetual erasure of national identities by colonial powers, I aim to showcase how activists mobilize and organize, standing in opposition against both quasi-coloniality and homophobia. Additionally, I explore how queer identity and national identity, originally thought to be distinct and mutually exclusive, are interlaced with each other, creating what I call a Q-unit identity that is unique to the Belarusian context. In this work, I identify three waves of queer activism throughout the modern history of the Republic of Belarus, as well as their features and characteristics. For this purpose, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Belarusian queer activists regarding their emotions and experiences in the process of increasing government repression. With this research, I hope to archive the experience and emotions of Belarusian queer people, as well as help activists in other authoritarian countries. Ultimately, this work is aimed at promoting the development of a tolerant and inclusive society in Belarus, where everyone has the right to free expression and equal opportunities.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family and loved ones, without whom this path would have been impossible.

I sincerely thank the wonderful participants in my interviews for your time and trust. You have allowed me to feel the solidarity and strength of the queer community like never before.

Declaration

As a result of this, I declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of a bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis is accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 26,873 words

Entire manuscript: 30,019 words

Signed: Ekaterina Donskova

Table of Contents	
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Declaration	iv
Introduction	1
Background.....	5
Manifestation of Quasi-Coloniality in Sovereign Belarus.....	5
Queer Activism at the Crossroads of the Global West and the Soviet Legacy	10
Methodology	13
Limitations	15
Ethic policy.....	15
Case study	15
Author's standpoint	16
Theoretical Framework and literature review:	18
Chapter 1. Repressions and Resistance in Queer Belarus.....	25
Introduction	25
Governmental and social homophobia as state ideology	25
Waves of Belarusian queer activism and corresponding resistance tools	33
Conclusion.....	38
Chapter 2. The growth of national and queer identities during the events of 2020.....	39
Introduction	39
Revolution and hope as driving mechanisms for the development and growth of identities ...	40
Belarusiness and revolution.....	41
Queerness and revolution	47
Merging of Belarusianism and queerness due to the growth of repression	49
Conclusion.....	54
Chapter 3. Strategies for mobilization, transformation, and reduction of resistance activity under autocracy	56
Introduction	56
Analysis of the relationship between repression and mobilization of activists through various emotional experiences and states	57
The strategy of survival and support of the community as a result of activities in a totalitarian context compared to the Western privileged communities.....	64
Conclusion.....	68
Conclusion.....	71
Appendices	74
Bibliography	80

Introduction

Throughout the past, Belarus has been subject to external domination and control, first by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and then by the Russian Empire. With subsequent waves of Polonization, Russification, and suppression of the Belarusian cultural, linguistic, and religious autonomy, these periods of subjugation have left indelible imprints on the collective consciousness of the Belarusian people, shaping their perceptions, values, and aspirations.

The 20th century ushered in a turbulent era marked by the fleeting independence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, but it was overshadowed by the Soviet annexation and subsequent occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II. In the post-war period, Belarus fell back under Soviet control, surviving further Russification efforts and the catastrophic consequences of the Chornobyl nuclear disaster. The final declaration of independence in 1991 marked a new chapter in the history of Belarus, but this newfound autonomy was quickly overshadowed by the rise of the authoritarian regime under the leadership of Alexander Lukashenko, characterized by political repression and human rights violations.

The political landscape of post-Soviet Belarus is evidence of the ongoing difficulties and challenges facing countries moving from authoritarian rule to democracy. Since gaining independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus has gone through an exciting path marked by political upheaval, contested elections, and strained relations with neighboring countries and the international community. The basis for understanding the political situation in post-Soviet Belarus is the dynamics of consolidation of power, the role of state institutions, and the aspirations of its population for greater political freedom and democratic governance.

The term quasi-colony¹ encapsulates the nuanced relationship between Belarus and its neighboring powers, particularly Russia, and is characterized by elements of both colonial exploitation and cultural assimilation. Despite achieving independence in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Belarus continues to grapple with lingering vestiges of colonialism, manifesting in socio-economic disparities, political dependencies, and cultural hegemony.

In addition to the suppression of linguistic autonomy in favor of the Russian language and general political endeavors to create a unified government between Belarus and Russia, quasi-coloniality is vividly manifested by governmental homophobia. The usage of traditional values as a justification for discrimination against LGBT people, as well as the development of the idea that queer Belarusians are internal enemies of the state that seek to destroy the nation, was

¹ Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315868448>.

first modeled by Russian laws that were then adopted by the Belarusian government. One of the most prominent examples of this entanglement between Russian and Belarusian legislatures is the proposed law on administrative responsibility for propaganda of non-traditional relations that mirrors the Russian legislature, which is discussed further in Chapter 3.

This state homophobia, as well as police violence targeting queer people, considerably hinders the wellbeing of activists. Seen as propagandists of corrupted Western democratic societies, advocates for LGBT human rights are socially and politically persecuted, with arrests and beatings being frequent occurrences. Considering how persistent and systematic violence and police homophobia is now, I argue that homophobia has become an inherent part of state ideology.

Despite the repressions and violence, LGBT activism has existed since the early 1990s, characterized by its resilience and creative opposition against raids, police brutality, and discriminatory policies. From 27 interviews I conducted with queer activists from Belarus, I concluded that queer activism in Belarus can be divided into three waves that all have distinct characteristics and timelines. The first wave of queer activism, although it can be described more accurately as gay activism, occurred from 1994 to 2014, and was led by individual persons rather than groups. Its main focus was activism on behalf of HIV-positive people, as well as the initial creation of a gay community that constructed spaces for dating and social activities. This first wave was hierarchical, with gay groups having the most privileges and freedoms, with a lack of a unified queer community fighting for all identities. The second wave of queer activism took place from 2014 to 2020 and was guided not by individuals, but by organizations and initiatives. It produced a more integrated queer, more politically-leftist, community that concentrated on defending human rights through cultural, educational, and legislative projects. The third, and currently last wave of queer activism started in 2020 and is still ongoing. It consisted of online activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Revolution, which I divide further into three periods based on activists' emotional responses, and current onsite anonymous activism that is occupied primarily by projects aimed at recreation, mental health care, and survival of the community. While there is now a division between activism done by those in Belarus and abroad, it nevertheless seeks to service both people in and out of the country. I address the details of the three waves of queer activism, as well as my reasoning behind dividing the movement into three parts, in Chapter 1.

The 2020 Belarusian National Revolution itself can additionally be separated into three distinct periods. From my interviews, I gathered that those involved in the protests and advocacy during the third wave of activism had distinct emotional responses that corresponded

with the progression of the resistance. Over and over again, I heard people describe feelings of hope, then despair, and then a resurgence of hope, all demonstrated by different political events. The first period of the Revolution took place from February 2020 to October 2020 and was characterized by hope, bravery, and horizontal organization for social change. It included mobilization during COVID-19, as well as political activity during the presidential race that made people optimistic about the prospect of Lukashenko's governmental downfall. However, with the financial and military support of Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the Revolution saw complete suppression, bringing on the second period that lasted from November 2020 to May 2023. The second period was permeated with feelings of fear, despair, and emotional burnout, causing a deceleration of activism and mass migratory fleeing of those in the greatest danger of imprisonment. Finally, the third period of the Revolution came in June 2023 and is still ongoing. Its main attributes encompass a revival of political hope, recovery of activists from mental burnouts, as well as increased collaboration with the democratic powers in exile, including the office of the democratic leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. I analyze my interview findings regarding the three Revolutionary periods in Chapter 3.

The connection between Belarusian national identity and queer identity is an important part of my investigation into the effects of authoritarian repressions on activism. Before the 2020 Revolution, queer people viewed Belarusianess, our national identity, as malevolent, equating Belarusianess with the evident homophobia in the country's legislature. One could not be both queer and Belarusian, as they represent drastically different values and ideologies. However, the Revolution changed those perceptions, showcasing that the government is not an adequate representation of the opinions of the people of Belarus and proving that a person can maintain both identities. Queer people participated in protests and advocacy projects with pride flags, demonstrating that LGBT Belarusians are not internal enemies, fighting against alienation, and certifying that queer rights are human rights that are intrinsic in a democratic society. Putin's support of Lukashenko, which ultimately led to the suppression of the Revolution, also illustrated that Belarusians must fight not only against Lukashenko but also against Russia's influence and quasi-colonialism. In Chapter 2, I speak of what I call Q-unit identity, or the emergence of a double queer-national identity that encouraged activists to contest both Belarusian homophobia and quasi-colonialism, as they maintain each other on various levels of influence.

Due to this entanglement of queer and national identities, Belarusian queer activism can be distinguished from activism conducted by queer people in other countries. My internship at EQUAL PostOST, a queer human rights organization based in Berlin, Germany, and led

primarily by Russian immigrants, allowed me to further analyze the difference between how queer activism is maintained in Western countries and Belarus. My discoveries, which are detailed in Chapter 3, center on the attitudes and priorities of activists. In democratically privileged Western countries, activists concentrate mostly on social homophobia or individual instances of state homophobia, while Belarusians fight against a more systemic homophobia that permeates politics on an ideological level. Additionally, people in the West can do activism for employment and a valid source of income, not having to worry as much about financial survival or police brutality for their participation. Even if activism is done on a volunteer basis, their efforts are considered admirable, while, in Belarus, volunteering is still regarded as a dangerous and, oftentimes, fruitless endeavor.

While the situation in Belarus is different from that of Germany or Canada, I believe that activists in many authoritarian countries like Iran, Venezuela, or Tajikistan already utilize or can benefit from tactics of mobilization that are used in Belarus. From my observations, which are described further in Chapter 3, there are two main tactics that Belarusian activists use now: survival and support of the community. Survival of the community is evident by deprioritization of educational programs and focus on social connection that would let people know that they are not alone, while the support of the community is manifested through mental health care and financial support for recreational activities and projects that would reduce burnout. As the focus of this work remains on Belarus, I retain the hope that my investigation can support and validate the experience of not only those in my home country but in other places that share our struggles.

Background

Manifestation of Quasi-Coloniality in Sovereign Belarus

From the very beginning of its existence as an independent state, Belarus has remained under the dominant influence of its first and only president, Alexander Lukashenko. When Lukashenko took office in 1994, he quickly consolidated his power, destroying almost all political opposition forces and controlling state institutions. His regime is characterized by the centralization of power, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, and the suppression of political protests. Violations are often recorded² during elections, and observers of international organizations often do not recognize the results as democratic.

Belarus remains an important strategic partner for Russia in the post-Soviet space. Energy ties between the two countries remain key, as well as cooperation at the military and economic levels. From 2014 to 2020, relations between Belarus and Russia were strained, especially after the annexation of Crimea by Russia and Russia's support for military operations in eastern Ukraine. At that time, the government of Belarus sought to strengthen its relations with the West, especially with the European Union. European countries, in turn, have shown interest in Belarus as a potential strategic partner in Eastern Europe.

From 2015 onward, Lukashenko initiated several diplomatic missions to the European Union, seeking to soften the country's authoritarian image. These efforts included holding public discussions on human rights issues, engaging in economic dialogues aimed at attracting European investment, and the admission of European observers to the parliamentary elections (although there were still registered inconsistencies with democratic election standards)³. The EU responded by partially lifting existing sanctions⁴, increasing diplomatic engagement, and initiating programs to support civil society and economic reforms in Belarus. This period saw a slight thaw in the decades-old frosty relations between Belarus and the West. European diplomats frequently visited Minsk, and Belarusian officials were invited to EU summits and forums, signaling a cautious but hopeful rapprochement.

These events gave hope to democratic and even nationalist movements within the country. Activists and opposition leaders, who had long been suppressed, found new opportunities to voice their aspirations for a more open and democratic Belarus. Civil society groups flourished,

² Clara Portela, 'The European Union and Belarus: Sanctions and Partnership?', *Comparative European Politics* 9, no. 4–5 (September 2011): 495, <https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2011.13>.

³ Lord David BLENATHRA, United Kingdom, EC/DA, 'Observation of the Early Parliamentary Elections in Belarus (17 November 2019)', PACE, accessed 20 May 2024, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=28304&lang=en>.

⁴ TASS Russian News Agency, 'The history of European sanctions against Belarus', TASS Russian News Agency, 12 October 2020, <https://tass.ru/info/9694095>.

and there was a surge in pro-European sentiment among the population. The possibility of closer ties with the EU ignited dreams of political reform and economic modernization.

Belarus and Russia also maintained somewhat unstable yet usually strong economic ties, which allowed Lukashenko to sustain alliances with both the EU and the Russian Federation. In 2019, Lukashenko and Putin held bilateral talks in Sochi, during which they stated that Belarus and Russia "could unite tomorrow, no problem"⁵. In 2020, the relationship between Lukashenko and Putin became strained again, but that yet again changed during the Revolution of 2020, when Lukashenko requested Putin's help in violently suppressing the movement seeking to democratically elect another candidate.

The protests in Belarus in 2020 were the culmination of a long period of widespread dissatisfaction with the political regime of Alexander Lukashenko, who had held power for more than twenty-five years and failed to adequately respond to an economic crisis straining the country since 2011. The lead-up to the elections included many events highlighting the authoritarian nature of the regime and the patriarchal system of the state, which stood viciously against human rights and specifically freedom of speech and expression. The possibility of an alternative political choice was minimized through the systematic suppression of political opponents, manipulation of the electoral process, and control over the media. These actions allowed Lukashenko to retain power, creating an environment of fear and suppression in society. Alexander Lukashenko was declared the winner with an official result of about 80% of the vote, which caused extensive discontent and suspicion of massive violations of the electoral process. The protests began as an expression of dissatisfaction with the political results and demands for free and fair elections. Citizens took to the streets demanding a review of the voting results and Lukashenko's departure.

The protests were massive and became the largest in the history of Belarus. On August 16, 2020, alone, about 500,000 people went to the streets of Belarus. In response to the protests, the government used harsh suppression, arrests of participants, and the use of tear gas and rubber bullets. This has only increased discontent and led to supplemented demands for political change. In prisons, torture, sexualized violence, denial of medical services, food, and sanitation were used against detainees. In addition to increased social repressions and generalized violence against those deemed to be a part of political opposition, targeted brutality towards the LGBTQ+ population was exacerbated, showcasing attempts to create a public internal enemy

⁵ The Moscow Times, 'Belarus Ready to "Unite" With Russia, Lukashenko Says', The Moscow Times, 15 February 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/15/were-ready-unite-with-russia-belarus-leader-lukashenko-says-a64517>.

of the state. This internal enemy was a representation and manifestation of the corrupt Western democratic society that could be condemned for the deficiencies of the nation-state.

The revolution was aimed both at dissatisfaction with the economic crisis and at the general system of totalitarianism in the state, where the lack of freedom of speech, lack of human rights, and self-expression was widespread everywhere. Demands for cultural and linguistic self-determination were also put forward as part of the protests. Many protesters advocated the protection of the Belarusian language and the country's cultural identity from the dominance of the Russian language and the pro-Russian position. There were fears (confirmed later) that under pressure from the Russian authorities and because of Lukashenko's desire to strengthen his position, the authorities might take steps to strengthen Russification and suppress Belarusian culture. These concerns were caused by historical facts and previous actions of the authorities in relation to the Belarusian language and culture. In this situation, protesters and activists continued to focus on the importance of preserving and developing the Belarusian cultural and linguistic identity, as well as the need to resist Russian influence and pro-Russian trends.

Unfortunately, in November of 2020, the Belarusian protests of 2020 were ruthlessly suppressed not solely by domestic forces but also by a substantial contingent of Russian military surreptitiously deployed within Belarus. Lukashenko has effectively bartered his presidential status for subservience to the Russian empire, as presently the territory of Belarus is utilized as one of the staging grounds for an incursion into Ukraine.

Despite absolute state control following the suppression of the Revolution, clandestine civil initiatives and movements to protect human rights, freedom of speech, and free elections continue to exist in Belarus. Some of them are actively supported by the West, which causes discontent on the part of the Lukashenko regime and leads to repression against activists and opposition figures⁶.

Despite the serious concerns expressed by global leaders about the legal crisis in Belarus in 2020, no active measures were taken⁷. Essentially, the Western world turned away from the relatively inconsequential Belarus region. At the same time, Russia covertly gained control over Belarus. Talks about Belarus, under the dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko, becoming subservient to Russia gained momentum in 2020 when the regime ruthlessly suppressed all

⁶ Unfortunately, I cannot provide the names of specific organizations for security reasons. However, at the following link you can find a list of "Extremist and terrorist organizations" whose activities are aimed at improving the rights of Belarusians in the country and abroad.

<https://humanconstantia.org/razbiraemsya-s-ekstremistskimi-spiskami-perechen-organizacij-i-fizicheskix-lic-prichastnyx-k-terroristicheskoy-deyatelnosti/#i>

⁷ Franak Viačorka, 'The EU's "Grave Concern" Will Not Help Belarus', *Atlantic Council* (blog), 15 September 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/the-eus-grave-concern-will-not-help-belarus/>.

dissent with full support from Moscow.

Three to four years later, Lukashenko became even more dependent on the Kremlin. The Belarusian economy relies on direct and indirect financial inflows from Russia, Russian troops are stationed throughout the country, and its territory is used to launch missiles against Ukraine. Russia trains Belarusian armed forces, the country's opposition is either imprisoned or in exile, and the official language, Belarusian is actively suppressed by authorities in favor of Russian. Belarus is also part of the Union State, a political union with Russia, which previously gradually integrated Belarus with its aggressive neighbor. The process accelerated after Lukashenko unequivocally severed ties⁸ with the West in 2020 following harsh repression against participants in democratic protests.

In late October 2022, Ukraine's parliament became the pioneer in designating Belarus as a "temporarily occupied territory"⁹, appealing to the international community for a coordinated response. This move was endorsed by exiled leaders of the Belarusian opposition. The initiative to label Belarus as occupied territory had been championed by opposition leaders immediately following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February, an offensive that included operations launched from Belarusian territory. Lukashenko confirmed Belarus' involvement in Russia's conflict with Ukraine and announced the creation of the Unified Command in October 2022.

However, as I mentioned earlier, the Russian colonization of Belarus did not begin in February 2022 or even in 2020. Its history spans more than 300 years and dates back to the imperialistic aspirations of Tsarist Russia, and later the Soviet Union. For many years, Moscow has exercised a colonial influence over Belarus, exerting control over its economy and politics, promoting Russian culture and language, and systematically eradicating Belarusian national heritage. Frequent joint military exercises, declarations of alliance, the presence of Russian troops, and the use of Belarusian territory as a base for Russian missiles highlight Lukashenko's minimal military autonomy. He might oversee his own army, but his control over his territory is severely compromised. Moreover, the country's information policy is dominated by Russian propagandists. Following the fraudulent 2020 presidential elections, Belarusian state media journalists went on strike and resigned within three weeks of the ensuing civil protests, only to

⁸ JIM HEINTZ, "‘Europe’s Last Dictator’ Raises the Stakes with the West", AP News, 14 November 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-moscow-latvia-lithuania-513f4212d26474f0d474152f28868fc4>.

⁹ Maria Yeryoma, 'With the World Looking Away, Russia Quietly Took Control over Belarus', The Kyiv Independent, 4 January 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/is-belarus-occupied-by-russia/>.

be replaced by Russian propagandists¹⁰.

November 4, 2022, can be seen as a pivotal moment, if not the outright end, of Belarus's sovereignty in domestic matters. On this day, Lukashenko signed an agreement to integrate the Union State with Russia. This Union State aims to create a supranational entity merging Russian and Belarusian laws, tax codes, judicial systems, and customs. In its most extreme form, it proposes a single currency managed by the Central Bank of Russia in Moscow. According to Yelisieev¹¹, Belarus's leadership fell into the trap of growing dependence on Russia, which Moscow intends to exploit.

Henadz Korshunau, senior expert at the Center for New Ideas asserts¹² that Lukashenko's regime can only sustain its rule through the use of force and the support of Russia.

After the Revolution in 2020, Lukashenko began a war against civil society. Independent media became one of the main victims: over 30 journalists were imprisoned, and many media outlets were declared extremist. Over 1600 non-profit organizations were subsequently disbanded¹³. In 2022, new attacks on Belarusian history and language also began. Belarusian law enforcement agencies conducted raids and closed independent publications. A public organization advocating for the Belarusian language, the "Society for the Protection of the Belarusian Language" (Tavarystva Belaruskay Movy)¹⁴, was closed. Lukashenko has repeatedly stated, "nothing outstanding can be expressed in Belarusian. It's a bad language"¹⁵.

As we can see from the information above, these relations between Russia and Belarus have been going on for several centuries and have shaped Belarus not only in economic but also in ideological ways. Russia's desire to maintain Belarus as a quasi-colony has a direct impact on propaganda, anti-gender politics, the lack of women's rights, and, ultimately, the repression of queer activists, which I will discuss in the next section.

¹⁰ Denis Yudin, 'BelTeleRadio employees: Specialists from Russia work on television in Belarus instead of strikers', LIGA, 19 August 2020, <https://news.liga.net/world/news/sotrudniki-bt-v-belarusi-na-televidenii-vmesto-bastuyuschih-rabotayut-spetsialisty-iz-rossii>.

¹¹ Andrei Yeliseyev, 'There is no need for Russia to start a war with Belarus', 19 January 2017, 3, <http://surl.li/tujxs>.

¹² Pavel Slyunkin et al., 'Expert Evaluations: BELARUSIAN CHANGE TRACKER' (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, FES, August 2022), 16, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19564.pdf>.

¹³ Lawtrend, 'Belarus Dissolves over 1,600 NGOs since 2020 Election – Report', Pozirk, 6 April 2024, <https://pozirk.online/en/news/78001/>.

¹⁴ 'Right for Culture. Belarus 2021', 16 February 2022, 16, https://penbelarus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/pen_manitoryng-parushennyau_eng_.pdf.

¹⁵ Daria Gushtyn, 'The Referendum-1995. Antiheroes of the Belarusian Language', naviny.by, 14 May 2015, https://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2015/05/14/ic_articles_116_188882.

Queer Activism at the Crossroads of the Global West and the Soviet Legacy

Belarusian queer history stands as a case study where the intersections of historical heritage, colonial legacies, and Soviet influence have profoundly shaped queer identity formation and activism. Belarus, nestled between Russia and Europe, has endured centuries of shifting borders and cultural influences, leaving a complex historical legacy. Colonial policies aimed at homogenizing culture often suppressed non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, laying the groundwork for societal stigma against queer communities. The Soviet period further entrenched norms of heteronormativity and gender conformity in Belarusian society. State-sponsored homophobia and transphobia were pervasive, as LGBTQ+ identities were deemed incompatible with socialist values¹⁶. The criminalization of homosexuality under Soviet law forced queer individuals into the shadows, fostering a culture of silence and invisibility. Despite this repression, underground queer networks and subcultures emerged, serving as precursors to contemporary queer activism.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus faced uncertainty, stuck between the Soviet era and the transition to a democratic society influenced by Western development projects. In the West, Belarus was presented as a third-world country, later renamed a developing country. The problem facing the queer community in Belarus was double: on the one hand, the erasure of voices and the existence of a region that could not be considered outside the context of its former colonial center - Russia; on the other hand, its subordination to the Global West with its neoliberal capitalism.

It is very noteworthy that one aspect of neoliberalism and colonialism is characterized by the foundation of human rights and democracy. In this context, the promotion of women's and LGBTQI rights has become an important part of Western aid coming to the region through development work. This does not mean that we did not have problems with human rights or that being a queer person in Belarus is safe from the point of view of the state and society. But it should be noted that since Belarus received development support from international organizations, all this has been happening within the framework of a neoliberal development project designed by colonial methods, where newly independent countries are shown to be devoid of civilization, and human rights have become the colonial currency in the region.

This brings us to the broader problem of colonialism – the inner belief in the superiority of the colonizer and the reproduction of this idea through human actions, documents, and the production of well-known knowledge¹⁷. In Belarus, the issue of postcolonialism and the

¹⁶ Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 43.

¹⁷ Mignolo and Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, 129.

decolonization process is very complicated, starting with the question of whether we were really colonized (as I mentioned in the previous section) and if so, by whom? Was it the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union? Both options have their own reasons and limitations. As a result, today we see ongoing discussions and debates about how to free ourselves from the past and the ghosts of Russian colonialism that have penetrated all areas of our lives. However, very few people think about the current colonialism of the West, perhaps because it would highlight the difficult situation in which we find ourselves.

As mentioned in the Introduction and will delve further into in Chapter 1, queer activity has shifted from LGBT activism of the 90s, early 2000s to queer activism in the mid-late 2010s. Current organizations prioritize more left-wing non-normative work principles, destroying the established binary heteropatriarchal approach and hierarchy within the community. Initially, activism tried to replicate the development of privileged communities in the United States and Central European countries. For example, in 1998, the Belarusian League of Sexual Minorities LAMBDA was established under the leadership of Edward Tarletsky¹⁸, which served as a place for romantic acquaintances and work on the anti-AIDS agenda. In 1999, the 1st Pride Festival was held in Minsk. Belarus Gay Pride was held every September from 1999 to 2002¹⁹. In 2007, the Gay Belarus initiative was created under the leadership of Sergei Androsenko, which continued to work with cis-gays. These are just a few examples of when Belarusian organizations imitated Western models of behavior, wanting to go through a long multi-stage path of development within a couple of years, using prides and gay alliances working with AIDS. All these events were characterized by the representation of famous gay figures, taking an example from abroad and not worrying about the destruction of normativity and binary. However, activists soon realized that not only the grant-givers treat the Eastern European region as countries of the third world, but also Russian activists perceive Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other countries as younger brothers. This has created a kind of impostor complex²⁰ among Belarusian LGBT activists. Nevertheless, the concept of queer

¹⁸ Tatiana Melnichuk, 'The life of gays in Belarus: Either get out, or keep your head down', *BBC Russian Service*, 17 May 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-39954700>.

¹⁹ Nasta Mancewicz, 'In Search of a Place: Looking Back at the Gay Pride History in Minsk', *MAKEOUT* — Magazine about gender and sexuality, 1 November 2017, <https://makeout.space/2017/11/01/in-search-of-a-place-looking-back-at-the-gay-pride-history-in-minsk.html>.

²⁰ Imposter syndrome is the condition of feeling anxious and not experiencing success internally, despite being high-performing in external, objective ways. This condition often results in people feeling like "a fraud" or "a phony" and doubting their abilities.

Joe Langford and Pauline Rose Clance, 'The Imposter Phenomenon: Recent Research Findings Regarding Dynamics, Personality and Family Patterns and Their Implications for Treatment.', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 30, no. 3 (1993): 495, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.30.3.495>.

decolonization has opened a new door of possibilities for rethinking the ways of struggle and development.

After this reflection, activism becomes focused not only on men who have sex with men, but also on other marginalized communities, paying special attention to trans and non-binary communities. Initiative groups conducted mainly educational and cultural art²¹ events that allowed the creation of a new Belarusian paradigm with its special experience of ups and downs. As Popa and Sandals wrote in their analysis of decolonization queer politics, “queer activism becomes a platform that is used to represent either a broader coalition of positions or a threat that will create problems for the heteronormative racist imagination”²².

Belarusian queer history is a unique study where the intersection of historical heritage, colonial traces, and Soviet influence deeply influenced the formation of queer identity and activism. Colonial policies aimed at homogenizing culture often suppressed profanity of gender and sexuality, laying the foundation for the social stigmatization of the queer community. Queer activism in Belarus has undergone significant changes: from imitation of Western models in the 90s to more left-leaning non-normative principles of work, starting in the mid-2010s. Thus, the concept of queer decolonization opens up new opportunities for rethinking the ways of struggle and development, which we will discuss in the following chapters.

²¹ Yana Soroka and translated by Anton Klimovich, ‘Three interviews about art, identity and life in Belarus here and now’, MAKEOUT — Magazine about gender and sexuality, 6 August 2021, <https://makeout.space/2021/08/06/three-interviews-about-art-identity-and-life-in-belarus-here-and-now.html>.

²² ‘Decolonial Queer Politics and LGBTI+ Activism in Romania and Turkey’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, by Bogdan Popa and Hakan Sandal (Oxford University Press, 2019), 11–12, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1282>.

Methodology

This is a qualitative case study analysis of queer activism in Belarus during times of autocracy and intensified repression. In this chapter, I will present the methodology of my research, including the sampling techniques and methods used, the technical aspects and challenges encountered, and the ethical considerations addressed. Additionally, I will explain my positionality and describe the limitations faced by my research.

- Semi-structured interviews

The first part of my research is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews. The choice of this method was driven by the need for an in-depth exploration of the topic, allowing me to obtain deep and detailed responses that uncovered complex aspects of the phenomenon under study. Moreover, all respondents answered the same set of questions, ensuring comparability of the answers and allowing me, as the researcher, to control the interview process by guiding the respondents. Additionally, semi-structured interviews have a formalized question structure, which helps reduce interviewer bias, a priority for me. However, the most significant advantage of this method is the ability to ensure confidential data collection (as most conversations took place in person) and the emotional engagement in the process, which helped queer activists share their complex experiences with me.

In the summer of 2023, I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews. The respondents are members of the Belarusian queer activism movement. I used the snowball sampling method. I managed to conduct 16 out of 27 interviews in person in Poland, Germany, and Lithuania, as these are the most common places for Belarusian queer activists facing political persecution to reside. Also, some participants are still in Belarus. I interacted with the remaining participants via Zoom.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the details of my project and obtained verbal consent for participation and recording; the script for my verbal consent can be found in Appendix 1. Additionally, all respondents declined to sign written consent forms due to security concerns.

Most interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. After each session, I adjusted my guidelines based on the respondents' responses. Some wanted to discuss their feelings and experiences, while others focused on structural changes. Consequently, I modified the emphasis of my questions. At the end of each interview, I asked if my respondents wanted to add anything else. We also agreed on maintaining communication—I would send the quotes used for review after transcription and promised to share the final work after publication.

I recorded each interview using the voice recorder on my smartphone. Additionally, after

each interview, I made notes on the most interesting and important points, which ultimately formed the basis of my cluster table, found in Appendix 2, after coding. For more than half of the interviews, I used Microsoft 365 for transcription. However, many activists use a mix of Belarusian, Russian, and English, which the speech recognition software does not support. Therefore, I had to transcribe four interviews entirely by hand and another seven partially.

List of subject questions for the interview:

1. Please tell me about your experience of queer activism in Belarus before the political events of 2020. Why were you involved in this movement?
2. How would you characterize the political regime in Belarus before 2020 and after?
3. Please tell me about the 2020 revolution and your queer activism at that time. How do you remember these events?
4. Do you think that the activists' strategy has somehow changed due to the increase of government repression?
5. In your opinion, were there any turning points that influenced the choice of tools for activist resistance?
6. From your point of view, have the state repressions starting in 2020 become an impulse to mobilize queer activists or to reduce their activity?
7. What tools of queer activism do you consider the most important in working in Belarus and in the other totalitarian countries?

During the interview, I focused my attention on compiling a system with all the clusters that I saw in the process. I presented them as a table, where I outlined the topics of my respondents' answers to the questions they were asked. You can see this table below. I also identified the 4 highest priority clusters: 1. Many participants talked about "emotions: hope; fear; despair", as the most important defining structures of the events of 2020-2023; 2. One of their most striking highlighted concepts was "identities: growth/understanding of national identity; growth/understanding of one's queer identity", where I was able to see not only the growth of identities as separate but also a common evolution; 3. The study helped me identify the waves of queer activism and describe them both chronologically and instrumentally "the growth at the beginning of the protest, the decline during the increase of state repression, the growth of invisible activism inside the country and queer online activism outside"; 4. The last cluster shows the vision of the future of the community and answers the global question about the tools of queer resistance in totalitarian countries "community support + survival".

Limitations

The first limitation of this study may be my inability to enter Belarus, and accordingly the unavailability of some electronic information data that can only be obtained from the territory of Belarus. The second limitation is the need to provide absolute confidentiality and anonymity to respondents since they are representatives of a vulnerable group that is persecuted not only by state law enforcement agencies but they are also subjected to pressure from the Eastern European general public, where their rights are poorly defended or not protected in any way.

Ethic policy

Participants were allowed to remain absolutely anonymous, especially those currently on the territory of Belarus. At any time, participants have the right to refuse to participate in the research if they feel a danger to their well-being and lack of confidentiality. All names in the process of analyzing the received information will be encrypted and changed. During the interview, all respondents were informed about possible risks, and the necessary consent was obtained to receive narratives. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and the further use of the data (data exploitation in the practical part of the master thesis). Consent to the interview was obtained before the interview began. Also, the respondents were informed about how the interview will be recorded and stored (specifically, all audio recordings of the interview will be deleted after the end of the study in July 2024). Participants were given a choice regarding the use of their data: whether they wanted to participate in the study anonymously or with the indication of names. In addition, after conducting, coding, and analyzing the interview, each participant was sent a final version of the publication to confirm the accuracy of the information received.

Case study

This is a detailed study and analysis of the key characteristics and distinctive features of Belarusian queer activism during an internship at a European Queer NGO. I interned at Equal PostOst in Berlin from May 1, 2023, to July 31, 2023, which aligned with the required timing of the Applied Track program. However, I was actively engaged in project activities there until January 2024.

During the internship, the main focus was on understanding the unique aspects of Western queer activism, including challenges, strategies, and experiences of activists. Additionally, one of the major tasks was to analyze what distinguishes Belarusian queer activism from queer movements in other regions, particularly in the context of political repression and societal

attitudes in Belarus. This also allowed me to assess the impact of activism both on the local queer community and on the broader human rights context. I actively participated in events and meetings of queer NGOs during this part of the research, as well as observed from an ethnographic perspective during internal and external processes. Furthermore, I conducted 5 mandatory interviews with the team of this initiative.

I depicted all of this in the final internship report and also conducted a comparative analysis in Chapter 3 of this research.

Author's standpoint

My position in this project is driven by being a Belarusian cisgender queer woman who lived in Belarus until the autumn of 2021, thus participating in political and activist events described in this thesis. It was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Firstly, it was relatively easy for me to find interviewees as I personally knew them from my time in Belarus. Those activists who were unfamiliar to me and those who remained in the country were found by my initial contacts. Moreover, it was also easy for me to compose the questionnaire as I had a good understanding of the ethical and contextual aspects.

However, I became so deeply involved in this research and emotionally reconnected with my past experiences that conducting 27 interviews about pain, fear, and hope almost caused burnout. Additionally, I had to confront the fact that some of my perceptions about the Belarusian queer movement and the 2020 Revolution differed from those of my colleagues with whom I conducted interviews, particularly due to the varying privileges and circumstances of our departure from or staying in Belarus.

Throughout the research process, I endeavored to constantly acknowledge my personal privileges and recognize the risks associated with my position, which could lead to misinterpreting the responses of my interviewees. To avoid this, I actively encouraged my interviewees to clarify details. Furthermore, due to my own experience and cisgender identity, I realized that my understanding of the difficulties faced by transgender individuals might be limited. I am deeply grateful to my non-binary colleagues for allowing me to hear their experiences.

I would also like to add that I have received a bachelor's degree in gender and pedagogical psychology, which gives me a broader and deeper understanding of emotional processes, conducting correlations, and identifying clusters in the process of coding interviews. Presenting this topic for study is significant to me not solely due to academic interest, but also because of personal experiences, hopes, and internal processes that necessitate validation and reevaluation.

Utilizing my experience and positional identity in this research is essential as I firmly believe in the value of everyone's experiences in such contexts, which contributes to improved archiving of materials and analysis of gathered data.

Theoretical Framework and literature review:

The topic of Belarusian queer activism and resistance is yet to be granted the appropriate attention from global academics and advocates for LGBT and human rights. Following the 2020 Revolution, several articles have been published about the role of women in political opposition, but the aspect of queer organizing has often been left neglected. To conduct a detailed study of the way queer activism evolves during repressive times, I analyzed scholarly works from various disciplines, diving into theoretical backgrounds of hope, solidarity, quasi-colonialism, social movements, state homophobia, and more.

The first part of the literature I employ is aimed at uncovering the specific characteristics of autocratic governance in Belarus within the context of its quasi-colonial reality. To do this, I draw on the work of Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, editors of the book "Globalization and the Decolonial Option." Their work emphasizes the need for decolonization, seen as an epistemological restitution with significant political and ethical implications. Decoloniality became a horizon for reimagining and taking action toward a global future. The work of these authors helps to examine the broader context of imperialism and interdependent relationships, as well as the subsequent quasi-coloniality of Belarus. This enables the systematization of understandings of Belarusian authoritarianism and Russia's influence on state discourses regarding freedom of speech, and human rights, as well as resistance to traditional values and gender equality.

I use the "New social movements theory"²³ by Alain Touraine, which explains and shows the distinctive features of the formation of social movements in a European post-industrial society, where the main goals of individuals and communities are not material capital, but central cultural values, such as human rights and civil liberties. In the works of Alain Touraine, the central place is given to the analysis of the formation of collective identity, in the process of which there is a protection of oneself as a member of the community. This approach directly correlates with my scientific question about the formation of queer and national identities in the process of repression. I also consider the writings of Sidney Tarrow, a prominent social movement theorist. In "Power in Movement"²⁴, he describes the collective ups and downs, as well as their impact on personal life and identity, political reforms, and political culture. Since Tarrow also talks about examples of countries with a totalitarian management style, this work

²³ Christian Scholl, 'The New Social Movement Approach', in *Handbook of Political Citizenship and Social Movements*, by Hein-Anton van der Heijden (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014), 233–58, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781954706.00019>.

²⁴ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813245>.

helps in discussing how mass social movements operate in autocratic contexts. By applying Tarrow's framework to the context of Belarus from 2017 to 2023, my research aims to explore how queer activism navigates and responds to the autocratic nature of the Belarusian state. Tarrow's concepts of political opportunities and mobilizing structures help explain the specific dynamics and strategies employed by queer activists in Belarus, shedding light on the broader implications for social movements operating under autocratic rule.

The next basis of my research is the "Theory of State Repression and Political Order"²⁵ by Christian Davenport. The author outlines the main configurations of state repression, as well as their perception by groups and individuals. Christian Davenport describes various political repression points that correlate with the growth of opposition activity and its decline. Davenport identifies various forms of political suppression, such as violence, arrests, censorship, and other control methods that are used by states to suppress dissent. He also argues that government repression plays a key role in shaping the political order. He shows how repressive measures can both stimulate the growth of opposition activity and lead to its decrease, depending on the perception and reaction to these measures on the part of society. Davenport's theoretical framework helps me to explain how the repressive measures of the regime shape the strategies and actions of queer activists in an autocratic environment, and how these movements adapt and respond to pressure from the state.

In addition to considering various political repressions, I consider it necessary to pay attention to the work of Charles Kurzman "The Arab Spring Uncoiled"²⁶. In it, the author describes the experiences of protesters and activists in connection with political repression in authoritarian countries, as well as the relationship of various emotions with the mobilization of activity, introducing the term sudden prominence of bravery. This increased willingness to participate in risky protest actions correlates very strongly with what is happening during the 2020 revolution in Belarus. Social movements often resort to covert methods to evade state backlash in repressive contexts, potentially fracturing their visibility and effectiveness. Kurzman explains how movements may opt for subtle resistance or cultural expressions rather than direct confrontation with authorities under repression. Though vital for survival, these tactics can limit the movement's capacity for systemic change. As Kurzman et al. aptly note, "activists might engage in 'everyday forms of resistance,' such as subtle acts of defiance or

²⁵ Dag Tanneberg, *The Politics of Repression Under Authoritarian Rule: How Steadfast Is the Iron Throne?*, Contributions to Political Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35477-0>.

²⁶ Charles Kurzman, 'The Arab Spring Uncoiled', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1 December 2012): 377–90, <https://doi.org/10.17813/mai.17.4.10326742n0556v15>.

cultural expressions that challenge the status quo without provoking a direct confrontation with authorities"²⁷. Moreover, state repression prompts a shift in activism, favoring community building and mutual aid over direct political action. This adaptation serves to fortify networks against prolonged repression, as traditional forms of protest are met with severe repercussions. Illustratively, in Belarus, the queer movement confronts escalating repression by employing diverse strategies, including clandestine organizing and international advocacy, to advance their cause amidst perilous conditions.

I also consider the theory of Elizabeth A. Armstrong, who introduced the theory of "Unity in diversity"²⁸. The author used it to explain the success of the queer and gay rights movement since the two thousandths in the USA. This theory describes a single group's LGBTQ+ identity with the celebration of individual differences. Also, in Tatiana Shchurko's work "From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking Protests in Belarus through a transnational feminist perspective"²⁹, the author examines the importance of solidarity in the process of resistance, which is especially evident due to the inclusion of feminist and queer movements in the agenda. The article also explores the concepts of exile and transnational feminist solidarity. These concepts correspond exactly to the format in which Belarusian queer activism currently exists, given the impossibility of returning to their homeland, as well as involvement in military resistance after the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine.

Another theoretical entry point for my thesis is homophobia as a component of state ideology. In this, I am aided by the work of Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland, "Hate Crime: Impact, Causes and Responses"³⁰, which explores the nature, extent, and consequences of hate crimes. Hate crimes are a particularly destructive form of violence that significantly impacts not only the victims but also their families and broader communities. In the context of Belarus, this affects the entire queer community and serves as a means of intimidation for other citizens. Although Chakraborti and Garland's book addresses not only homophobia but also other crimes motivated by racial and religious hatred, discrimination based on disability, and other forms of targeted violence, such as gender-based hate, abuse of the elderly, attacks on members of

²⁷ Julia Margaret Zulver, 'Complex Gendered Agency in Mexico: How Women Negotiate Hierarchies of Fear to Search for the Disappeared', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 7, no. 2 (June 2024): 246, <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16746579646888>.

²⁸ Katherine McFarland Bruce, 'Unity in Diversity: Pride Growth', in *Pride Parades* (New York University Press, 2020), 62–94, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479803613.003.0003>.

²⁹ Tatiana Shchurko, 'From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking Protests in Belarus through a Transnational Feminist Perspective' 8, no. 4 (18 January 2023): 25–41, <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i4.1007>.

³⁰ Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland, *Hate Crime: Impact, Causes & Responses* (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473918108>.

alternative subcultures, and violence against sex workers and the homeless. This comprehensive analysis helps to better understand the mechanisms of forming and sustaining homophobic attitudes both at the state level and within society. This is particularly important for identifying homophobia as a state ideology. I also utilize the work of Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, "Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond, Africa Now", where the authors describe perceptions of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. This helps me to identify sexualized violence against protesters not only as isolated incidents but also as institutionalized actions by the Belarusian riot police to dehumanize, demoralize, and divide Belarusian society. This is further corroborated by Melanie Richter-Montpetit's work, "Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner 'Abuse' in Abu Ghraib and the Question of 'Gender Equality'". I use her work to juxtapose events of the torture of Muslim prisoners during the Iraq War with the torture of political prisoners in Belarusian prisons. The author describes how these state-sanctioned actions follow a pre-constructed heterosexual, racial, and gendered script, firmly rooted in colonial desires and practices of a broader social order, correlating with pro-Russian heteropatriarchal behavior patterns.

The second part of my literature review focuses on understanding the intersection of national and queer identities. I begin with Anna Triandafyllidou's work, "National Identity and the 'Other'"³¹, which discusses the understanding and conditioning of the formation and transformation of national identity. She argues that, along with historical context, provides insight into Belarusian identity and its formation during the 2020 Revolution, where the dichotomy of us/them became visible and palpable. I also draw on the works of Bikanau and Nesterovich³², Trencsényi³³, and Ioffe³⁴ to analyze what Belarusians attribute to their understanding of identity and the concepts and characteristics through which they perceive themselves.

Next, I utilize literature focused on analyzing queer identity and its development during various upheavals, particularly national revolutions. For this, I refer to Arman Heljic's

³¹ Anna Triandafyllidou, 'National Identity and the "Other"', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (January 1998): 593–612, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798329784>.

³² Philipp Bikanau, Konstantin Nesterovich, "'Belarusian Identity in 2023 : A Quantitative Study,'" Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine / Project Belarus' (Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine / Project Belarus, December 2023), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/20889.pdf>.

³³ Balázs Trencsényi et al., *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945): Texts and Commentaries* (Budapest New York: Central European University Press, 2006).

³⁴ Grigory Ioffe, 'Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 8 (2003): 1241–72.

analysis³⁵, where she discusses the continuous process of rebellion against despotic systems and the creative vision as an essential part of healing and self-representation for the queer community. I combine this with Windpassinger's work³⁶, where the author talks about the interdependence of national and queer identities, contrasting this with my conducted interviews, where participants spoke about the wholeness and indivisibility of identities and self-perception.

While analyzing the intersections of identities, I draw on the works of Jasbir K. Puar³⁷ and Tiina Rosenberg, Sandra D'Urso, and Anna Renée Winget³⁸, relating the concepts of homonationalism and queer nation to the Belarusian context. The arguments of these authors affirm the authenticity of the self-determination of queer activists during the 2020 National Revolution.

Also for understanding various emotions and their correlation with solidarity, burnout, and the choice of resistance tools among individual representatives of non-conformist marginalized protesters in the formation of national and queer identities. I use the work of Radzhana Buyantueva and Marina Shevtsova "LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Resistance, Representation and Identity" to show the concept of visibility. It is important to me that this book avoids giving status to its characters as victims. Discussions about sexual civic identity and strategic visibility, or more precisely, invisibility, explore how these communities prefer to present themselves. This book successfully explores the possibility of applying Western theoretical paradigms in local contexts, and also takes a step forward, calling on queer theorists in this region to create their own critical structure. This work combines an appeal to the local context and the formation of its own concept of understanding identities, as well as the characteristics of the queer movement.

In the third part of my dissertation, I employ the concepts of E. Fromm outlined in the book "The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology"³⁹. This work aids in conceptualizing hope as a contrasting construct and emotion that can function both actively and passively. Fromm demonstrates hope not only as a personal experience but also as a social one.

³⁵ Arman Heljic, 'Staging the Romani Queer Revolution: New Approaches to the Study of Romani Queerness', *Critical Romani Studies* 4, no. 1 (12 April 2022), <https://doi.org/10.29098/crs.v4i1.68>.

³⁶ Gwendolyn Windpassinger, 'Queering Anarchism in Post-2001 Buenos Aires', *Sexualities* 13, no. 4 (August 2010): 495–509, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460710370657>.

³⁷ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fg5>.

³⁸ Tiina Rosenberg, Sandra D'Urso, and Anna Renée Winget, *The Palgrave Handbook of Queer and Trans Feminisms in Contemporary Performance* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

³⁹ E. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (AmericanMentalHealthFoundationBooks, 2011), <https://books.google.at/books?id=SVdy0rtho0kC>.

He utilizes it to explain the formation of encouraging social activities stemming from consciously hopeful communities of individuals, each deriving individual benefits from an orientation towards a better life. This helps me elucidate not only the clusters of positive emotions experienced by queer activists at the onset of the revolution but also the subsequent experiences of disillusionment and burnout, which become variants of passive hope.

To conceptualize hope I also rely on Yener Bayramoğlu's work "Remembering hope: mediated queer futurity and counter publics in Turkey's authoritarian times"⁴⁰, which helps me to draw parallels between his concept of queer hope with the context of Belarusian queer activism and analyze the desire to destabilize the existing hegemonic sexual and gender order. The author resorts to moving away from traditional gender studies regarding melancholy and depression to focus on the future and new visions. He claims that queer hope refutes the repressive present, homosexuals are increasingly insistently formulating their dreams and demanding a better future. They refuse to leave the public space. Their resilience becomes the source from which hope springs. This is what we can see as the root cause and global consequence of the activities of Belarusian activists. Hope becomes a central concept and tool for the survival of queer people, as well as for creating a community with similar needs and interests (both personal and political). It is through it that, for the most part, queer identity is formed as a collective concept in the Belarusian environment. As a result, I need to pay attention to the formation of queer solidarity in Belarus as a post-Soviet country. The work of Katharina Wiedlack, Olenka Dmytryk, and Syaivot "Introduction to Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts on/from a Post-Soviet Perspective"⁴¹ helps me in this. The authors discuss solidarity as the basis of queer and feminist unions, overcoming the boundaries of Eastern and Western approaches (in the dichotomy of which is post-Soviet Eastern Europe). They avoid the pitfalls of Western superiority or anti-Western sentiment. Presenting in more detail the concept of queer solidarity as working together, they are looking for ways of egalitarian mutual support that overcomes national and cultural restrictions. Examining solidarity from the perspectives of both emotional connections and collaborative effort allows us to perceive the exploration of emotions, sentiments, and motivations as integral components of the collective endeavor that solidarity embodies. This collaborative effort must be inclusive and mindful of hegemonic

⁴⁰ Yener Bayramoğlu, 'Remembering Hope: Mediated Queer Futurity and Counterpublics in Turkey's Authoritarian Times', *New Perspectives on Turkey* 64 (May 2021): 173–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2021.14>.

⁴¹ 'Introduction to Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts on/from a Post-Soviet Perspective', *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, no. 5 (15 December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.52323/567892>.

influences. Moreover, this collaborative work must acknowledge the prevailing power dynamics. My interviewees, akin to myself, envision overcoming the challenges within the current landscape of Belarusian queer activism through this type of solidarity—mutual support and sustainability.

Chapter 1. Repressions and Resistance in Queer Belarus

Introduction

In a world where human rights and freedoms are often put to the test, the study of homophobia and its manifestations in various countries is of particular importance. In Belarus, as in several other countries, homophobia acts not only as a social phenomenon but also as an important tool of state policy. This Chapter will examine how homophobia in Belarus has been used and continues to be used to manipulate public opinion, strengthen political power, and suppress the opposition. This manifests itself in various forms, ranging from legislative initiatives to propaganda campaigns that reinforce stereotypes and prejudices among the population.

Government rhetoric directed against the LGBTQ+ community plays a huge role in shaping public opinion. Propaganda disseminated through state media creates an image of queer people as threats to traditional values and public order. This rhetoric not only justifies repression against the LGBTQ+ community but is also used to distract attention from other socio-political issues such as the economic crisis or political repression.

State structures, which are an example of a hetero-patriarchal system and traditional values, actively suppressed the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Traditional values such as family and patriotism became the basis of state ideology, which allowed the authorities to manipulate public opinion and justify repression.

Homophobia is becoming a powerful tool for suppressing political and social activism. Law enforcement agencies, using homophobic rhetoric, use violence and intimidation against LGBTQ+ activists and political opponents. This creates an atmosphere of fear and suppression, discouraging any form of resistance and activism.

Nevertheless, queer activism has been actively developing even in such unfavorable conditions since the early 90s. This chapter explores the stages of development, consolidation, and survival of the queer community in the conditions of individual crises. The study of these waves of queer activism allows us to understand better the dynamics of the struggle for the rights of LGBT+ people in Belarus and identify the most effective strategies and methods of activism in conditions of political repression.

Governmental and social homophobia as state ideology

Homophobia exists in various forms across many countries; however, in some states, it becomes part of the governmental ideology and social policy. Belarus is one such country where homophobia is actively supported at the state level and permeates social structures. This part of

the chapter examines the phenomenon of homophobia in Belarus as a tool of state control and ideological influence on the population.

Historically, the post-Soviet space is characterized by deep traditional and religious views, creating a fertile ground for the development of homophobic sentiments. In Belarus, these sentiments are reinforced and amplified by state rhetoric, leading to the marginalization and discrimination of the LGBT+ community. State homophobia manifests through legislative acts, official statements, and actions of the authorities, as well as through control over mass media and educational institutions.

Social homophobia in Belarus is closely linked to state homophobia, as the country's population is significantly influenced⁴² by state media and ideological directives. As a result, a vicious circle is created, where homophobic sentiments are supported and amplified both from above, through governmental institutions, and from below, through social institutions and networks.

Homophobia has been growing for a long time in all spheres of society. The homophobia of government agencies began to have a systematic character already in the early 2000s. Before 2020, the patriarchal system of the state in Belarus also played a role in increasing homophobia and other forms of discrimination. Government structures based on the ideology of male dominance and the preservation of the status quo and traditional values not only supported norms and stereotypes that suppress LGBTQ+ rights but also actively used them as a tool of control and suppression in society. In Belarus, traditional values are imposed⁴³ by outside influences, particularly Russia, and become the focus of attention of the state ideology. Many officials, like Lukashenko, declare⁴⁴ the need to abolish childfree ideology, feminism and queer culture.

As a powerful tool of repression, homophobia aggravated a broader atmosphere of fear and control. Law enforcement agencies, with the implicit or explicit approval of the government, resort to targeted violence and intimidation against LGBTQ+ representatives. The deliberate use of homophobic overtones⁴⁵ during the mistreatment of political prisoners sends a

⁴² “‘It’s the same scam.’ The media expert told how propaganda has changed in the last two years and why it works’, news.zerkalo, 7 May 2022, <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/13854.html>.

⁴³ Irina Sidorskaya, ‘Belarusian state propaganda on guard of “traditional values”’, 11 May 2023, <https://mediaiq.info/belaruskaya-gospropaganda-na-strazhe-tradicionnyh-cennostej-chast-2-kakie-cennosti-tradicionnye>.

⁴⁴ ‘In Belarus, the state proposed to punish for propaganda of refusal to have children’, RBC, 19 February 2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/02/2024/65d39c4d9a7947da1a92aca2>.

⁴⁵ ‘Torture of LGBTQ+ people and the regime’s homophobic policies’ (The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus co-authored a Legal initiative., 2023), 13, https://torturesbelarus2020.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/report_lgbtq_ru.pdf.

frightening signal not only to those directly concerned but also to the entire Belarusian community. These tactics aim to sow fear by discouraging any form of dissent or activism among this marginalized group. Presenting individuals as LGBTQ+ without their consent through public disclosure, especially in the context of politically motivated detentions, serves as a powerful weapon of humiliation and degradation. By exposing individuals to public prejudice and discrimination, the authorities exploit the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ individuals, exposing them to additional risks in the prison system and society as a whole. Guards and non-political prisoners treat queer detainees inappropriately and disrespectfully, they are the lowest caste in the prison hierarchy. The proposed law banning LGBTQ+ propaganda promotes the criminalization of LGBTQ+ identities. Those who violate social gender standards are particularly vulnerable to violence in prison. In May 2019, the story⁴⁶ of the torture of a gay man by police officers, which occurred in September 2017, became public. The facts of arbitrary detention of visitors to LGBT events, as well as indications of profiling based on sexual orientation, are of serious concern⁴⁷.

Moreover, the queer activism existing in Belarus is complicated not only by the homophobia of the state at the level of values. Currently, a law on administrative responsibility for propaganda of non-traditional relations⁴⁸ is being developed in Belarus, mirroring the Russian law⁴⁹, on the initiative of the Prosecutor General's Office. This was announced at a press conference on September 12, 2020, by the senior prosecutor of the Department for Supervision of Compliance with legislation on minors and youth of the Prosecutor General's Office. The Office equates pedophilia, homosexuality, trans transition, and childfree people. The Prosecutor General's Office emphasizes that its initiatives are supported by Alexander Lukashenko, and clarifies what these initiatives are: "on working out issues related to strengthening parental responsibility; determining administrative responsibility for promoting non-traditional sexual relations, sex change, pedophilia and childfree ideology; introducing a compulsory course on the topic of sex education of children and youth into the educational process; strengthening control over previously convicted persons, including through the use of

⁴⁶ 'Overview of the Situation with the Prohibition of Torture in Belarus. Homophobic Torture and Ill-Treatment of a Detainee', n.d., <https://police-barometer.ru/belarus-2019>.

⁴⁷ Alexandra Dynko, 'The Guy Served 3 Days after the Raid at the Club, Which Is Visited by LGBT People. He Doesn't Understand Why', 23 July 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29385334.html>.

⁴⁸ <https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-belarusi-gotovyat-zakon-chtoby-nakazyvat-za-propagandu-lgbt-i-chayldfri>

⁴⁹ Alexander Kondakov, 'The Influence of the "Gay-Propaganda" Law on Violence against LGBTIQ People in Russia: Evidence from Criminal Court Rulings', *European Journal of Criminology* 18, no. 6 (November 2021): 940–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819887511>.

electronic bracelets, as well as chemical castration."⁵⁰

Such legislation not only creates an environment in which LGBTQ+ membership is stigmatized and viewed as a threat but also provides authorities with a legal basis for suppressing and discriminating against individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This legal framework provides a semblance of legitimacy to State-sponsored homophobia and violence.

The use of homophobia as a tool of repression also serves as a distraction tactic to divert attention from political disagreements. By appointing scapegoats and marginalizing the LGBTQ+ community, the authorities are trying to distract the public from the main problems and consolidate power. Following the example of Russia, they shifted the focus not only from the economic crisis and international sanctions but also spread the idea that all problems in society will end as soon as victory over LGBTQ+ is won. They also try to convince those who have stayed in the country that only those people who live the wrong way of life are being persecuted, and so-called normal people are safe. When in reality, of course, everyone is the target of an authoritarian dictatorial machine. This strategy of division is aimed at creating internal discord in society, diverting attention from the actions of the government, and suppressing the united opposition. When government agencies, including law enforcement agencies, exhibit homophobic behavior and intolerance, it normalizes discrimination in a broader social context. The permissiveness of the police in participating in the actions of homophobia creates a precedent for discriminatory practices in society as a whole. Such normalization inevitably leads to an increase in hate crimes and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals outside the immediate context of political repression. The transformation of homophobia into a weapon of repression in Belarus goes beyond physical violence and covers psychological, social, and legal aspects. By systematically persecuting and marginalizing LGBTQ+ representatives, the authorities perpetuate an atmosphere of fear, silence dissent, and reinforce a discriminatory status quo that goes beyond the immediate consequences for political activists and affects the broader LGBTQ+ community.

The picture became more complicated during the 2020 revolution. Persecution begins not only of members of queer activism but also of representatives of the community. Since August 2020, over 35,000⁵¹ people have been subjected to brutal detentions, arrests, inhuman conditions of detention, and torture of varying severity. People who were politically active and engaged in LGBTQ+ policy activities were usually subjected to particularly harsh treatment in

⁵⁰ <https://euroradio.fm/ru/genprokuratura-soobschaet-chto-dlya-pedofilov-vvedut-khimicheskuyu-kastratsiyu>

⁵¹ <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru#list>

detention facilities⁵². But the situation has worsened with the beginning of the 2020 revolution in Belarus. Torture and violence with homophobic overtones of political prisoners in jails have become especially cruel⁵³. Videos⁵⁴ with outings (public disclosure of information about a person's belonging to the LGBT community without consent⁵⁵) of politically motivated detainees (including young people) are becoming systemic⁵⁶.

In February 2023, Journalists for Tolerance (J4T) published its periodic report monitoring hate speech in 2022 in Belarus. J4T found that every second piece of media coverage on LGBTQ+ people amounted to hate speech. The following report, covering January to October 2023, found that 46% of LGBTQ+ stories contained hate speech, 2% more than in 2022⁵⁷. A joint report by the International Committee to Investigate Torture in Belarus and the Human Rights Centre “Viasna”, published in May, documents that LGBTQ+ detainees continue to be subjected to severe beatings, rape, threats of rape against them and their family members, humiliation, harassment, and verbal insults. Clothing, hair color, length, and painted nails have been grounds for torture and violence. A former trans detainee, for instance, recalled guards saying “Let’s take him out into the yard and shoot him”⁵⁸. The social environment is also quite pessimistic. According to the latest research “Research on Stigmatization of LGBTQ+ People in Belarusian Society”, we can see that 59.5% of respondents believe that LGBTQ+ people live in Belarus under social pressure, and 62% of respondents believe that LGBTQ+ people are under state pressure⁵⁹. Queer people are experiencing repression not only from the state but also from society. Moreover, both from pro-government segments of the population and from opposition democratic movements.

ILGA-Europe notes in its latest report “Rainbow Map & Index” that Belarus ranks 45th

⁵² Marina Henrikson, ‘The Protests in Belarus and the Future of the Country’s LGBTQ+ Community’, *THE PROTESTS IN BELARUS AND THE FUTURE OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY*, 22 April 2021, Baltic World edition, <https://balticworlds.com/the-protests-in-belarus-and-the-future-of-the-lgbtq-community/>.

⁵³ ‘The UN Report Testifies to Mass Repressions in Belarus in August 2020’, 17 March 2022, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/03/1420122>.

⁵⁴ *Confession of Artyom Boyarsky’s Crime* (Azarenok. STV, 2021), https://t.me/Azarenok_TV/1160.

⁵⁵ Larry P. Gross, *Contested Closets: The Politics and Ethics of Outing* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ Evgenia Dolgaya, ‘How the Belarusian Authorities Use Homophobia for Repression’, 16 November 2021, <https://zaborona.com/ru/kak-belaruskie-vlasti-ispolzuyut-gomofobiyu-dlya-repressij/>.

⁵⁷ ‘Monitoring of the Hate Speech against LGBTQ+ in the Media of Belarus in 2022’, *J4t* (blog), 4 February 2023, <https://j4t.info/en/2023/02/04/monitoring-of-the-hate-speech-against-lgbtq-in-the-media-of-belarus-in-2022/>.

⁵⁸ ‘Torture of LGBTQ+ people and the regime’s homophobic policies’.

⁵⁹ Media Initiative ‘Heta Okey’, ‘Research on Stigmatization of LGBTQ+ People in Belarusian Society’ (Media Initiative ‘Heta Okey’, 2023), 6, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PDn8ZrjXzaSjE0TqMw6IVd7YkWXdpZCB/view?usp=embed_facebook.

out of 49 European countries on the homophobia index⁶⁰. They also note that information about events in the country is very difficult to access, as a result of increasing repression against civil society. There is no official public information available about LGBT rights and communities. While activists and organizations fighting for equality continue to collect evidence, they face significant risks to their safety and freedom. Also, very few people from the activist community are currently in the country, which makes access to information more difficult.

All this gives us an understanding of why police permissiveness correlates with increased discrimination based on sexual and gender identity in society. In the spirit of the feminicidal state that Hawksworth describes⁶¹, the state is responsible not only for what it has committed but also for condoning violence committed by others, in this case, homophobia. Nevertheless, let's analyze how sexual violence by the police has become an instrument of state repression against its citizens.

In my opinion, it was a control that was the main driving mechanism in the implementation of homophobic violence and torture by law enforcement agencies in prisons. According to Melanie Richter-Monpeti, various forms of torture are a way to regain control⁶². As history and experience show, as soon as the state lost control, it immediately began more sophisticated torture, as happened on August 9-12, 2020. The administration realized that the 80% figure in Lukashenko's elections was no longer satisfactory for society, people were ready to resist and were not ready to compromise. It was on those three nights that a high percentage of physical and sexualized violence occurred. We can find confirmation in the Human Rights Watch report of beatings, prolonged stress positions, electric shocks, and in at least one case, rape, and witness statements that described other detainees suffering similar or worse abuse. The detained had serious injuries, including broken bones, cracked teeth, skin wounds, electrical burns, and mild traumatic brain injuries.

“The sweeping brutality of the crackdown shows the lengths to which the Belarusian authorities will go to silence people, but tens of thousands of peaceful protesters continue to demand fair elections and justice for abuses,” said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia

⁶⁰ ILGA-Europe's Annual Review Team, 'Annual Review 2024 Of The Human Rights Situation Of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans And Intersex People In Europe And Central Asia' (ILGA-Europe, n.d.), 38, https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/02/2024_full_annual_review.pdf.

⁶¹ Mary Hawkesworth, 'Visibility Politics: Theorizing Racialized Gendering, Homosociality, and the Feminicidal State', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 2 (January 2020): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1086/704986>.

⁶² Melanie Richter-Montpetit, 'Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner "Abuse" in Abu Ghraib and the Question of "Gender Equality"', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2007): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740601066366>.

director at Human Rights Watch⁶³. Sexualized violence against both men and women were carried out because of the hetero-patriarchal association of the penetrated body as passive, and the penetrating body as masculine⁶⁴. At the same time, rape was not an exception to the rule, but a popular systematic weapon. The police acted according to the scorched earth tactics, taking into account the possible loss in the political race. As Maria Eriksson Boaz and Maria Stern describe, the legacy of mass rape tactics is destroying civilian lives and livelihoods, destroying social structure and prospects for lasting peace⁶⁵. The police did this not only because of permissiveness, which is confirmed by the words “lawlessness allows criminals to act with impunity and leaves survivors with virtually no legal remedies”⁶⁶, but also because of the desire to eradicate the hope of citizens for a positive outcome of the revolution. It is a weapon of morale suppression. For example, such sexualized violence is a special weapon in a militarized conflict⁶⁷. It meets all its goals:

1. It promotes ethnic cleansing by increasing the incentive to flee: Since one of the reasons for the revolution was the desire of the Lukashenko administration to include Belarusians in the so-called Russian world with the suppression of the Belarusian national identity, it became unsafe to identify oneself as a Belarusian. Currently, people are imprisoned for using the Belarusian language, historical national symbols, celebrating traditional holidays, and so on.

2. This demoralizes the opponent. Every time access to information was blocked, there were brutal purges, violence and rapes. The State blocked access to the Internet and used censorship and manipulation in the media to create the illusion of the futility of protests⁶⁸. After such days, photos of beatings and mutilated people appeared⁶⁹. The facts of sexualized violence were particularly striking. The riot police used this as a method of frightening.

3. This signals the intention to split society. Despite the irrefutable facts about sexualized violence, many people did not want to believe that military forces could carry out such terror

⁶³ Tanya Lokshina, ‘Belarus: Systematic Beatings, Torture of Protesters’ (OSCE, UN Human Rights Council Inquiries Needed, 15 September 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>.

⁶⁴ Richter-Montpetit, ‘Empire, Desire and Violence’, 46.

⁶⁵ Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond*, Africa Now (London ; New York, NY : Uppsala, Sweden: Zed Books ; Nordic Africa Institute, 2013), 45.

⁶⁶ ‘Stoprapenow’ (UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2007), 3, https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/wps/StopRapeNow_Brochure.pdf.

⁶⁷ Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, 48.

⁶⁸ Author Not Specified, *Belarus Protests : Information Control and Technological Censorship vs Connected Societies*, Belarus Protests (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020).

⁶⁹ Focht E., Pushkarskaya A., Chizh O., “‘If you die, we don’t care.’ How detainees are bullied in Belarus’, BBC News Russian, 14 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53773443>.

against the citizens of their country. The pro-government part of the population decided that all this was Photoshop, which of course is a mixture of propaganda and psychological defense - denial, to not recognize the fact that their ideology was wrong.

4. It causes injury and contributes to the psychological damage of the opposite party. As a result of demoralization and the lack of winnings in the process of revolution, people begin to burn out, and the protesters lose hope. Sexualized violence is becoming too big of a price that society is willing to pay to win the Revolution.

5. This gives psychological advantages to criminals, and not only physical (in the form of weapons and equipment). Riot police became not just people with guns, but a figure of power, violence, rape, and repression. After the protests, many citizens have PTSD. The most terrible thing was not even just violence, but dehumanization using sexualized torture.

All this proves that the sexual violence of the authorities against protesters during the Belarusian revolution is not accidental. Also, these crimes are not only not accidental, but they are also identified as hate crimes. For example, Chakraborti and Garland understand hate crimes as “acts of violence, hostility, and intimidation directed towards people because of their identity or perceived ‘difference’”⁷⁰. And since homophobia in Belarus (in particular from government agencies) is directed against a specific identity (in this case, queer identity) and the opposition of us/them in the context of hetero- and homo-orientation has a clear place to be, I can say that the violence described above is not random, it is targeted. First, hate crimes have a symbolic focus when they are committed. Second, they are often defined as crimes with a public message at the time of commission. In the moment of violence, the perpetrator sends a message to both the victim and their community⁷¹. The target, then, is not the victim, but rather his or her community— “others like him or her”. Hate crime, according to Perry: “Involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed toward already stigmatized and marginalized groups. As such, it is a mechanism of power and oppression, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterize a given social order. It attempts to re-create simultaneously the threatened (real or imagined) hegemony of the perpetrator’s group and the ‘appropriate’ subordinate identity of the victim’s group”⁷².

Also, if we talk about a specific example of confirmation of hierarchy and evidence of power, the Belarusian government uses homophobia as a separate tool of repression, which

⁷⁰ Chakraborti and Garland, *Hate Crime*, 5.

⁷¹ Jennifer Schweppe, ‘What Is a Hate Crime?’, ed. Kar-wai Tong, *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (1 January 2021): 1902643, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1902643>.

⁷² Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 10.

distinguishes it from general violence in several critical ways. First, unlike random acts of violence, state-sponsored homophobia enjoys implicit or explicit approval from government agencies. This gives legitimacy to discriminatory practices and promotes a culture of impunity where criminals feel emboldened to attack LGBTQ+ individuals without fear of consequences. Secondly, homophobia in Belarus goes beyond individual incidents and is part of a broader strategy to suppress dissent and marginalize minority groups. By systematically targeting LGBTQ+ people, the government strengthens the social hierarchy and exercises control over the population. Finally, the persecution of the LGBTQ+ community in Belarus is associated not only with the manifestation of power but also with deep-rooted hatred and prejudice. LGBTQ+ people are unfairly scapegoated for social ills and portrayed as a threat to traditional values, exacerbating existing divisions within society.

We can see that the Belarusian government uses homophobia as a separate cruel method of repression, which reproduces hierarchy among both the democratic population and the queer community. LGBTQ+ people are becoming the lowest rung of the social ladder, suffering both from state violence and lack of public support. As we can see, queer people, and especially queer activists in Belarus, are in an even more disadvantaged position than heteronormative citizens.

Waves of Belarusian queer activism and corresponding resistance tools

In response to the oppression described above, Belarusian queer activism has gone through several significant waves, each of which was marked by specific instruments of fighting for their rights and resisting repression by the state and society. With each wave, the forms and methods of activism changed, the queer community adapted to new challenges, and various strategies were used to protect queer rights and freedoms under a repressive regime. These responses played a key role in the formation and development of the movement, influencing its strategy, goals, and ways of interacting with the outside world.

During my interviews, I talked with representatives of various age groups who participated in different waves of queer activism. In these 27 discussions, the majority of the participants identified different stages in the queer activism movement describing different features, which allowed me to establish the 3 waves of Belarusian queer activism, as well as analyze their characteristics and tools for fighting for their rights.

For clarity and convenience of readers, I have depicted a timeline of important events, waves, and periods that have occurred since the collapse of the USSR and ending today. Figure 1 presents the "Timeline of Modern Belarusian queer history"

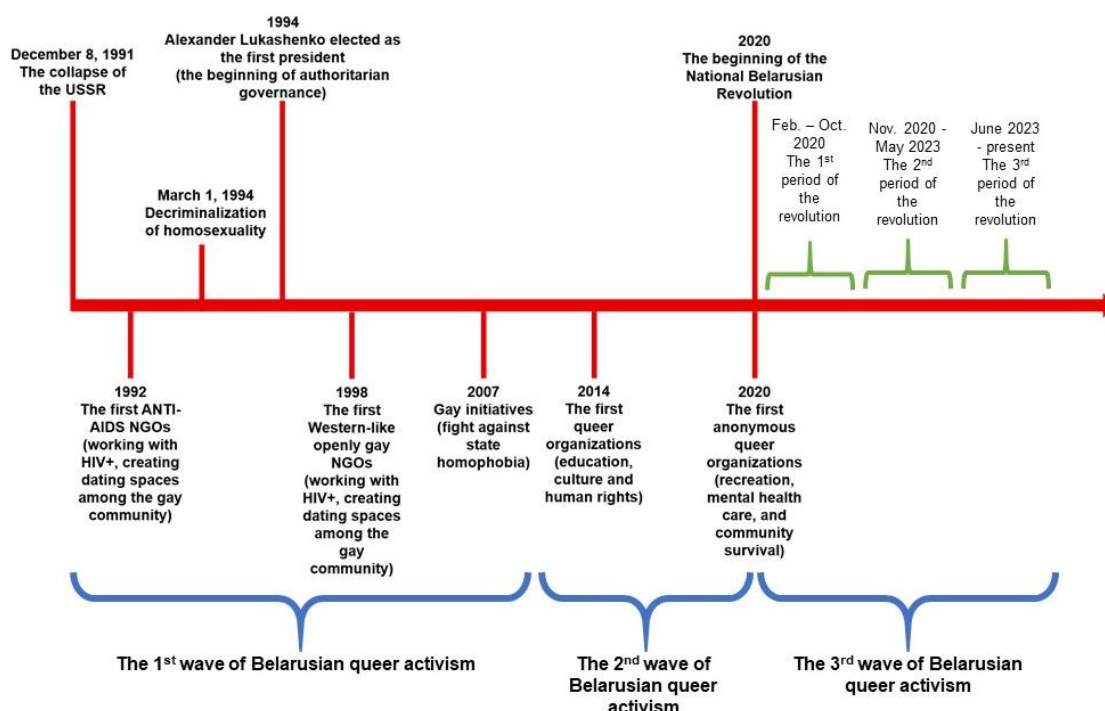


Figure 1 "Timeline of modern Belarusian queer history"

Waves of Belarusian queer activism:

1. Activism of persons. This era began with the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s and lasted until 2014. During this wave, LGBTQ+ activism was carried out at the expense of individual famous people and their teams. For example, In 1998, Edward Tarletsky founded the Belarusian League of Sexual Minorities (LAMBDA), and in 2007, Sergei Androsenko established the Gay Belarus initiative. At that time, the initiatives were working with men who have sex with men on the topic of HIV⁷³, as well as creating opportunities for romantic acquaintances among representatives of the LGBT community. By analogy with Western NGOs, the organizations created printed publications, organized LGBT youth and lesbian conferences, and held gay prides and festivals, the purpose of which was to find a common vision of the Belarusian reality. Also, at the end of the 2000s, the movement focuses on the human rights agenda, and the defense of gay rights begins. At the same time, the number of hate crimes that the police refused to investigate has increased, which symbolizes the beginning of a homophobic state ideology in Belarus.

The main figures of this movement were charismatic speakers and cultural figures who emigrated from Belarus in the late 2000s due to political repression. Since these were predominantly only openly cisgender gay people in great power, this formed a certain

⁷³ Uladzimir Valodzin, 'Queer History of Belarus in the Second Half of the 20th Century: A Preliminary Study' (Minsk, 2016), 46, https://belarusianqueerstory.noblogs.org/files/2016/10/queer_history.pdf.

hierarchy within the community, repeating heteronormative patriarchal systems. Also, the problem with this wave turned out to be that due to the representation of only certain individuals in the media, the remaining members of the organizations could not prove their need for political shelters in other countries, which is why they were subjected to constant pressure from government systems.

2. Activism of organizations. The second wave began in 2014 and continued until the beginning of the 2020 Revolution. It is characterized by the activity of teams and an emphasis on educational and cultural events, as well as systematic work on legal issues. At this time, several large organizations were being formed, the names of which were well-known to the public. They took over the main activist functions throughout the country. The main focus of the initiatives has shifted from the gay agenda to queer rights and development. There were many regular educational and art events, the first magazine about gender and sexuality was opened, and international queer culture and film festivals were held for several years in a row. Human rights activities were aimed at combating racism, xenophobia, intolerance, and discrimination. The organizations recorded hate crimes, transmitted statistics to European investigative committees, and worked with queer victims of police violence and harassment. Information materials were compiled about fake dates⁷⁴, police violent raids in gay clubs⁷⁵, and forced outings⁷⁶. After several years of the organizations' activity, young generations of socially involved people began to join, as well as create their own initiative groups. The organization of rather large educational and cultural events in the regional cities of Belarus has become an innovation. Before that, almost all queer festivals and events were held exclusively in the capital of Belarus – Minsk. Nevertheless, despite the team style of activism, the organizations did not overlap in their activities and did not create associations. Because of this, it was difficult to transfer knowledge to each other, as well as to form an independent stable community with its own structure and functional units.

⁷⁴ A situation where Interior Ministry employees invite gays on dates under the guise of ordinary users of dating sites, and then persecute and impute criminal articles on the topic of "distribution of pornography" or "pedophilia".

'A date with a policeman: how gay people are bullied in Belarus', BBC News Russian, 24 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/media-55059877>.

⁷⁵ Will Stroude, 'Gay Men Reportedly Being Detained in Belarus after Police Raid Clubs', Attitude, 26 October 2017, <https://www.attitude.co.uk/news/world/gay-men-reportedly-being-detained-in-belarus-after-police-raid-clubs-294161/>.

⁷⁶ Julia Lyashkevich, 'Orientation is Belarusian. How to respond to outing?', dw.com, 15 December 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/orientacia-belorus-kak-reagirovat-na-prinuditelnyj-auting/a-60119960>.

The situation changed only during the preparations for the first march of the queer column⁷⁷ during the Belarusian National Revolution in 2020. Thus, began the transition to the third wave of queer activism. People were able to forget about personal grievances and prejudices and unite for a common goal - to make the queer community visible and representative in Belarus. Nevertheless, due to state repression, many Belarusian queer projects ended their activity or went underground, which for the first time raised the issue of copyrights and the separation of personal and public. The educational and cultural materials and developments of many organizations have been removed from public access and have become unavailable. Due to the common fear, queer people began to hide from the public, which led to the segregation of the activist field: some became even more public and privileged, while others went underground and did not receive any support from grant-givers or society. The issue of the late 2000s somehow repeated itself, which I associate with the problem of the lack of transfer of the expertise of activism, as well as with the lack of reflection on problems, mistakes, and risks.

3. Activism of anonymity. During this period of the early 2020s, we are moving to the third wave of Belarusian queer activism. Its main features are the anonymity of both individuals and organizations, as well as a direct focus on supporting the community both in Belarus and abroad. Now all events and projects are organized underground, a word of mouth is used for more secure data transmission. Events are not publicly available. Outside of Belarus, it may seem that the life of queer activism has completely stopped, but interviewees who remain inside the country talked about secret big parties that are developing very actively now, and recreational events are the most popular. As I said earlier, most of the activist field has emotional burnout, characterized by the emotion of despair. That is why it is now so important for the community to focus not on cultural and educational activities, but on maintaining the existence of the community itself as a whole. Also, in the answer to the question "What tools of queer activism do you consider the most significant in working in Belarus, in totalitarian countries?" all respondents focused their attention on survival as a political form of resistance. Of course, this period has its disadvantages.

Firstly, as I said earlier, the number of educational events has decreased several times because of the small need of the population for this, which means there is a rollback in ethical communication, knowledge transfer, etc. Secondly, due to anonymity and lack of information

⁷⁷ Tatiana Nevedomskaya, 'Under the rainbow flag against Lukashenko: LGBT protests', dw.com, accessed 23 May 2024, <https://www.dw.com/ru/pod-raduzhnym-flagom-protiv-lukashenko-lgbt-soobshhestvo-i-protesty/a-57215607>.

about events in the media, there is limited access to participants, almost everything, as far as I know, is held only in Minsk, which is why regional queer people remain not involved in the activities. Thirdly, in my opinion, the biggest problem is the lack of knowledge transfer among generations of activists. Above, I described the indispensability of the LGBTQ+ activist field due to the reason for hiding a large amount of accumulated information. Also, many new associations do not make enough efforts to find old developments, they are trying to reinvent the wheel. Many make mistakes of their predecessors or pretend to be the first in Belarus..., which is not a sustainable strategy for development and existence. However, in my opinion, this is all excusable, since by doing so, among other things, they protect themselves from the fact that law enforcement state bodies found out about their existence. We use the phrase "not visible outside of Belarus – not visible to the cops in Belarus". Currently, this is the main principle of the work of queer activists in Belarus: "it's kind of scary to do something big and noticeable because it's automatically noticeable both to people who show personal interest and to people who can repress you. Therefore, when control is total, people just need a place where they can survive, and not be killed". Their work helps maintain the community's existence and survival: "that is, activism continues with the growth of repression, but it has changed. We have reoriented the funds that we had. That is, we used to have a vector for some educational events, and then we realized that no one wants to be educated now, it's already too late. So, we switched to resource support and made psychological meetings and support groups to be held. They are still being conducted. Because it has not gotten better, as we know, and people are still in Belarus, and they need to survive somehow"⁷⁸. It is also important to note that some are engaged in activism outside Belarus, but for its citizens both inside and outside the country. Most often, these are educational and cultural events online, which are carried out by people from the previous generation of activists (to whom I refer myself). It is we who undertake the function of knowledge transfer and the organization of statistical research for the best advocacy of the position of queer Belarusians in the world.

But representatives of the modern wave of queer activism who are currently in Belarus were also part of my sample. They talked about feeling constantly isolated. Lack of opportunities for knowledge sharing and systematic communication with the activists who left. This happens because some cannot return to Belarus, and others because of the difficulty of obtaining visas, as well as the danger of crossing borders. This further strengthens the segregation of the Belarusian LGBTQ+ community. It is crucial to focus on this issue and

⁷⁸ K. A., interview by author, 15.07.2023

utilize all available means to ensure the sustainable transfer of knowledge and recreational mechanisms. This should be done not only vertically (from second-wave activists to the third) but also in reverse, fostering horizontality and a sense of inclusion in the community's development and survival.

As can be seen from the description of the third wave of activism, we can say that at present, after a lull and powerlessness, the queer movement has begun to resume its activities quite actively both in Belarus and abroad. I associate this with political hope, which we will talk about in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of homophobia and queer activism in Belarus shows a complex relationship between state repression, public attitudes, and the sustainability of the LGBTQ+ community. Homophobia, actively promoted by the government as a tool of control and manipulation, serves to reinforce traditional values and distract from pressing socio-political issues. It permeates various aspects of society, from legislative acts to law enforcement practices, creating an environment of fear and discrimination.

Despite these challenges, queer activism in Belarus has persisted through multiple waves, each characterized by distinct strategies and responses to repression. From individual efforts to organized movements, activists have sought to raise awareness, advocate for rights, and provide support to the community. However, the landscape of activism has evolved in response to changing political dynamics, with recent waves emphasizing anonymity and survival in the face of increased repression.

The current wave of queer activism underscores the importance of solidarity and resilience in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Belarus. Despite the risks and obstacles, activists continue to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society, both within the country and on the international stage.

Chapter 2. The growth of national and queer identities during the events of 2020

Introduction

The year 2020 was a turning point in the history of Belarus, as the country witnessed unprecedented protests, political upheaval, and a profound revision of collective identity. Against the background of the falsified presidential elections, which were officially recognized⁷⁹ as fraudulent by various international organizations, Belarusians took to the streets with mass demonstrations, demanding democratic reforms and calling for an end to the authoritarian rule of Alexander Lukashenko. At the midpoint of this historic movement, the growth of national and queer identity became a central theme, reflecting the complex interplay between political activism, social dynamics, and cultural expression.

The 2020 protests served as a powerful catalyst for the revival and redefinition of national identity in Belarus. When citizens from all walks of life united to challenge the regime, a new sense of patriotism and solidarity swept the country, overcoming traditional class, ethnic, and ideological differences. Images of the iconic white-red-white national flag, which has become a symbol of the protest movement against the Belarusian autocracy, proudly waving amid a sea of protesters, have become a symbol of the people's unwavering commitment to freedom, democracy, and national sovereignty. The protests have become a symbol of the collective desire of Belarusians for a bright future based on the principles of justice, equality, and self-determination.

However, along with the revival of national identity, the events of 2020 also shed light on the struggles and aspirations of the LGBTQ+ communities in Belarus. As the protest movement gained momentum, the voices of LGBTQ+ people became more visible and louder, challenging rooted social norms and advocating for recognition, equality, and inclusion in the broader struggle for social justice. LGBTQ+ activists and their allies joined the ranks of the protesters, marching side by side with their compatriots, demanding not only political change but also social transformation. Queer Belarusians have ceased to be invisible to a hetero-patriarchal community.

The growth of national and queer identity during the events of 2020 in Belarus reflects the complex and evolving nature of identity formation in times of crisis and resistance. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the intersecting dynamics of political mobilization, cultural expression, and social change, shedding light on the narratives, experiences, and aspirations of individuals and communities involved in these movements. By delving into the realities of the

⁷⁹ U. S. Mission OSCE, 'On the Anniversary of the Fraudulent Election in Belarus', U.S. Mission to the OSCE, 8 September 2023, <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-the-anniversary-of-the-fraudulent-election-in-belarus/>.

life of queer Belarusians in this historical period, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of identities and their role in shaping history, culture, and the social foundation of solidarity, hope, and resistance.

Revolution and hope as driving mechanisms for the development and growth of identities

The intersection of revolution and hope provides a compelling reason to explore the development and growth of identity, especially in marginalized communities. In various socio-political contexts, revolution often arises as a reaction to systemic oppression and injustice, fueled by collective hope for a better future. This dynamic interaction between national revolution and hope shapes the trajectories of individual and collective identity, catalyzing transformational processes that challenge existing power structures and redefine societal norms.

In this chapter, I explore the profound impact of the 2020 revolution and the hopes of queer activists on the formation and evolution of identities in a totalitarian regime. Through the prism of queer activism in contexts such as Belarus, where authoritarianism reigns and state-sponsored homophobia is widespread, I want to show how revolution and hope become the driving mechanisms of identity development. During my interviews, most of the participants categorized hope as the most stable driving mechanism during the protests. Because, according to the participants in my study, hope was the only permanent feeling, unlike fear, disappointment, burnout, and other negative emotions that were fluctuating and temporary. In this Chapter, we will look at how hope influenced the formation of national and queer identities and also allowed them to intersect with each other.

A revolution characterized by upheaval and resistance to repressive systems is a catalyst for change, inspiring people to challenge entrenched norms and truly assert their identity. The pursuit of liberation and equality puts marginalized communities at the forefront of social movements, where hope serves as a beacon of opportunity. Taking as a basis the concept of hope by Erich Fromm⁸⁰ and considering the revolution not only as a change in the political system in the country but as a metamorphosis within each person and the humanization of the community, this powerful feeling embodies resilience and determination, encouraging people to imagine and strive for a future in which their identity will not be discriminated against. It raises activism and solidarity in communities that refuse to be silenced or marginalized.

Through the stories and experiences of queer activists in totalitarian regimes, we learn how revolution and hope intersect, forming an identity. From underground support networks to acts

⁸⁰ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*.

of resistance to State oppression, people overcome the difficulties of forming an identity in a hostile environment, drawing strength from the collective pursuit of justice and equality.

Belarusiness and revolution

In this chapter, I explore the concept of Belarusiness (national identity) in Belarus, examining its complexities and nuances. I argue that national identity is shaped by various factors, including historical heritage, cultural characteristics, emotional connections, and material components. With the help of recent research, I demonstrate that Belarusians clearly identify themselves as part of the national community, are proud of their national identity, and show a keen interest in national issues. I emphasize the importance of emotional ties in the formation of national identity, citing the example of the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election race in Belarus, which gave rise to a sense of unity and solidarity among Belarusians. I claim that this experience of unification has become a key factor in the formation of modern Belarusian identity. Throughout this chapter, I aim to provide a detailed understanding of the complexities of national identity in Belarus, highlighting the role of various factors in shaping this complex psychological phenomenon

By revolution in this chapter, I mean both the social revolution, the struggle against autocracy, and the internal revolution of society and each individual in realizing their Belarusiness. But what does Belarusiness mean as an identity?

On the one hand, it could be defined as national identity, a person's sense of belonging to a particular state or nation⁸¹. This includes a sense of unity with the nation, defined by common traditions, culture, and language⁸². However, national identity is something much deeper than just the fact of belonging to a particular nation or ethnic group. It is a complex psychological phenomenon that includes many aspects that determine who we are and how we perceive ourselves in the context of our cultural and social affiliation. Moreover, according to Anna Triandafyllidou, "National identity is defined both through the common features of compatriots and through the difference and differentiation of a nation from other nations or ethnic groups. National identity becomes significant only through contrast with others"⁸³. That is why Belarusians define themselves not only as hardworking and multicultural but also as very

⁸¹ Richard D. Ashmore, Lee J. Jussim, and David Wilder, eds., *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity, v. 3 (Oxford [England] New York, N.Y. [USA]: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74.

⁸² Yoonmi Lee, *Modern Education, Textbooks, and the Image of the Nation*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2012), 29, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203357651>.

⁸³ Triandafyllidou, 'National Identity and the "Other"', 594.

tolerant and peace-loving, based on differences with some of their closest neighbors⁸⁴.

When we talk about national identity, we refer to the deep connections that are established between an individual and their culture, history, traditions, and language. These connections form the basis of our self-awareness and determine how we see ourselves in the world.

Of course, historical heritage plays a key role in shaping national identity, because knowing about the past of our nation or ethnic group helps us understand where we come from and what values and principles we have. The historical component is a given⁸⁵ and national identity cannot be considered separately from the experience, events, and context that establish them. Cultural characteristics also play an important role. Language, traditions, customs, cooking, music, and art are all elements that create a unique atmosphere⁸⁶ and help us feel connected to our nation or ethnic group.

However, emotional connection is also an important aspect of national identity. "It could be argued that it is the expression of the emotion (even if only before oneself) that constitutes [national identity] as such"⁸⁷. Emotions, pivotal components of social life, wield considerable influence over the construction of historical knowledge. They must be recognized as products of social and cultural contexts because we cannot directly access others' emotions; rather, we can only analyze the experiences that gave rise to them and the expressions they manifest⁸⁸. A sense of pride, attachment, and belonging creates a special emotional bond with our culture and nation, which can be enhanced through participation in social or patriotic events. Belonging to a nation involves an emotional bond wherein individuals strive for unity not just for personal gain, but also because the alternative—seclusion—is undesirable. As Mack notes, "experiencing alienation, discrediting, or rejection by a national group can be frustrating. Groups can count on a significant number of community members who value their involvement"⁸⁹. Material components serve as a form of group association, allowing people to realize their desire for involvement and affiliation. Moreover, according to Mack, there is a

⁸⁴ The University of Białystok and Larissa Titarenko, 'Belarus – a Land of Multiculturalism?', *Pogranicze. Studia Społeczne* 18 (2011): 187–94, <https://doi.org/10.15290/pss.2011.18.09>.

⁸⁵ Merrill D. Peterson, 'ASPECTS OF THE NATIONAL IDENTITY', ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Paul C. Nagel, *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 40, no. 4 (1964): 637.

⁸⁶ Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*, Reprinted (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 42.

⁸⁷ Luisa Elena Delgado, Pura Fernández, and Jo Labanyi, *La cultura de las emociones y las emociones en la cultura española contemporánea, siglos XVIII-XXI*, 1a. edición, cop. de ed. by Vanderbilt university press, 2016, Historia (Madrid: Cátedra, 2018), 12.

⁸⁸ Delfín Ortega-Sánchez, Joan Pagès Blanch, and Carlos Pérez-González, 'Emotions and Construction of National Identities in Historical Education', *Education Sciences* 10, no. 11 (6 November 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110322>.

⁸⁹ John Mack, 'Nationalism and the Self.', *Psychohistory Review*, 1983, 54.

fundamental need for personal security, which is often attained through active participation in a group. Social solidarity and a sense of mutual understanding with other members of our nation or ethnic group help us feel part of something bigger and support our sense of self. In general, it is something that is formed throughout life and remains with us as a key component of our personality.

Referring to recent research^{90,91} on Belarusian national identity, it's evident that Belarusian nationals strongly identify themselves as part of the national community: as Belarusians, citizens of the country, and patriots. According to the studies, they take pride in their national identity and show a keen interest in national issues. Symbols such as the bison, stork, lakes, and cornflowers serve to unify the nation. Additionally, there is a widespread perception of Belarusians as hardworking, kind, and hospitable people.

Despite various problems, such as fear of persecution for anti-government responses, which signal the incomplete reliability of the data, these studies are important to demonstrate how Belarusians see and differentiate themselves from the rest of the world, which will further help us to understand the uniqueness of intersections with queerness.

Below are some of the findings of the studies:

1. Regardless of their political affiliations or views on foreign policy, Belarusians share a common desire for their sovereign state, which is friendly to all peoples. This solidifies the notion that Belarusian national identity is firmly established and unlikely to be shaken by political unrest.

2. As studies continue to state, Belarusian society is inclusive, welcoming anyone who embraces Belarusian culture and loves the country, irrespective of their appearance, place of birth, or parental nationality. Culturally, Belarusians share similarities with supporters of the national-romantic project⁹², aligning to some extent with the Russian-Soviet perspective⁹³ on Belarusian identity.

3. Contrary to the people, the modern Belarusian state largely adheres to an ideology reinforcing the Russian-Soviet national project. Propaganda often seeks to stoke animosity towards perceived enemies, perpetuating hostility. Despite prevailing pro-Russian sentiments,

⁹⁰ Philipp Bikanau, Konstantin Nesterovich, “Belarusian Identity in 2023 : A Quantitative Study,” Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine / Project Belarus’.

⁹¹ Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, ‘Belarusians’ Media Consumption, Attitudes to Mobilization and Political Identities’, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-13>, November 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ed8DA3fhRtuYXwaDyoMiC7XBaW0gTaNA/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook.

⁹² Trencsényi et al., *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945)*.

⁹³ Ioffe, ‘Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity’.

only slightly more than a third of Belarusians identify as such⁹⁴. Many others remain neutral in foreign policy matters, indicating a widespread disengagement from international politics. Even those sympathetic to Russia emphasize the importance of integration on a cultural and intergovernmental level rather than advocating for political merger.

4. The desire for closer ties between Belarus and Ukraine, amidst the ongoing conflict, reflects a prevailing sentiment among Belarusians. Pro-Russian sentiments often remain superficial, driven more by ideological government adherence than genuine political alignment. This is further underscored by strong negative emotions surrounding the war, such as fear, sorrow, and anger, which resonate deeply within Belarusian society.

5. Despite the dominance of state-controlled media, the Bikanau and Nesterovich study also claims that Belarusians exhibit a notable resilience against propaganda, maintaining a critical stance towards official narratives. This resilience suggests a level of independence in thought and a resistance to external influence. These characteristics are important key links of the Belarusian national identity.

However, the authors of the study admit that there were obvious limitations when conducting the survey, in particular, the influence of the fear factor on the responses of the survey participants. This is of course explained by the fact that the Belarusian authorities have absolutely no restrictions on access to personal information. There is no confidentiality, none of the respondents can be sure that the next day the riot police will not come to them with perquisition, and they will not be imprisoned for answers that do not coincide with the ideology of the state. Also, it is very important to note that the study was conducted only within the country. This further confirms that people did not have the opportunity to express their political position honestly and without fear of being repressed. Moreover, it is worth noting that the majority of emigrated people, as well as people who are currently in prison, are the most engaged and included in the Belarusian national agenda. Continuing the researchers' thoughts about the media, it is important to note that non-state media are recognized as extremist on the territory of Belarus (491 independent media sites are located with limited access)⁹⁵, which means it is difficult for people to get information from outside, and only Belarusians who have left, for the most part, can more critically assess the real situation.

⁹⁴ Andrei Vardomatsky, 'The war in Ukraine will change the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians', *belsat.eu*, 26 April 2022, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/26-04-2022-andrej-var-domatskij-vojna-v-ukraine-izmenit-geopoliticheskie-orientatsii-belorusov>.

⁹⁵ Human Constanta, 'We Are Dealing with "Extremist" Lists: Which Sites Are Blocked in Belarus and on What Grounds', *Human Constanta* (blog), 17 February 2023, <https://humanconstantat.org/razbiraemysya-s-ekstremistskimi-spiskami-kakie-sajty-i-po-kakim-osnovaniyam-blokiruyut-v-belarusi/>.

Belarusiness, as an ethnic unit, was very blurred after the Second World War. More than a third of Belarusians have immediate ancestors of various nationalities and faiths, where at least one of the parents is from another ethnic group or nationality. Firstly, this happened because Belarus suffered huge population losses. According to various sources, between 1.6 and 3 million people were killed during the Nazi occupation⁹⁶. Consideration of the demographic situation in Belarus during the 1930s and 1940s, which saw a population of approximately 6.5 million, reveals that the post-war era was marked by underutilized territories and natural resources. This circumstance gave rise to a second factor, namely, the mass migration of individuals within the Soviet Union during the 20th century in pursuit of improved living conditions. Notably, Belarus, with its capital Minsk, possessed a more favorable economic situation compared to many regions of the Soviet Union. This demographic trend continued throughout the 1960s-1980s, with people being drawn to Belarus in search of better opportunities. The modern concept of Belarusian national identity, however, has been shaped by numerous upheavals and perturbations. Furthermore, the country's quasi-colonial status and subsequent Russification, which we discussed earlier, have significantly complicated the formation of this identity.

As described in Chapter 1, before 2020, many Belarusians did not have an active form of national understanding in its modern sense. Firstly, because many historical documents did not coincide with each other. Many children were taught one thing in schools, and the opposite was told at home. The state ideology strongly permeates educational institutions and multiplies the Soviet legacy. Secondly, the issue of the cultural code and symbols of Belarus is also not so simple. For example, the national flag and coat of arms have always been undesirable in official discourse, as they contradicted the Soviet agenda. Although in 1991 Belarus became an independent state with a red-white-red flag and the coat of arms "Chase", after coming to power, Lukashenko changed the symbols. The state is actively promoting the Soviet narrative about the red-green Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic flag and coat of arms, similar to the symbol of the USSR. Thirdly, the question of language. Due to widespread Russification, the Belarusian language has not just become a second language, it has become a symbol of ignorance and marginality. Fourth, many Belarusians simply did not have a sense of unity, as there was no single goal, idea, or even vision about who Belarusians are as a nation.

I want to show how modern Belarusian identity began to be crystalized only during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election race. The article "We Didn't

⁹⁶ YURI M. ZHUKOV, 'EXTERNAL RESOURCES AND INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE: Evidence from German-Occupied Belarus', *World Politics* 69, no. 1 (2017): 54–97.

Get Enough Sleep and Forgot to Eat”⁹⁷ describes the history of the cohesion of the Belarusian community during the COVID-19 pandemic, which formed the basis of the modern protest movement and public solidarity. Doctors faced an acute shortage of personal protective equipment and ventilators. The whole country has united to solve this problem. The NAMES website launched a telegram channel⁹⁸ where they collected requests for necessary equipment from hospitals and passed them on to those who could help with the purchase and transfer. This moment was so important because it showed the inability of the state to protect its own people or at least take minimal protective measures. People were disappointed by how devaluing Lukashenko talked⁹⁹ about deceased citizens, and then society began to consolidate to help each other.

Many believe that it was this experience of unification that formed the basis of the horizontal revolutionary movement. Drawing an analogy with the answers of my respondents during the interviews, which I will talk about in the next chapter, I can say that this horizontal solidarity movement prompted the population to feel the strength and hope for change in the run-up to the next elections. This is also confirmed in the work of Christopher J. Gerry and Core Neumann, as quoted in the book “Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy” who prove the relationship between the socioeconomic landscape and the pandemic¹⁰⁰. My arguments also match the opinion of Elena Gapova, who writes that it was the beginning of the social and state revolution that symbolized the commemoration of the modern Belarusian identity. “For the participants of the movement, this hope is associated with agency, the manifestation of one's own will and individual autonomy as the basis of collective identity and gaining recognition. In other words, by committing peaceful but public acts of resistance, the protesters became someone they wanted to be”¹⁰¹ - this is how the people began to realize their need for identification and consolidation.

⁹⁷ Editorial Board of ‘Names’, “‘We didn’t sleep enough and forgot to eat.’ #ByCovid19 volunteers about how Belarus and themselves have changed during the coronavirus’, Media Names, 30 June 2020, <https://imenamag.by/posts/bycovid19-story>.

⁹⁸ Telegram channel is a Telegram messenger tool that allows you to deliver information to subscribers.

⁹⁹ “‘The tractor will cure everyone.’ Lukashenko said that he had been ill with coronavirus’, *BBC Russian*, 28 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53570933>.

¹⁰⁰ Elena A. Korosteleva, Irina Petrova, and Anastasiia Kudlenko, eds., *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy*, Basees/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003311454>.

¹⁰¹ Elena Gapova, ‘THE BELARUSIAN CIVIL ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN REVOLUTION’, 2021, 12, <https://doi.org/10.24412/1815-0047-2021-2-75-95>.

Queerness and revolution

In the context of the 2020 Belarusian Revolution, queerness and protests intersected as LGBTQ+ people and their allies participated in a broader protest movement against authoritarianism and electoral fraud. Queer activists and organizations mobilized with other groups, emphasizing the importance of LGBTQ+ rights in the fight for democracy and human rights. Moreover, queer activists decided to defend their rights to be present in the national revolution and start talking about the problems of discrimination, violence, and marginalization, which were previously faced only by LGBTQ+, and now all social groups criticizing the state had to confront them. Queer voices within the movement emphasized the interconnectedness of the struggle for social justice and the need for solidarity between different communities.

The relationship between queerness and protests reflects the profound influence of LGBTQ+ activism on the revolutionary movement(s) and context. This is confirmed by the words of one of my respondents:

"Queer is an extremely vulnerable group, and during the protests, it was even more vulnerable, twice as much. More vulnerable because we were targets for everyone at once. But we were there anyway and showed who we are. It was as if we had several goals at once: democracy and our rights. They no longer had a chance to ignore us. They had to see us, write about us, communicate with us, respect our experience"¹⁰².

Queer activists challenge the status quo of both Lukashenko's structures and the old-school Belarusian nationalists who are in confrontation with him—opposing heteronormative norms that prescribe rigid gender roles and heterosexual identity as a social default. Another participant in my interviews told me about the battle against both the ideology of the state and the homophobia of the protesters:

"One of the times when we decided to make a queer column, we drew posters 'PATRIARCHY, YOU'RE FUCKED'. Next, we agreed with the girls only to draw posters for Saturday, for the women's march, but for Sunday, for the general march, we decided that we needed to position ourselves somehow, except for flags, and we rented huge speakers and played our playlist. First of all, of course, many in the column had complicated stories with each other, different previous experiences, and not always favorable relations, but at this moment there was such a common unity and courage on the march. And of course, we received various comments and reactions. Some looked away, some took pictures on the contrary, some women with

¹⁰² N. M., interview by author, 20.06.2023

icons came up, and we even had really nice conversations. And of course, some spoke out aggressively and tried to attack, but they were in the minority, so they probably didn't dare. In any case, on the one hand, it was always scary and even twice as scary, on the other hand, we were able to destroy these binary, patriarchal marches, and added rainbow colors!”¹⁰³

Through their principles, activists seek to break down systems of oppression and create a more inclusive space where all people can thrive, regardless of any identity. Here is one example of activist work aimed at destroying a hierarchical system:

“We have decided that we will cover everything related to the participation of queer people in the protest movement. We needed special attention, because if the LGBTQ+ group does not declare itself publicly somewhere and does not preserve the artifacts of its participation, then after the victory, this is all that we believed in, will evaporate. Well, by analogy with the Ukrainian Maidan, for example, the right-wing power usurped everything after the victory there. And the right-wingers could do it here too. Well, for me then, in 2020, activism consisted, since we were a media project, to preserve evidence and change the paradigm of the revolution to an inclusive and democratic one”¹⁰⁴.

One of the transformative aspects of LGBTQ+ activism in a revolutionary context is the emphasis on inclusivity. Queer activists recognize the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, including those based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. They advocate intersectional approaches to social change, recognizing that people face multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously. By amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and concentrating their experiences, queer activists strive to create more equal and just societies.

Moreover, LGBTQ+ activism within revolutionary movements contributes to a broader struggle for liberation and equality. By challenging heteronormativity and defending LGBTQ+ rights, queer activists are expanding the scope of revolutionary programs by promoting a more comprehensive vision of social transformation. Disassembling repressive structures and ensuring greater freedom and equality for everyone is an overriding value and goal.

I use the words of Arman Heljic, who writes about the Romani Queer Revolution, to express the importance of being represented, feeling yourself and your queer voice during the revolution: “Self-envisioning allows us to sit with the pain that injustice, misrepresentation, and othering has inflicted; it is a healing moment, in which there is calm and clarity. It is the moment

¹⁰³ O. L., interview by author, 04.06.2023

¹⁰⁴ M. L., interview by author, 30.05.2023

after anger settles down, burns out, and creative vision takes over: a moment that many of us never had, or never will the privilege of enjoying, but which we still have despite the odds. It is the moment when we ask ourselves who we want to be, who we are, and what we project on our environment. What are our talents, what/who our loves are, and what our hopes are? This, in itself, is an act of rebellion. Self-envisioning in such an oppressive system allows us to reclaim agency as a revolutionary practice”¹⁰⁵.

This manifestation of queerness in the patriarchal and homophobic environment of 2020, when queers were a double target (for both riot police and protesters), became an important moment in understanding and realizing collective and personal identity. Despite the fear and dangers, the hope for justice and an inclusive future has been captured. In the meantime, so much pride has been realized through this collective queer identity, which has never been there before. For many queer activists, it was not just a matter of visibility, but of existence in general. As one of my respondents said

“It was very important for me to join the queer column, and I am very, very glad and grateful that it turned out, that it was because now no one can tell us ‘you weren't there’”¹⁰⁶.

As queers walked along the main avenue in the queer column, carried flags, turned on their music, shouted their slogans, they were united, and no one else could say "You weren't there, now is not your time"!

Merging of Belarusianism and queerness due to the growth of repression

As already argued in the first part of this chapter, both the Belarusian national and queer identities have undergone some shocks on the way to their holistic formation as a collective modern concept.

The evolution of Belarusian national identity has been shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors. From the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Soviet period and beyond, Belarusians have grappled with questions of autonomy, language, and cultural heritage. The process of nation-building has been marked by periods of suppression, assimilation, and resistance, ultimately culminating in the emergence of a distinct Belarusian national consciousness.

Similarly, queer identities in Belarus have navigated a complex terrain fraught with challenges and barriers. In a society where traditional norms and values often prevail, LGBTQ+

¹⁰⁵ Heljic, ‘Staging the Romani Queer Revolution’, 11.

¹⁰⁶ N. B., interview by author, 15.07.2023

individuals have faced stigma, discrimination, and persecution. The journey towards self-acceptance and visibility has been fraught with hardships, yet LGBTQ+ communities have persisted in asserting their rights and identities.

Despite the distinctiveness of these two identity constructs, they share commonalities in their struggles for recognition, representation, and rights. Both the Belarusian national and queer identities have been subject to external influences and internal debates, shaping their evolution over time. Moreover, they intersect and interact in multifaceted ways, with individuals often embodying overlapping or hybrid identities that reflect the complexity of human experience.

In the context of contemporary Belarusian society, the convergence¹⁰⁷ of national and queer identities presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the coexistence of diverse identities enriches the cultural tapestry of the nation, fostering inclusivity and pluralism. On the other hand, tensions may arise between conservative and progressive forces, leading to clashes over issues of morality, tradition, and modernity.

Ultimately, the holistic formation of Belarusian national and queer identities represents an ongoing process shaped by historical legacies, social dynamics, and individual experiences. As society continues to evolve, so too will the narratives and expressions of these identities, reflecting the complexities and diversities of the human condition.

Due to various intersections of oppression, including but not limited to gender roles, reproductive politics, national socio-political strategies, and heteropatriarchal cultural frameworks, the merging of Belarusian national identity and queerness, is seen as an almost incompatible union. During the summer and autumn of 2020, many representatives of LGBTQ+ activism experienced an increase/understanding of national identity, as well as an increase/understanding of their queer identity. Most people already had one of their identities formed, but they all indicated that the feeling of belonging to various communities during the protests allowed them to increase their identification with them. For example, a distinctive feature of the protests was the presence of associations of interests. There were women's, students', neighbors', and pensioners' marches, as well as columns from the queer, the military, doctors, teachers' communities, etc. Respondents said that such associations helped to feel community with all segments of the population, a united struggle for a democratic future without authoritarianism: "I felt a lot of solidarity and support because I went out as part of the

¹⁰⁷ Anonymous, 'After August 2020: Stories of LGBT+ People in Belarus', trans. Anton Klimovich, *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.52323/993862>.

queer columns”¹⁰⁸ or

“The feeling of community here [in Germany] is not comparable to that in Belarus. The way I felt in Belarus as a part of something cosmic, some incredibly large-scale, what we are doing is so incredible, it's just fucking amazing”¹⁰⁹.

In this regard, each representative of some formation felt a sense of belonging not only with the Belarusian people as a whole but also with their own small groups. In my personal experience, both of my identifications formed precisely in the process of the Belarusian revolution. Firstly, I had the opportunity to see a huge community that also wants changes in society. Secondly, Belarusians showed respect and care to each other by helping during repressions in prisons, on the streets, and abroad. Thirdly, I had the opportunity to walk with my two flags (queer and national Belarusian) along the main streets of Minsk, to show the surrounding society all sides of my identity. And finally, precisely because of the revolution and rising democratic values, my family was able to change their views on the LGBTQ+ community, from which I finally managed to accept myself and finish the process of self-identification.

A unique feature of the Belarusian queer identity is that usually, queer identity goes against national identity. The very definition of queer gives us an understanding that going beyond, the absence of belonging to familiarity is an opposition to the national idea because statehood develops as a dichotomy of we/they, which is what Anna Triandafyllidou is talking about. Most often, queer people adhere to anarchic views and do not want to belong to something, since queer activists most often reject paternalistic state structures that depend on capitalism and the nuclear family¹¹⁰. But in this particular case, a unique case of creating a national identity through queerness can be observed, a fusion of identities. “If we talk about ‘queerness’ and ‘Belarusiness’, then it seems to me they went side by side”¹¹¹,

“Therefore, it seems to me that, well, this also became an incentive, because queer people did not want, and could not, in general, keep silent or hide their identity and circumstances developed in such a way or people put them in such a way that different groups could manifest themselves. And it is precisely in this difference, of course, that queer people have also become noticeable”¹¹².

As one of my participants said,

¹⁰⁸ D. T., interview by author, 02.08.2023

¹⁰⁹ A. Z., interview by author, 10.06.2023

¹¹⁰ Windpassinger, ‘Queering Anarchism in Post-2001 Buenos Aires’, 496.

¹¹¹ N. B., interview by author, 15.07.2023

¹¹² V. B., interview by author, 10.06.2023

“During the protests, and in general, some kind of development of self-awareness, the development of consciousness of oneself as a queer and as a Belarusian - they were very connected in parallel. Well, it seems to me that this is somehow connected with the fact that when you realize yourself as a Belarusian, you are a little bit internally decolonized from Russia, and when you realize yourself as a queer person, you are a little decolonized from the hetero-patriarchal world, and these are similar mechanisms”¹¹³.

National and queer identities intersect in the circumstances of quasi-colonialism and widespread homophobia. Neither homonationalism nor queer nationalism are suitable for describing what the queer community of Belarus exhibits since 2020. My respondents describe, as it were, the mutual support of identities, and their equal position to each other. Firstly, because of the disadvantages of both Belarussianness and queerness and secondly, because of the simultaneous growth of solidarity both in a global society and in the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, I want to introduce a new concept where national and queer identities can intertwine and be in an equal position to each other, I would call it a “Q-unit” identity. As if one cannot develop and exist without the other. This is also confirmed by the work of Roman Leksikov and Dafna Rachok, in which they wrote that homonationalism is the origin of the Global West, and in the case of Eastern Europe, it is simply impossible to shift these concepts to a local context due to colonialism and repressed nationalism¹¹⁴. From the point of view of the development of identities, the revolution was critically necessary for their intersection and the formation of a Q-unit identity.

Again, my finding is fundamentally different from homonationalism and queer nationalism. Homonationalism is a policy in which capitalist and neoliberal ruling elites use sexual diversity and LGBT rights to maintain a political position against immigration, which is becoming increasingly common among far-right parties. Homonationalism refers to a phenomenon where LGBTQ+ rights are leveraged to advance nationalist and exclusionary agendas. It involves the co-opting of queer rights discourse by nationalist movements or governments to promote a particular vision of national identity that excludes or marginalizes certain groups, often immigrants or minorities.

In homonationalist rhetoric, LGBTQ+ rights are framed as a marker of progressiveness and modernity, contrasting with the perceived backwardness or intolerance of other cultures or

¹¹³ D. B., interview by author, 12.07.2023

¹¹⁴ Roman Leksikov and Dafna Rachok, ‘Beyond Western Theories: On the Use and Abuse of “Homonationalism” in Eastern Europe’, in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 25–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20401-3_2.

nations. This narrative is used to justify exclusionary policies, such as border controls or anti-immigration measures, under the guise of protecting LGBTQ+ rights.

As described in Jasbir K. Puar's book¹¹⁵ homonationalism is nothing more than dangerous pinkwashing. Currently, there are a huge number of examples¹¹⁶ where such a strategy, using a demonstratively positive attitude towards LGBT people, allows you to divert attention from the negative aspects of the activities of the states and corporations applying it.

One of the key critiques of homonationalism is its complicity in reinforcing existing power structures and hierarchies. By aligning LGBTQ+ rights with nationalist agendas, homonationalism overlooks the intersecting forms of oppression faced by queer individuals who belong to marginalized communities, such as people of color, refugees, or religious minorities. It also reinforces notions of national superiority and exceptionalism, which can perpetuate discrimination and violence against those who do not conform to the dominant narrative of national identity.

At the same time, queer nationalism is a movement that supports the idea that the LGBT community forms a separate nation due to its unique culture and customs. Brian Walker says that modern communication technologies, such as the Internet, give the LGBT community a chance to further integrate as a non-territorial nation¹¹⁷. Will Kymlicka supports this concept, seeing in the LGBT community the potential to form an alternative world order. They view the LGBT community as not a territorial nationalist movement¹¹⁸ recognizing its group identity and culture but at the same time advocating integration rather than separatism. Which, as you can see, also does not describe what happened in the Belarusian context.

The intersection of national and queer identities in Belarus is complex, influenced by quasi-colonialism and widespread homophobia. Respondents describe mutual support and equal positioning of national and queer identities, driven by the shared disadvantages faced by both and the growing global solidarity and LGBTQ+ community. That is why Q-unit identity recognizes the interdependence and equal importance of national and queer identities, suggesting that one cannot develop or exist without the other.

¹¹⁵ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 39.

¹¹⁶ <https://dmexco.com/stories/pinkwashing-examples-that-you-need-to-know-about/>

¹¹⁷ Brian Walker, 'Social Movements as Nationalisms or, On the Very Idea of a Queer Nation', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume* 22 (1996): 505–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1997.10716826>.

¹¹⁸ Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* (Toronto ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93.

Conclusion

The intersection of revolution and hope serves as a compelling lens through which to examine the development and growth of identities, particularly within marginalized communities. Revolution, characterized by upheaval and resistance against oppressive systems, often arises as a response to systemic injustice, fuelled by collective hope for a brighter future. This dynamic interplay between national revolution and hope shapes the trajectories of individual and collective identity, catalyzing transformative processes that challenge existing power structures and redefine societal norms.

In this chapter, I have delved into the profound impact of the 2020 revolution and the hopes and strategizing of queer activists on the formation and evolution of identities within a totalitarian regime. Through the prism of queer activism in contexts such as Belarus, where authoritarianism prevails and state-sponsored homophobia is rampant, I have explored how revolution and hope emerge as driving mechanisms for identity development.

A revolution, whether social or internal, changes, inspiring individuals to challenge entrenched norms and assert their identity authentically. The pursuit of liberation and equality places marginalized communities at the forefront of social movements, where hope serves as a beacon of opportunity. Hope within the context of revolution embodies resilience and determination, empowering individuals to envision and strive for a future where their identity is not subject to discrimination. It fuels activism and solidarity within communities unwilling to be silenced or marginalized.

Through the stories and experiences of queer activists in totalitarian regimes, we witness the intersection of revolution and hope to shape identity formation. From underground support networks to acts of resistance against state oppression, individuals navigate the challenges of identity formation in hostile environments, drawing strength from collective efforts toward justice and equality.

Furthermore, the examination of Belarussianness and revolution reveals the intricate complexities of national identity formation within the context of political upheaval. Despite historical challenges and socio-political pressures, Belarusians demonstrate a resilient commitment to their national identity, rooted in shared cultural heritage, traditions, and values.

The events of 2020 underscored the importance of collective action and solidarity in shaping identity and driving social change. As Belarusians continue to navigate the complexities of nationhood amidst ongoing political unrest, the intersection of revolution and hope remains a powerful force for identity development and collective empowerment. Through resilience, determination, and a shared vision for a better future, individuals and communities

forge pathways towards a more inclusive and equitable society, where identity is celebrated and respected.

All of this sparked a fascinating blend of Belarusiness and queerness, especially due to the mounting repression. Both Belarusian national identity and queer identity have been through a lot on their journey to becoming what they are today. Belarusian national identity has been shaped by history, culture, and politics, emerging as a distinct consciousness amidst struggles for autonomy and cultural preservation. Similarly, queer identities in Belarus have faced stigma and discrimination but have persisted in asserting their rights and visibility. Although they're different, both identities share common ground in their struggles for recognition and rights. Their coming together offers both challenges and opportunities for Belarusian society, enriching its culture while also highlighting tensions between different viewpoints.

The merging of Belarusiness and queerness during the 2020 events reflects a complex mix due to various forms of oppression intersecting. However, the protests provided a platform for people to embrace their identities, fostering a sense of belonging and unity among diverse communities. This unique blend challenges traditional ideas about queerness and nationalism, offering a new way to think about identity in times of resistance. Unlike some other concepts, like homonationalism or queer nationalism, this Q-unit identity doesn't prioritize one identity over the other but emphasizes their mutual support and equality.

Looking ahead, this intersectional identity signifies an important step forward in the struggle for democracy and human rights in Belarus. Despite the challenges, the events of 2020 have opened doors for a more inclusive and resilient society, where diverse identities can coexist and flourish.

Chapter 3. Strategies for mobilization, transformation, and reduction of resistance activity under autocracy

Introduction

In the field of political activism, the use of strategies for mobilization, transformation, and adaptation to resistance in an autocratic environment is an in-depth study of human resilience and the desire for social change. Chapter 3 is an analytical analysis of autocratic regimes to understand the multifaceted approaches used by activists and communities to overcome oppressive conditions. I aimed to help readers understand the nuances of the dynamics between repression and mobilization, as well as to discuss the various tactics of queer activism used in totalitarian conditions and the privileged democratic and economic communities of the West.

At the heart of this scientific study is the complex interaction between repression and activism, in which the actions of autocratic regimes serve as both catalysts and obstacles to efforts for democratic change. This chapter begins its research by examining the psychological foundations of Belarusian queer activism, analyzing how various emotional experiences and states shape the trajectory of the resistance movement. This study aims to uncover the subtle relationship between repression and the propensity of caring people to resist - from the intense fear inspired by repressive regimes to the determination generated by injustice.

However, in totalitarian conditions, the desire for survival and public support acquires a special character in comparison with Western privileged communities. In an autocracy where dissent is punished with rapid and brutal repression, individuals and communities face threats and uncertainty. And yet, despite the enormous difficulties they face, they strengthen bonds of solidarity and develop secret support networks and creative resilience strategies. Opp and Roehl identify the effects of radicalization of revolutionary actions, but only when repression is considered illegal¹¹⁹. Jennifer Earl proves in her work that repressions in totalitarian countries most actively strengthen solidarity within movements, especially at the level of individual groups¹²⁰, which in total gives us an understanding of the special development of protest movements in autocratic regimes.

In contrast, the privileged communities of the West benefit from freedom and access to resources, which gives them a large area of influence. Although they too face difficulties and resistance in society and states, their strategies for survival and community support are often based on the use of institutional mechanisms, social capital, and advocacy platforms to bring

¹¹⁹ Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, 'Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest', *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (1990): 521–47.

¹²⁰ Jennifer Earl, 'Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control', *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 268.

about change. By comparing these different approaches, in this chapter, I will try to provide an invaluable insight into the universality of human resilience and the contextual nuances that underlie activism and resistance.

Through careful analysis and empirical examples, in this chapter, I will try to understand the intricacies of activism under autocracy and in the privileged communities of the West. By revealing strategies for mobilization, transformation, and adaptation to resistance, I aim to provide a detailed understanding of the dynamics taking place and justify more effective approaches to stimulating change in an oppressive political environment.

Analysis of the relationship between repression and mobilization of activists through various emotional experiences and states

In Belarus, as in many other countries, social and political activists face repression by the authorities. These repressions, whether arrests, bans on rallies, or harassment, significantly impact the emotional state of activists and their mobilization capabilities. Analyzing this relationship between repression and activist mobilization through various emotional states provides an understanding of how these factors interact and what strategies can effectively support the popular protest movement and democratic change.

One of the key aspects in analyzing this interaction is the emotional experience of the activists. Government repressive actions such as arrests, beatings, and intimidation can cause activists to feel fear, anger, and despair. However, these emotions can also be a catalyst for increased mobilization. For example, fear may encourage activists to take more active measures to protect their rights and interests, and anger may encourage them to further protest actions.

On the other hand, repression can also cause activists to feel hopeless, leading to demobilization and loss of motivation. When activists see that their actions are not yielding results or face strong opposition from the authorities, they may lose faith in their strength and the strength of their movement.

Let's take a closer look at the connection between repression in Belarus since 2020 and the mobilization/regression tools used by queer activists. As described earlier, Lukashenko began actively suppressing dissent long before the events described, and they were catalyzed during the 2020 presidential race. At that time, the police began to act permissively, and the law and the court lost all meaning and their role. In particular, all the candidates for the presidency were detained, and fake checks began on their economic and social activities. This happens through the fact that the police plant money or drugs on politically active people, and then put them in

prison for huge periods¹²¹. At first glance, it seemed that during this period people should have given in to the pressure of government repression. However, contrary to expectations, it was precisely the repressive actions of the authorities that became a catalyst for the activation of resistance. People realized the need for a purposeful struggle against the authoritarian regime. This understanding and determination led to the first wave of mobilization against authoritarianism. Various groups of activists, including queer activists, joined this mobilization. For the first time in Belarusian history, several significant LGBTQ+ organizations were able to unite with each other and publish a statement¹²². As I wrote earlier in Chapter 1, the waves of Belarusian queer activism have their specific characteristics and peculiarities. For example, the second wave that took place in the 2010s was determined by the activism of individual initiatives and organizations. You can see the details in Figure 1 "Timeline of Modern Belarusian queer history". On the one hand, this had many advantages, especially after the individualistic first wave, however, it is worth noting that LGBTQ+ organizations were not connected to each other in any way due to internal disagreements, personal resentments, and conflicts. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2020, all this became absolutely insignificant compared to state terror and targeting of queer people. This is exactly how the second wave of Belarusian queer activism ended, with mobilization and cohesion. Simply put, the third wave of Belarusian queer activism corresponded with the first period of the revolution in 2020. Thus, I am further dividing the 3rd wave of queer activism in Belarus into three periods of the Revolution that each correlates with certain emotions and mental states.

1. The first period of the Revolution and the hope of Belarusian queer activists.

The beginning of the first period of the revolution is the spring-summer of 2020, the period of the election campaign, the first months of protests, and hope. Hope has become the main driving mechanism for participation in the protests. During the first months of the pandemic, Belarusians have already formed their own local online support system for each other, which allowed the population to unite so quickly during the presidential race. That is why I believe that the first period of Belarussian queer activism includes not only the first months after the fabricated elections but also the six months before that. Despite severe repression, torture in prisons, and constant raids on activists, the activity did not stop. Also, an interesting feature of

¹²¹ 'The case of Sergey Tikhonovsky: what conclusions can be drawn before the trial begins', spring96.org, 18 May 2021, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/103409>.

¹²² Unfortunately, for security reasons, I cannot provide a link to the joint statement of the Belarusian LGBTQ+ NGOs and independent initiatives regarding repression and violence by the Lukashenko government.

queer activism was that people belonging to the queer community found themselves in a slightly better, more prepared, and secure position, compared to the general public. This happened because of the long-term persecution of the LGBTQ+ community, which made it possible to develop and use in everyday life the tactics of digital security and anonymization of one's identity (in offline and online spaces).

My respondents said that this feeling gave them unprecedented strength: "I was very surprised and at the same time caught up in the protest. It was shocking and unexpected, and strange, but somehow joyful. And I had a lot of hope for some changes, that is, I remember how my friends and I discussed back in the summer: 'Well, okay, we'll stay in prison for a while, well, they'll probably beat us, maybe they'll break the equipment, well, it's okay'. We didn't feel sorry for ourselves, and that's it, we were ready"¹²³ or "Damn, we have hope, we need to continue, we must not give up, because no one gave us such a right to give up"¹²⁴. The feeling of hope was not just at the moment, it was permanent, completely encompassed people, and overshadowed even fear. This feeling helped people not to feel alone in front of the huge machine of autocracy: "In the beginning it was less scary, and I went to the demonstration for the first time, on the very first Sunday. And in fact, I am very glad that this experience happened, because it seems to me that because of it everything became clear that nothing was lost, it became clear what and why it was. Because you remember that huge crowd, I've just never seen so many people in my life, and there is very healthy confidence in my position, that I see everything correctly, these people see the same thing"¹²⁵. Another participant describes that "this can be called inspiration, because when the Internet returned on August 11 and the scale of the protest became visible to everyone, the number of dissenting people was very impressive. There was a real difference between what was on TV and what was in reality. Hope and faith overwhelmed me!"¹²⁶ This sense of unity and hope played a major role in the protest. I want to prove my words with the finding of Yener Bayramoglu: "queer hope can function as a force that sustains queers' determination to maintain their presence. Belief in the power of hope is represented as a survival strategy for queer lives"¹²⁷, this shows the importance of hope as the main driving mechanism for resistance and fight, as well as for uniting in a community with the same motives and goals. Queer activists have never felt more involved in a common movement, vision, and pain than in the first months of the revolution. This is confirmed by the words "I

¹²³ A. B., interview by author, 02.08.2023

¹²⁴ V. A., interview by author, 17.07.2023

¹²⁵ YA. S. interview by author, 04.07.2023

¹²⁶ D. K., interview by author, 04.07.2023

¹²⁷ Bayramoğlu, 'Remembering Hope', 192.

felt a lot of solidarity and support, because I went out as part of a queer column"¹²⁸, "the experience of participating in protests as part of a queer column is unforgettable, a very great feeling that there are people who understand you, and you want the same thing together and that you're all queers. I felt enthusiasm and, as it were, it is clear that I also felt fear, but then it was so felt in the team that the fear was even pleasant and so gambling. You can even call it sectarianism because it was a pleasure"¹²⁹.

Queer hope refers to hope experienced within the context of queer identity and queer experiences. It encompasses hope for acceptance, equality, and liberation within a society that often marginalizes or discriminates against individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The difference between queer hope and general hope lies in the specific social and cultural context within which it operates. While hope in a broader sense may refer to optimism or expectation for positive outcomes in various aspects of life, queer hope is rooted in the desire for social and political change that recognizes and affirms the rights and humanity of LGBTQ+ individuals. Queer hope often arises in response to the challenges and injustices faced by queer communities, including discrimination, violence, and systemic oppression. It can be a powerful force of resilience and resistance, driving individuals and communities to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and visibility and to envision and work towards a more inclusive and equitable society. In summary, while hope is a universal human experience, queer hope specifically addresses the aspirations and struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals within the context of their unique social and political circumstances.

2. The second period of the revolution and the fear and despair of Belarusian queer activists.

In November 2020, the second period of the revolution began. Putin secretly brought Russian troops into Belarus, and this marked new repressions, which included the suppression of not only political activity but also the beginning of the persecution of the entire activist sector, including the queer movement. So, in the following year, activists and marginalized groups of the population were searched and raided, thousands of people were detained and imprisoned, and almost the entire NGO sector was liquidated. It was during that period that fear became the prevailing feeling among all my respondents. "It was fear, it was a constant feeling of insecurity. It was a feeling that they could catch you in one form or another all the time. And then there was a feeling of such a powerful realization that you would have to make a choice:

¹²⁸ D. T., interview by author, 02.08.2023

¹²⁹ K. B., interview by author, 03.08.2023

‘what are you going to do next? Will you continue to manifest yourself very strongly, go ahead and they will kill you, or do you have to choose the other direction, be a partisan, and be alive?’”¹³⁰

Even though 70% of the interview participants have left Belarus, many of them are still at the gunpoint of the state due to pressure and blackmail on relatives and confiscation of property¹³¹. Many people continue their activities even after leaving the country. On the other hand, despair became the dominant emotion during that period of the revolution, and for many, it continues to this day. I need to note that, of course, some Belarusian queer activists withdrew from activism due to fear of persecution, followed by emotional burnout, but it is also important to see additional danger in the form of state pressure on relatives. Many do not see a benevolent perspective, and feel emotionally burned out, exhausted, and useless. People do not see the point in action if they cannot help almost 2 thousand political prisoners¹³², as well as overthrow the dictatorial regime. “This is some kind of recession, and I associate it with a huge fear, burnout. There were already about a hundred political prisoners at that time and it seems that nothing can be done at all”¹³³. People wanted us to make queer activism stop completely¹³⁴, as the rest of the population believes that we are blurring the political agenda and there is no place for our problems in it. “Again, there is no place for us anywhere?! Yes, that is, on the one hand, I had a terrible fear, just of these people in black. And on the other hand, you can also get hit right away from your people. Negativity, discrimination, aggression, choose what you want!”¹³⁵ Firstly, many people cannot understand that repression and persecution, which have become a daily reality for any citizen who does not approve of Lukashenko's actions, is what LGBTQ+ have been facing in Belarus for decades. Secondly, due to despair and helplessness in connection with the new repressions, citizens stopped actively believing in the possibility of a bright future, which further increased the confrontation within the protest. E. Fromm believed that hope has the property of paradoxicality, noting that it “... is not a passive expectation, but also a not unrealistic spurring of circumstances that cannot occur”¹³⁶, and pointed out the existence of a special kind of hope — passive hope, which is a disguised form of hopelessness.

¹³⁰ R. A., interview by author, 20.07.2023

¹³¹ “‘For reasons of public necessity.’ Belarus has secretly adopted a law on the seizure of property’, Zerkalo, 6 January 2023, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/29772.html>.

¹³² <https://politzek.me/en>

¹³³ O. G., interview by author, 13.07.2023

¹³⁴ Verta Taylor, ‘Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance’, *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 5 (October 1989): 761, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2117752>.

¹³⁵ N. B., interview by author, 15.07.2023

¹³⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope, Toward a Humanized Technology*, vol. 38 (Harper & Row, 1968), 302.

Perhaps, our despair wasn't such a simple feeling, it was a dormant passive hope.

To explore the relationship between hope and fear, we can delve into Fromm's concept of passive hope and how it intertwines with despair. Fromm's idea that hope is not just passive but paradoxical suggests that true hope involves active engagement with reality. It is a dynamic force that drives people to strive for what seems unattainable. This sharply contrasts with passive hope, which lacks this active element and borders on resignation.

For example, fear is often associated with a sense of impending doom or danger. However, underneath fear, there is a desire for safety and security. This desire indicates that there is still a glimmer of hope for a better outcome, even if it is not immediately apparent. In this sense, fear can be viewed as passive hope—a hope that circumstances will improve and mitigate the dangerous threat. Similarly, despair is typically seen as the absence of hope. But from the perspective of passive hope, despair can be understood as a state where active hope is suppressed. It reflects a deeply rooted desire for change that feels unreachable.

By theorizing hope and fear together, we uncover a complex interaction where these emotions are not entirely distinct. Understanding this relationship allows us to view fear and despair not as final states, but as part of a continuum of hope. This perspective can be inspiring, suggesting that in the darkest moments of life lies a dormant potential for renewal and transformation. Thus, we demonstrate that in the context of the National Belarusian Revolution, hope did not transition into contrasting negative emotions such as fear and despair. It was a permanent feeling, though not always in an active form.

3. The third period of the revolution and the political hope of Belarusian queer activists.

Around the time of my interviews (summer 2023), I noticed that respondents began to talk about hope not only in the past tense but also as something that is being revived at present. It's a more neat and structured feeling. I noticed that this directly correlates with a new period of mobilization of activism directed both in Belarus and abroad. Currently, offline events have resumed, the purpose of which is to establish contacts, and come up with new ideas, questions, and solutions. Activists are beginning to interact more actively not only with each other but also with human rights organizations, the media, as well as democratic forces in exile. Labunskaya V. argued that hope is a prerequisite for the psychological security of the individual and society¹³⁷. That is why hope was so important in the first period of the revolution, as it created an island of security in the rapidly collapsing picture of the world. And when it collapsed at the

¹³⁷ Vera Labunskaya, 'Hope as the Provision for Psychological Security of the Person and the Society', *Social Psychology and Society* 2, no. 4 (2011): 15–26.

end due to forced emigration or the complete suppression of protests, security ceased to exist along with social and personal hope, which marked the appearance of frustration and despair.

We can currently observe political hope. It appeared due to various factors. Firstly, people began to actively engage in politics and stay in it, they got into the habit of interacting with democratic forces and the opportunity to challenge their decisions. "Belarusian queer people finally have a chance not to live in violence, someday it will be possible in the New Belarus"¹³⁸, my respondent says that it has eventually become impossible not to pay attention to the voices of LGBTQ+ people due to the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people and appeals from human rights defenders and queer activists to official democratic structures in exile such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office¹³⁹ and The Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power¹⁴⁰.

Secondly, many have moved from emotional burnout to a phase of active purposeful actions, with an understanding of the need for associations and writing strategies. My respondents said, "Right now I feel a lot of strength for development [of activism]. In general, in any field of activism, and this is very encouraging"¹⁴¹. Thirdly, politics finally gained practical force, and the interaction of local and administrative factors began, and actions ceased to be abstract, which was mentioned during my interviews. "At the beginning [of the protests] it felt like history was being created, but now it seems like it has become a reality, and we are making every possible effort for some kind of change"¹⁴². For example, Goldman speaks of such hope, which is actively and clearly addressed to politics. Hope, in her opinion, is not just connected with moving somewhere forward, but with ambitions and a desire for more democratic transformations¹⁴³. Her concept of progress does not just mean development but includes taking responsibility for one's own political beliefs and using them to create a more democratic society through political experiments. Dewey, on the other hand, believes that democratic hope requires changing conditions to facilitate the individual transformation necessary to maintain democratic habits¹⁴⁴. Theory and practice are inseparable, which imposes on all actors of transformation the responsibility for rebuilding the world to unleash democratic potential.

¹³⁸ E. V., interview by author, 18.07.2023

¹³⁹ <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/>

¹⁴⁰ <https://rada.vision/cc>

¹⁴¹ N. B., interview by author, 15.07.2023

¹⁴² A. K., interview by author, 02.08.2023

¹⁴³ Loren Goldman, 'Experimentation and the Future(s) of Political Hope', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 February 2024, 13684310241229653, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241229653>.

¹⁴⁴ Mary E. Wiltacil, 'The Principle of Political Hope: Progress, Action, and Democracy in Modern Thought', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 26 January 2024, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00674-w>.

Previously, queer activists did not have the opportunity to prepare for an absolute legal and social collapse. However, now, after various life circumstances, burnout, and changes in social interaction, LGBTQ+ activists have a common, holistic vision of the political and socio-cultural future that they want to strive for.

The strategy of survival and support of the community as a result of activities in a totalitarian context compared to the Western privileged communities

In the context of the totalitarian regime and Western democratically privileged communities, the strategies of queer community activism differ significantly due to the unique conditions in which they operate.

In a totalitarian context, where the government seeks to control all aspects of citizens' lives, the strategies and tools of the activist community are often associated with anonymity and secrecy. This is confirmed by the words from one of my interviews: "people started to go back to the closet because otherwise, it is impossible to survive. In Belarus, we try to do events very privately so that none of the outsiders find out, to support the people who stay here. After all, there are a lot of people left in the country, and I think it is necessary to support them methodically"¹⁴⁵. People can create underground support networks, such as secret organizations to provide mutual assistance and protection from repression. However, in such conditions, resources and opportunities for a full life are limited, which leads to the need for adaptation and creativity in finding ways to support.

Comparatively, in Western democratically and economically privileged communities, where there is a greater degree of individual freedom and access to resources, community strategies may be more focused on establishing and strengthening social connections and resources. I realized during my internship in Germany that people rely on a wide range of services and organizations, such as social services, charities, and non-profit organizations, to receive help and support when needed. It is precisely because of the above that emotional support and self-management strategies have been developed in privileged communities, as people have more opportunities to express their needs and seek help. The people I worked with in Berlin were not afraid to assert their rights and demand proper treatment from both government agencies and public ones.

During my internship, I realized that, in fact, due to quasi-colonialism, the Belarusian queer movement needs to handle not only with its official government and its installations but also with the Moscow metropolis. For example, people in Germany do not need to prove their

¹⁴⁵ L. A., interview by author, 12.07.2023

independence or culture to someone. They can focus their struggle more substantively. But an even more interesting observation for me was that in the organization where I did my internship, there were a lot of queer people from Russia (who moved to Germany in different years), and almost all of our work focused not on the post-Soviet space, as it was stated, but on Russia and its problems. Even though people there do not have clearly expressed imperial views, I saw a lack of reflection on this issue, a lack of knowledge of history, facts, cause-and-effect relationships, and a vision of the peculiarities of Ukrainian, Belarusian, Kazakh, and so on queer societies. These people did good, useful, and important work, but they could not fulfill their agenda of sending their help to all post-socialist countries. Belarus was not only absent from the focus of their attention; it was not paid any attention at all. Lawyers shrugged their shoulders about helping Belarusian queer refugees, because they did not know how to deal with such cases, and cultural and social support was limited due to the team's reduced attention to events not aimed at Russia. Of course, this further influenced my identity not just as a Belarusian, but as a citizen of a quasi-colony, which I remain even in the LGBTQ+ community.

Volunteering and activism are some of the strategies for survival and support, as many people find their community through helping others. Unfortunately, in Belarus, even volunteering (not necessarily queer-oriented) faces huge obstacles from the state. The Belarusian government not only does not support active citizens but also stops them from functioning, closing organizations, and putting people in prisons¹⁴⁶. In contrast to this, while conducting my interviews with NGO members, I also realized that globally, the attitude towards volunteering and activist activities differs in society. In Germany, it is considered very respectable if a person conducts such activities, as this means that the person is involved in civil society and has the desire to move into a bright future. However, in pre-revolutionary Belarus, activism (of any kind, not only queer) was considered narcissistic and showed a supposed desire to destabilize the social situation. The state also spreads the stereotype that volunteers and non-profit organizations are foreign agents who are sponsored by the global West. By and large, it is precisely because of this that such work is absolutely unpaid and endless due to the lack of personnel, which leads to emotional burnout and loss of hope for something good in the future. Of course, this is fundamentally different from the Western activist society with a widespread support network, donations, and a regulated working day.

This is directly related to the principles of European citizenship, which guarantee certain rights and freedoms. These principles include not only certain opportunities but also the

¹⁴⁶ <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

fundamental principles of equality that protect citizens from discrimination. Nevertheless, even though all this sounds very good, it is impossible not to say about the exclusivity of these principles, as only people with European citizenship, people of the Global West are considered first class. This creates segregation and hierarchy.

The financial standing of activists in Germany was another point of difference between Western and Belarusian queer activists that I observed during my time at EQUAL. In Berlin, all the activists I professionally interacted with could afford to do their work for free, relying either on savings, partners' support, or side jobs that could cover necessities such as accommodation and food. Additionally, applying for grants for projects aimed at Russian-specific activism earned more successful results, compared to projects aimed at Belarus, which faced more hardships in the fight to gain recognition, attention, and fiscal support.

In Belarus, making a living while dedicating yourself to activist projects is seen as a much harder endeavor. For example, in the book "Women's Activism in Belarus: Invisible and Untouchable"¹⁴⁷, Yulia Mickiewicz says that any gender issues are not considered by the state as significant, which means it is impossible to receive any financial assistance from the state. But if by 2020 grant-givers from abroad had access to Belarusian organizations, then with the beginning of the revolution absolutely all human rights initiatives and NGOs were eliminated¹⁴⁸, which means that any money transfers from other countries became illegal.

Of course, I do not deny that the countries of the collective West have their own problems and struggles. Queer people continue to be discriminated against both at the state and social levels. It is also worth noting that the European Union is not a homogeneous space. For example, Poland or Hungary is objectively a more unfavorable place for queer activism than Germany or Portugal. However, the average indicator¹⁴⁹ of freedom of speech, the availability of civil rights, and state protection is much more pronounced in the EU, compared with countries with an authoritarian management style. That is why the tools and strategies of resistance and struggle are very different.

For example, for Western society, visibility and "coming out" are popular strategies for many LGBT movements¹⁵⁰. However, these tools of struggle are not applicable in an

¹⁴⁷ Victoria R. Shmidt and I. Solomatina, *Zhenskiĭ aktivizm v Belarusi: nevidimyĭ i neprikasaemyĭ = Female activism in Belarus: invisible and untouchable*, Serĭia 'Gendernyĭ marshrut' (Kaunas: Taurapolis, 2017).

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.lawtrend.org/liquidation-nko>

¹⁴⁹ <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/>

¹⁵⁰ Phillip M. Ayoub, *When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316336045>.

authoritarian context. The policy of openness has been criticized¹⁵¹ for being a Western model that does not take into account local realities and, instead of empowering LGBT people, can make them more vulnerable. Increasing transparency involves serious risks for LGBT people¹⁵².

Unlike Western privileged activists, the Belarusian queer community needs not just secretive, but underground activities. For example, from outside Belarus, it seems that nothing is happening inside at all. However, this is just a responsible approach to security.

During my research, I explored the instruments of queer activism that activists consider the most significant in their work in Belarus and other totalitarian countries. Absolutely all 27 respondents answered that the most important thing now is community support and survival, which correlates very much with each other. "It is especially important to preserve the community in Belarus"¹⁵³, "We need to help those who are inside the community to survive, and not direct resources to educate people and, like, make those who don't care to understand something, they just need to survive"¹⁵⁴, "Yes, now people are more willing to go to spend a little time in nature, or they will sort out their injuries there, how they can support themselves. Or they will chop firewood together and then weave a pig out of beads, then they will watch a movie together and discuss it. Because where are the movies, and where are they? The primary task is not to go crazy"¹⁵⁵, "People in Belarus have learned to survive, and they continue to live this way. It is impossible to take offense at people for learning how to survive, go to parties, and not engage in activism and protests. I understand all this perfectly well. It was a very serious revelation for me"¹⁵⁶ - this is a small example of how people from the Belarusian activist queer field see the main mechanisms and strategies that are important at this historical moment.

As we can see from the above quotes, survival, and support of the community are currently the two most important strategies for working in totalitarian regimes. The survival of both the community and the individual becomes a form of struggle and protest against a heteronormative, patriarchal, authoritarian state and social system. Simply put, the stronger our existence, the weaker the hegemonic ideas about the world. This is also confirmed by Derrida's words. "Everything I say about survival as a complication of the opposition between life and

¹⁵¹ Natalie Newton, 'Contingent Invisibility', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 109–36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3315253>.

¹⁵² Julia Richardson, 'Not Seen and Not Heard: The Security Dilemma of in/Visibility', *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no. 1 (2 January 2017): 117–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2017.1294833>.

¹⁵³ V. A., interview by author, 16.07.2023

¹⁵⁴ A. B., interview by author, 21.07.2023

¹⁵⁵ V. B., interview by author, 06.06.2023

¹⁵⁶ O. G., interview by author, 13.07.2023

death proceeds from an unconditional affirmation of life. Survival is life beyond life, life more than life, and the discourse I undertake is not about death. On the contrary, it is the affirmation of a living being who prefers life and therefore survival to death, because survival is not simply what remains; it is the most intense life possible.”¹⁵⁷

I understand his words as the concept of survival through the very concept of life. The survival of activism and the queer community is the most genuine form of resistance against dictatorship and authoritarianism. Attempts to live, to integrate into the current reality, to experience joy – this is a revolution both in our society and in each of us individually. Authoritarian regimes see as their goal the suppression not only of any disagreements but also of any desire to think critically, to want to change their lives for the better, and to rejoice. They want to suppress our lives, however, we are stronger, and we have chosen to survive.

This survival happens through the support of each other. By support, my respondents understand therapeutic, creative, unifying practices: "It is necessary to focus work with the community on feeling oneself among people. People who are inside Belarus need to talk and draw. More support. As much as possible"¹⁵⁸, "We need to do support work. Now everything is all about therapy. And this is just about the help of some people to others"¹⁵⁹, "Now there is some kind of targeted help, non-public, often financial or therapeutic. It seems to me that right now the main goal is to somehow support the community"¹⁶⁰, "Community support is very important offline, with face-to-face events. There is no goal of any kind of learning or huge projects right now. Firstly, because there is no safe place for it, and secondly, because there is no strength. and in addition to all this, there is a constant fear of the police in the country with repression"¹⁶¹.

Conclusion

The results indicate the profound impact of government repression on the emotional state of activists and their mobilization capabilities, shedding light on the subtle interaction between (1) hope, (2) fear, and despair, and (3) political hope and survival during various periods of the revolution.

In Belarus, as in many other authoritarian countries, activists face severe repression by the

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida et al., *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 52.

¹⁵⁸ N. M., interview by author, 20.07.2023

¹⁵⁹ B. H., interview by author, 19.07.2023

¹⁶⁰ D. B., interview by author, 06.07.2023

¹⁶¹ N. T., interview by author, 12.07.2023

authorities, ranging from arrests to violence and persecution. These repressive actions have a profound impact on the emotional state of activists and their ability to respond to injustice. Of course, the fear and anger caused by government repression can serve as powerful catalysts for increased activism and resistance. However, prolonged repression and the lack of tangible progress can cause activists to feel hopeless. This is determined by passive hope, which gives us space for further research on its possibilities and development into an active form. In the analysis, I also highlight the problems faced by queer activists in Belarus. Nevertheless, even though they face prolonged persecution and discrimination, queer activists demonstrate resilience and unity in the face of state repression. The emergence of Queer Hope as a driving force of resistance and mobilization in the current period of the revolution underscores the importance of collective identity and solidarity in the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition, the data obtained indicate that over time, the emotional background of activism changes: from fear and despair to a revival of hope and political activism. The resurgence of hope among activists, combined with a new sense of purpose and strategic planning, signals a potential turning point in the ongoing struggle for democratic change in Belarus. Using hope as a driving force for political transformation, activists are mobilizing to create more democratic and inclusive societies both in Belarus and abroad.

By analyzing the complex relationship between repression, emotional experiences, and mobilization efforts, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of activism and social change in authoritarian settings. In addition, it highlights the transformative power of hope and collective action that help challenge repressive regimes and advance democratic ideals. As activists continue to navigate the ever-changing political landscape, the lessons learned from their experiences serve as evidence of the indomitable human spirit and the constant pursuit of justice and freedom.

In totalitarian regimes such as Belarus, where state control permeates all aspects of life, queer activism thrives on anonymity and secrecy. Underground support networks are vital for mutual assistance and protection from repression. However, limited resources require adaptive and creative survival strategies. The focus is on community preservation and individual survival in the face of constant threat and surveillance. Activists face not only harassment from the state but also the problem of obtaining support from external organizations, often encountering indifference or misunderstanding from those in a more privileged position, as evidenced by the experience they shared during the interview.

The repressive environment in Belarus goes beyond physical violence and includes legal and social discrimination, and state-sponsored homophobia serves as a tool to suppress dissent

and divert attention from political dissent. Representatives of the LGBTQ+ community face systematic discrimination and violence, while hate speech is widespread in the media, and detainees are subjected to abuse.

The contrast between Western privilege and totalitarian oppression highlights the need to develop individual strategies for activism. While visibility and openness can be effective in Western circumstances¹⁶², underground activism, and community support are of primary importance in totalitarian regimes such as Belarus. The focus on survival and social solidarity is becoming a form of resistance to authoritarianism and heteronormativity.

Despite the difficulties, queer activism in Belarus remains stable. Also, the survival and support of the community are the most important strategies for combating oppression and striving for a brighter future. By affirming life and supporting each other, activists resist the suppression of their existence and strive for a more just and inclusive society.

¹⁶² Mariya Levitanus and Polina Kislitsyna, “‘Why Wave the Flag?’: (In)Visible Queer Activism in Authoritarian Kazakhstan and Russia”, *Central Asian Survey* 43, no. 1 (2 January 2024): 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2023.2234955>.

Conclusion

Belarusian queer activism has gone through many stages of development, concealment, reassessment, and adaptation. Characterized by resilience and the ability to acclimate to various political, social, and economic changes, queer activism has been shaped considerably by the repressive policies of an authoritarian government that utilizes homophobia as one of the main state ideologies. Throughout this work, I have explored how queer activism in Belarus responds to ever-changing circumstances in an unstable political climate, creating alternative tactics of advocacy and survival, as well as modifying priorities to meet the needs of the members of the community, pivoting from visibility to protective invisibility and anonymity. In particular, I have analyzed how, in the past three decades, queer activism has changed from activism of persons to activism of organizations to anonymous activism, all depending on the level of political persecution and police brutality targeting the LGBT community. By applying Sidney Tarrow's¹⁶³ concepts of development and change of instruments of civil resistance to the Belarusian context, my study provides a nuanced analysis of how queer activists navigate and leverage political opportunities despite severe repression. This extends Tarrow's framework by showcasing the specific strategies and adaptations employed by activists in totalitarian settings, offering a deeper understanding of the dynamics of social movements under extreme political constraints.

Focusing on the social and political condition of Belarus following the 2020 Revolution, I have investigated how the resistance and subsequent violent repression of political freedom by Aleksandr Lukashenko have simultaneously developed a combination of both queer and national identities, a unified identity I call Q-unit, which is unique to Belarus due to its history of struggle against totalitarian regimes and development of national self-identity free of quasi-colonial ideals. This research contributes to the development of non-Western queer theory by exploring the intersection of national and queer identity in a repressive context. The Q-unit identity concept during the Belarusian Revolution of 2020 demonstrates the formation of a unified identity that challenges quasi-colonial and heteropatriarchal narratives. This work develops Elizabeth A. Armstrong's theory of "Unity in Diversity"¹⁶⁴, demonstrating how different identities can unite in a common political struggle. I explain the formation of the Q-unit identity during the Revolution as a realization that Belarussianness and queerness are not mutually exclusive. Although, under Lukashenko's regime, Belarussianness was deemed a conservative identity that opposes democratic principles and is based on traditional values, I

¹⁶³ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*.

¹⁶⁴ Katherine McFarland Bruce, 'Unity in Diversity'.

claim that this idea is a product of quasi-colonialism and vehement control of the Russian Federation on the society of Belarus. To support this argument, I briefly describe the history of quasi-colonialism, which was introduced by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, in Eastern Europe, specifically Belarus, and its impact on our linguistic freedom, political independence, and even territorial sovereignty. I note that queer opposition during the Revolution continues to fight two battles: one against heteropatriarchy and the other against Russian hegemony. Drawing on the intersectional feminist literature of many researchers, such as Melanie Richter-Montpetit¹⁶⁵, Jasbir K. Puar¹⁶⁶, Yener Bayramoğlu¹⁶⁷, and many others, this study highlights the dual struggle against hetero-patriarchy and quasi-colonial influence. This thesis places Belarusian queer activism within the broader framework of feminist resistance, thereby contributing to an understanding of how overlapping forms of oppression shape resistance strategies.

In addition to conducting 27 qualitative interviews with queer activists from Belarus and conducting a literature review of intersectional feminist scholarly works, I relied on my background as a psychologist to analyze the emotional responses and mental states of queer activists during various stages of the Revolution, which helped me identify three different periods of resistance. In this research, hope, fear, and despair become signifiers of collective and personal responses to authoritarian repressions, with the hope being the main driver of motivation. By differentiating queer hope from general hope, I sought to showcase how queer activism in Belarus is not simply a political act but a deeply emotional way of connection and survival. Queer activists strive to construct a society free from all axis of oppression, and while fear and anger can sufficiently motivate other revolutionaries, it is the feeling of hope that continues to reinvigorate queer resistance efforts.

As a queer activist myself, I wrote this work to have both academic and practical uses. Academically, I aimed to expand the body of literature that shines a light on queer activists in totalitarian regimes, as, oftentimes, they receive minimal attention from the global population. Because secrecy is a protection measure, it is remarkably hard for the tactics of queer activists to be visible to the world. Overall, this study enriches the existing literature by providing a detailed case study of Belarusian queer activism, demonstrating how it navigates and survives under an authoritarian regime. It provides valuable information about strategies, emotional dynamics, and identity formation in marginalized movements under repression. However, I

¹⁶⁵ Richter-Montpetit, 'Empire, Desire and Violence'.

¹⁶⁶ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

¹⁶⁷ Bayramoğlu, 'Remembering Hope'.

wanted to show that Belarusian queer activism is vibrantly alive and drastically different from queer activism in other, especially non-authoritarian, countries. I hope that this work can facilitate a widespread transfer of knowledge not only between different generations of queer activists in Belarus but also between various marginalized identities that perform advocacy in unfavorable political conditions. In short, I want others to know that queer people exist everywhere and that we are fighting against oppression. Queer activism deserves to be archived, supported, and, most importantly, not forgotten.

The problems described in this study will likely remain relevant in Belarus in the immediate future. Police violence, social stigmatization and ostracization, and political persecution will not be easily eradicated. But, like many of my fellow queer activists, I maintain the hope that by sharing this knowledge with the world, the state of queer living in Belarus and other repressive nations will improve. I hope that international solidarity with queer activists in precarious political climates will flourish and academics and activists alike will begin to better understand the needs and circumstances of Belarusian resistance, providing more adequate financial, intellectual, and organizational support and protection. Lastly, I would like this work to be proof that queer resistance is not invisible to the world: it is remembered, cherished, and supported in all corners of the Earth.

Appendices

Appendix 1.

Informed Consent for interview for research

“The development and innovation of queer activism under the influence of totalitarian state systems (case of Belarus from 2017 to 2023)”

Ekaterina Donskova

Masters Candidate

Department of Gender Studies, Central European University

e-mail: donskova_ekaterina@student.ceu.edu

This study is aimed at showing what strategies of mobilization and confrontation are chosen by queer activists in countries with totalitarian regimes (using the case of Belarus from 2017 to 2023). This work will provide a starting point for further deeper studies of activism in autocratic countries and help to validate the experience of queer activists. This interview is conducted to obtain data regarding the correlation between the repressions and mobilization of activists, confrontational and subversive activities of queer activism, as well as the connection between national and queer identities.

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Yes No

1. Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated [/ /], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

☐ ☐

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

☐ ☐

I understand that taking part in the study involves: an audio-recorded interview, written notes, and decryption of audio in the form of text. All materials will be

☐ ☐

destroyed later.

2. Use of the information in the study

I understand that the information I provide will be used for Ekaterina Donskova's master's thesis.

☐ ☐

I understand that personal information, such as my name or place of living, which may lead to my identification, will be immediately encrypted and deleted after the interview.

☐ ☐

I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.

☐ ☐

Future use and reuse of the information by others

I permit the transcribed anonymized interviews that I provide to be deposited in “The development and innovation of queer activism under the influence of totalitarian state systems (case of Belarus from 2017 to 2023)” ☐ so it can be used for future research and learning.

Signatures

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]

Signature

Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Name of researcher [IN CAPITALS]

Signature

Date

Appendix 2.

Questions				
1. Please tell me about your experience of queer activism in Belarus before the political events of 2020. Why were you involved in this movement?	Art/educational events (festivals, performances, educational events)	legal protection (working with cases, statements, manifestos, appeals to government agencies)	Information distribution work (journalism, graphic design, creation of zines, posters)	Local activities (community work, victim assistance, organization, street actions)
2. How would you characterize the political regime in Belarus before 2020 and after?	The dictatorship (there was a "latent" dictatorship, and it became visible; as it was, so it remains)	Authoritarian	Policing/Militaristic State	"State of Terror"
3. Please tell me about the 2020	"emotions": hope; fear; despair.	"swings": from the feeling of overwhelming love to betrayal; the	"identities": growth/understanding of national identity;	

revolution and your queer activism at this time. How do you remember these events?		feeling of involvement/rejection in the community	growth/understanding of one's queer identity	
4. Do you think that the activists' strategy has somehow changed due to the growth of government repression?	The growth of government repression in all 27 years of Lukashenka's rule with "thaws" and "cold spells": waves of activism	First, the activism of individuals (from the 90s to the 2000s); then organizations (from the 2010s to the 2020s); currently, anonymized activism online and offline		
5. In your opinion, were there any turning points that influenced the choice	State Violence: repression of NGO sector; homophobic violence by riot police	Important actions: queer column during the revolution; holding queer festivals and actions; formation of new initiatives and movements	Public violence: the murder of Mikhail Pishchevsky and the creation of "Dela_PI"; an attack on prides	Bright names in the LGBTQ+ movement

of instrument s of activist resistance ?				
6. From your point of view, have the state repression s starting in 2020 become an impulse to mobilize queer activists or to reduce their activity?	Decline of activism	"roller coaster": decline, rise, decline, etc.	The growth at the beginning of the protest, the decline during the increase of state repression, the growth of invisible activism inside the country, and queer online activism outside	The growth of offline activism in Diasporas
7. What instrument s of queer activism do you consider the most significant in the	Online activism	Community Support + Survival		

work in Belarus, in totalitaria n countries?				
----------------------------------------------------------	--	--	--	--

Bibliography

- Andrei Vardomatsky. 'The war in Ukraine will change the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians'. belsat.eu, 26 April 2022. <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/26-04-2022-andrej-var-domatskij-vojna-v-ukraine-izmenit-geopoliticheskie-orientatsii-belorusov>.
- Anonymous. 'After August 2020: Stories of LGBT+ People in Belarus'. Translated by Anton Klimovich. *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.52323/993862>.
- Ashmore, Richard D., Lee J. Jussim, and David Wilder, eds. *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*. Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity, v. 3. Oxford [England] New York, N.Y. [USA]: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Ayoub, Phillip M. *When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316336045>.
- Baaz, Maria Eriksson, and Maria Stern. *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond*. Africa Now. London ; New York, NY : Uppsala, Sweden: Zed Books ; Nordic Africa Institute, 2013.
- Bayramoğlu, Yener. 'Remembering Hope: Mediated Queer Futurity and Counterpublics in Turkey's Authoritarian Times'. *New Perspectives on Turkey* 64 (May 2021): 173–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2021.14>.
- BBC News Russian. 'A date with a policeman: how gay people are bullied in Belarus', 24 November 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/media-55059877>.
- BBC Russian. "'The tractor will cure everyone.'" Lukashenko said that he had been ill with coronavirus'. 28 July 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53570933>.
- Chakraborti, Neil, and Jon Garland. *Hate Crime: Impact, Causes & Responses*. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473918108>.
- Charles Kurzman. 'The Arab Spring Uncoiled'. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1 December 2012): 377–90. <https://doi.org/10.17813/mai.17.4.10326742n0556v15>.
- Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs. 'Belarusians' Media Consumption, Attitudes to Mobilization and Political Identities'. <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-13>, November 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ed8DA3fhRtuYXwaDyoMiC7XBaW0gTaNA/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook.
- Confession of Artyom Boyarsky's Crime*. Azarenok. STV, 2021. https://t.me/Azarenok_TV/1160.
- Constanta, Human. 'We Are Dealing with "Extremist" Lists: Which Sites Are Blocked in Belarus and on What Grounds'. *Human Constanta* (blog), 17 February 2023. <https://humanconstantia.org/razbiraem-sya-s-ekstremistskimi-spiskami-kakie-sajty-i-po-kakim-osnovaniyam-blokiruyut-v-belarusi/>.
- Dag Tanneberg. *The Politics of Repression Under Authoritarian Rule: How Steadfast Is the Iron Throne?* Contributions to Political Science. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35477-0>.
- Daria Gushtyn. 'The Referendum-1995. Antiheroes of the Belarusian Language'. naviny.by, 14 May 2015. https://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2015/05/14/ic_articles_116_188882.
- 'Decolonial Queer Politics and LGBTI+ Activism in Romania and Turkey'. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1282>.
- Delgado, Luisa Elena, Pura Fernández, and Jo Labanyi. *La cultura de las emociones y las emociones en la cultura española contemporánea, siglos XVIII-XXI*. 1a. edición, cop. De ed. by Vanderbilt university press, 2016. Historia. Madrid: Cátedra, 2018.
- Denis Yudin. 'BelTeleRadio employees: Specialists from Russia work on television in Belarus instead of strikers'. LIGA, 19 August 2020. <https://news.liga.net/world/news/sotrudniki-bt-v-belarusi-na-televidenii-vmesto-bastuyuschih-rabotayut-spetsialisty-iz-rossii>.
- Derrida, Jacques, Jean Birnbaum, Pascale-Anne Brault, Michael Naas, and Peter Krapp. *Learning to*

- Live Finally: The Last Interview*. Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Dolgaya, Evgenia. 'How the Belarusian Authorities Use Homophobia for Repression', 16 November 2021. <https://zaborona.com/ru/kak-belaruskie-vlasti-ispolzuyut-gomofobiyu-dlya-repressij/>.
- Dynko, Alexandra. 'The Guy Served 3 Days after the Raid at the Club, Which Is Visited by LGBT People. He Doesn't Understand Why', 23 July 2018. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29385334.html>.
- Earl, Jennifer. 'Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control'. *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 261–84.
- Editorial Board of 'Names'. "'We didn't sleep enough and forgot to eat.'" #ByCovid19 volunteers about how Belarus and themselves have changed during the coronavirus'. Media Names, 30 June 2020. <https://imenamag.by/posts/bycovid19-story>.
- Elena Gapova. 'THE BELARUSIAN CIVIL ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN REVOLUTION', 2021. <https://doi.org/10.24412/1815-0047-2021-2-75-95>.
- Focht E., Pushkarskaya A., Chizh O. "'If you die, we don't care.'" How detainees are bullied in Belarus'. BBC News Russian, 14 August 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53773443>.
- Franak Viačorka. 'The EU's "Grave Concern" Will Not Help Belarus'. *Atlantic Council* (blog), 15 September 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/the-eus-grave-concern-will-not-help-belarus/>.
- Fromm, E. *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*. AmericanMentalHealthFoundationBooks, 2011. <https://books.google.at/books?id=SVdy0rtho0kC>.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Revolution of Hope, Toward a Humanized Technology*. Vol. 38. Harper & Row, 1968.
- Goldman, Loren. 'Experimentation and the Future(s) of Political Hope'. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 February 2024, 13684310241229653. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241229653>.
- Gross, Larry P. *Contested Closets: The Politics and Ethics of Outing*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. 'Visibility Politics: Theorizing Racialized Gendering, Homosociality, and the Feminicidal State'. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 2 (January 2020): 311–19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704986>.
- Healey, Dan. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- Heljic, Arman. 'Staging the Romani Queer Revolution: New Approaches to the Study of Romani Queerness'. *Critical Romani Studies* 4, no. 1 (12 April 2022). <https://doi.org/10.29098/crs.v4i1.68>.
- ILGA-Europe's Annual Review Team. 'Annual Review 2024 Of The Human Rights Situation Of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans And Intersex People In Europe And Central Asia'. ILGA-Europe, n.d. https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/02/2024_full_annual_review.pdf.
- 'Introduction to Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts on/from a Post-Soviet Perspective'. *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, no. 5 (15 December 2021). <https://doi.org/10.52323/567892>.
- Ioffe, Grigory. 'Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity'. *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 8 (2003): 1241–72.
- Irina Sidorskaya. 'Belarusian state propaganda on guard of "traditional values"', 11 May 2023. <https://mediaiq.info/belaruskaya-gospropaganda-na-strazhe-tradicionnyh-cennostej-chast-2-kakie-cennosti-tradicionnye>.
- j4t. 'Monitoring of the Hate Speech against LGBTQ+ in the Media of Belarus in 2022', 4 February 2023. <https://j4t.info/en/2023/02/04/monitoring-of-the-hate-speech-against-lgbtq-in-the-media-of-belarus-in-2022/>.
- JIM HEINTZ. "'Europe's Last Dictator" Raises the Stakes with the West'. AP News, 14 November 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-moscow-latvia-lithuania-513f4212d26474f0d474152f28868fc4>.
- Julia Lyashkevich. 'Orientation is Belarusian. How to respond to outing?' dw.com, 15 December 2021. <https://www.dw.com/ru/orientacia-belorus-kak-reagirovat-na-prinuditelnyj-austing/a-60119960>.

- Katherine McFarland Bruce. 'Unity in Diversity: Pride Growth'. In *Pride Parades*, 62–94. New York University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479803613.003.0003>.
- Kondakov, Alexander. 'The Influence of the "Gay-Propaganda" Law on Violence against LGBTIQ People in Russia: Evidence from Criminal Court Rulings'. *European Journal of Criminology* 18, no. 6 (November 2021): 940–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819887511>.
- Korosteleva, Elena A., Irina Petrova, and Anastasiia Kudlenko, eds. *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy*. Bases/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003311454>.
- Kymlicka, Will. *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada*. Toronto ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*. Reprinted. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010.
- Labunskaya, Vera. 'Hope as the Provision for Psychological Security of the Person and the Society'. *Social Psychology and Society* 2, no. 4 (2011): 15–26.
- Langford, Joe, and Pauline Rose Clance. 'The Imposter Phenomenon: Recent Research Findings Regarding Dynamics, Personality and Family Patterns and Their Implications for Treatment'. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 30, no. 3 (1993): 495–501. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.30.3.495>.
- Lawtrend. 'Belarus Dissolves over 1,600 NGOs since 2020 Election – Report'. Pozirk, 6 April 2024. <https://pozirk.online/en/news/78001/>.
- Lee, Yoonmi. *Modern Education, Textbooks, and the Image of the Nation*. 0 ed. Routledge, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203357651>.
- Leksikov, Roman, and Dafna Rachok. 'Beyond Western Theories: On the Use and Abuse of "Homonationalism" in Eastern Europe'. In *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova, 25–49. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20401-3_2.
- Levitanus, Mariya, and Polina Kislitsyna. "'Why Wave the Flag?': (In)Visible Queer Activism in Authoritarian Kazakhstan and Russia". *Central Asian Survey* 43, no. 1 (2 January 2024): 12–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2023.2234955>.
- Lokshina, Tanya. 'Belarus: Systematic Beatings, Torture of Protesters'. OSCE, UN Human Rights Council Inquiries Needed, 15 September 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>.
- Lord David BLENCATHRA, United Kingdom, EC/DA. 'Observation of the Early Parliamentary Elections in Belarus (17 November 2019)'. PACE. Accessed 20 May 2024. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=28304&lang=en>.
- Mack, John. 'Nationalism and the Self'. *Psychohistory Review*, 1983.
- Maria Yeryoma. 'With the World Looking Away, Russia Quietly Took Control over Belarus'. The Kyiv Independent, 4 January 2023. <https://kyivindependent.com/is-belarus-occupied-by-russia/>.
- Marina Henrikson. 'The Protests in Belarus and the Future of the Country's LGBTQ+ Community'. *THE PROTESTS IN BELARUS AND THE FUTURE OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY*, 22 April 2021, Baltic World edition. <https://balticworlds.com/the-protests-in-belarus-and-the-future-of-the-lgbtq-community/>.
- Media Initiative 'Heta Okey'. 'Research on Stigmatization of LGBTQ+ People in Belarusian Society'. Media Initiative 'Heta Okey', 2023. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PDn8ZrjXzaSjE0TqMw6IVd7YkWxdPzCB/view?usp=embed_facebook.
- Mignolo, Walter D., and Arturo Escobar, eds. *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*. 0 ed. Routledge, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315868448>.
- Nasta Mancewicz. 'In Search of a Place: Looking Back at the Gay Pride History in Minsk'. MAKEOUT — Magazine about gender and sexuality, 1 November 2017. <https://makeout.space/2017/11/01/in-search-of-a-place-looking-back-at-the-gay-pride-history-in-minsk.html>.
- news.zerkalo. "'It's the same scam.'" The media expert told how propaganda has changed in the last

- two years and why it works', 7 May 2022. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/13854.html>.
- Newton, Natalie. 'Contingent Invisibility'. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 109–36. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3315253>.
- Not Specified, Author. *Belarus Protests : Information Control and Technological Censorship vs Connected Societies*. Belarus Protests. Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020.
- Opp, Karl-Dieter, and Wolfgang Roehl. 'Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest'. *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (1990): 521–47.
- Ortega-Sánchez, Delfín, Joan Pagès Blanch, and Carlos Pérez-González. 'Emotions and Construction of National Identities in Historical Education'. *Education Sciences* 10, no. 11 (6 November 2020): 322. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110322>.
- OSCE, U. S. Mission. 'On the Anniversary of the Fraudulent Election in Belarus'. U.S. Mission to the OSCE, 8 September 2023. <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-the-anniversary-of-the-fraudulent-election-in-belarus/>.
- 'Overview of the Situation with the Prohibition of Torture in Belarus. Homophobic Torture and Ill-Treatment of a Detainee'. n.d. <https://police-barometer.ru/belarus-2019>.
- Pavel Slyunkin, Philip Bikanov, Katerina Bornukova, Artyom Shraibman, Gennady Korshunov, and Lev Lvovsky. 'Expert Evaluations: BELARUSIAN CHANGE TRACKER'. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, FES, August 2022. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19564.pdf>.
- Perry, Barbara. *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Peterson, Merrill D. 'ASPECTS OF THE NATIONAL IDENTITY'. Edited by Seymour Martin Lipset and Paul C. Nagel. *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 40, no. 4 (1964): 636–41.
- Philipp Bikanau, Konstantin Nesterovich. "'Belarusian Identity in 2023 : A Quantitative Study,'" Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine / Project Belarus'. Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine / Project Belarus, December 2023. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/20889.pdf>.
- Portela, Clara. 'The European Union and Belarus: Sanctions and Partnership?' *Comparative European Politics* 9, no. 4–5 (September 2011): 486–505. <https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2011.13>.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fg5>.
- RBC. 'In Belarus, the state proposed to punish for propaganda of refusal to have children', 19 February 2024. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/02/2024/65d39c4d9a7947da1a92aca2>.
- Richardson, Julia. 'Not Seen and Not Heard: The Security Dilemma of in/Visibility'. *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no. 1 (2 January 2017): 117–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2017.1294833>.
- Richter-Montpetit, Melanie. 'Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner "Abuse" in Abu Ghraib and the Question of "Gender Equality"'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2007): 38–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740601066366>.
- 'Right for Culture. Belarus 2021', 16 February 2022. https://penbelarus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/pen_manitoryng-parushennyau_eng_.pdf.
- Rosenberg, Tiina, Sandra D'Urso, and Anna Renée Winget. *The Palgrave Handbook of Queer and Trans Feminisms in Contemporary Performance*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- Scholl, Christian. 'The New Social Movement Approach'. In *Handbook of Political Citizenship and Social Movements*, by Hein-Anton van der Heijden, 233–58. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781954706.00019>.
- Schweppe, Jennifer. 'What Is a Hate Crime?' Edited by Kar-wai Tong. *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (1 January 2021): 1902643. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1902643>.
- Shmidt, Victoria R., and I. Solomatina. *Zhenskii aktivizm v Belarusi: nevidimyĭ i neprikasaemyĭ = Female activism in Belarus: invisible and untouchable*. Serĭia 'Gendernyĭ marshrut'. Kaunas: Taurapolis, 2017.
- spring96.org. 'The case of Sergey Tikhonovsky: what conclusions can be drawn before the trial begins', 18 May 2021. <https://spring96.org/ru/news/103409>.
- 'Stoprapenow'. UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2007. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/wps/StopRapeNow_Brochure.pdf.

- Stroude, Will. 'Gay Men Reportedly Being Detained in Belarus after Police Raid Clubs'. *Attitude*, 26 October 2017. <https://www.attitude.co.uk/news/world/gay-men-reportedly-being-detained-in-belarus-after-police-raid-clubs-294161/>.
- Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813245>.
- TASS Russian News Agency. 'The history of European sanctions against Belarus'. TASS Russian News Agency, 12 October 2020. <https://tass.ru/info/9694095>.
- Tatiana Melnichuk. 'The life of gays in Belarus: Either get out, or keep your head down'. *BBC Russian Service*, 17 May 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-39954700>.
- Tatiana Nevedomskaya. 'Under the rainbow flag against Lukashenko: LGBT protests'. *dw.com*. Accessed 23 May 2024. <https://www.dw.com/ru/pod-raduzhnym-flagom-protiv-lukashenko-lgbt-soobshhestvo-i-protesty/a-57215607>.
- Tatiana Shchurko. 'From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking Protests in Belarus through a Transnational Feminist Perspective' 8, no. 4 (18 January 2023): 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i4.1007>.
- Taylor, Verta. 'Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance'. *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 5 (October 1989): 761. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2117752>.
- The Moscow Times. 'Belarus Ready to "Unite" With Russia, Lukashenko Says'. *The Moscow Times*, 15 February 2019. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/15/were-ready-unite-with-russia-belarus-leader-lukashenko-says-a64517>.
- 'The UN Report Testifies to Mass Repressions in Belarus in August 2020', 17 March 2022. <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/03/1420122>.
- The University of Bialystok, and Larissa Titarenko. 'Belarus – a Land of Multiculturalism?' *Pogranicze. Studia Społeczne* 18 (2011): 180–97. <https://doi.org/10.15290/pss.2011.18.09>.
- 'Torture of LGBTQ+ people and the regime's homophobic policies'. The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus co-authored a Legal initiative., 2023. https://torturesbelarus2020.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/report_lgbtq_ru.pdf.
- Trencsényi, Balázs, Michal Kopeček, Ahmet Ersoy, Maciej Górny, Vangelis Kechriotis, Diana Mishkova, and Marius Turda. *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945): Texts and Commentaries*. Budapest New York: Central European University Press, 2006.
- Triandafyllidou, Anna. 'National Identity and the "Other"'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (January 1998): 593–612. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798329784>.
- Uladzimir Valodzin. 'Queer History of Belarus in the Second Half of the 20th Century: A Preliminary Study'. Minsk, 2016. https://belarusianqueerstory.noblogs.org/files/2016/10/queer_history.pdf.
- Walker, Brian. 'Social Movements as Nationalisms or, On the Very Idea of a Queer Nation'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume* 22 (1996): 505–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1997.10716826>.
- Windpassinger, Gwendolyn. 'Queering Anarchism in Post-2001 Buenos Aires'. *Sexualities* 13, no. 4 (August 2010): 495–509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460710370657>.
- Witlacil, Mary E. 'The Principle of Political Hope: Progress, Action, and Democracy in Modern Thought'. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 26 January 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00674-w>.
- Yana Soroka and translated by Anton Klimovich. 'Three interviews about art, identity and life in Belarus here and now'. *MAKEOUT — Magazine about gender and sexuality*, 6 August 2021. <https://makeout.space/2021/08/06/three-interviews-about-art-identity-and-life-in-belarus-here-and-now.html>.
- Yeliseyev, Andrei. 'There is no need for Russia to start a war with Belarus', 19 January 2017. <http://surl.li/tujxs>.
- Zerkalo. "'For reasons of public necessity.'" Belarus has secretly adopted a law on the seizure of property', 6 January 2023. <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/29772.html>.
- ZHUKOV, YURI M. 'EXTERNAL RESOURCES AND INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE: Evidence from German-Occupied Belarus'. *World Politics* 69, no. 1 (2017): 54–97.
- Zulver, Julia Margaret. 'Complex Gendered Agency in Mexico: How Women Negotiate Hierarchies

of Fear to Search for the Disappeared'. *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 7, no. 2 (June 2024): 239–55. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16746579646888>.