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Contagion, Contention, and Content:

Political Mobilization on Telegram in the 2020 Belarusian post-Election
Protests

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Abstract

This study aims to scrutinize the role of the social media application Telegram as a protest mobilizing structure during the 2020 post-election uprising in Minsk, Belarus. The purpose is to strengthen the understanding on how protest mobilizations online relate to offline protest participation in authoritarian states, and how the usage of social media in social movements impact, and is influenced by, its authoritarian context. The study utilizes an abductive, qualitative research approach, relying on semi-structured, in-depth, virtual interview data. The study found that Telegram was a decentralized and central mobilizing structure, supplying popular protest opportunities. The amount, speed of information, and tight fit with audiences' protest demands made it efficient. Online Telegram mobilization and offline protest action was seen as complementing and interlinked. The mobilizing aspect of public Telegram channels was the usability of the information available, governed by a process of socialization in private chats and groups, showing the coexistence of weak and strong social ties online. The study findings point towards an interaction of online and offline repression in Belarus. While dissidents are not passive targets of digital authoritarianism, repression was capable of both impeding and driving protest mobilization online and offline. The complementarity of mobilization on Telegram was its constructive features and ability to provide an alternative space for action for highly repressed offline mobilization.

Keywords: Telegram, Belarus, Protest, Participation, Mobilization, Connective Action

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Table of Content

1. INTRODUCTION	9
1.1 AIM AND RELEVANCE	10
1.1.1 <i>Research Aim</i>	10
1.1.2 <i>Research Questions</i>	11
2. REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE.....	12
2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN PROTEST MOBILIZATION	12
2.1.1 <i>Techno-pessimism</i>	12
2.1.2 <i>Techno-optimism</i>	13
2.1.3 <i>Techno-ambivalence</i>	14
2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND PROTEST MOBILIZATION IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES.	15
2.3 TELEGRAM AND PROTEST MOBILIZATION.	17
2.4 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION	18
2.4 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND.....	19
2.4.1 <i>Belarusian Authoritarianism</i>	19
2.4.2 <i>Telegram</i>	22
2.4.3 <i>The 2020 Post-election Uprising</i>	23
3. THEORETICAL GROUNDING.	26
3.1 THE LOGIC OF CONNECTIVE ACTION.	26
3.1.1 <i>Multiple Logics of Action</i>	26
3.1.2 <i>The Personalization of Action</i>	28
3.1.3 <i>Communication as Organization</i>	29
3.2 POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES	29
3.3 INDIVIDUAL PROTEST PARTICIPATION	31
3.3.1 <i>The Dynamics of Protest Demand</i>	31
3.3.2 <i>The Dynamics of Protest Supply</i>	31
3.3.3 <i>Mobilization Dynamic and Mobilizing Structures</i>	32
3.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	34
4. METHODOLOGY	36
4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND STRATEGY.....	36
4.2 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION	37
4.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	37
4.4 DATA ANALYSIS	38
4.5 BIASES	39
4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	40
4.6.1 <i>Risk and Security</i>	40
4.6.2 <i>Consent and Anonymity</i>	41
4.6.3 <i>Psychological Strain</i>	41
4.7 LIMITATIONS	42
5. ANALYSIS	43
5.1 POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES	43
5.1.1 <i>The Election</i>	43
5.1.2 <i>The Internet</i>	44
5.2 REPRESSION.....	45
5.2.1 <i>Offline Repression</i>	45
5.2.2 <i>Online Repression</i>	46
5.3 DYNAMICS OF PROTEST DEMAND.....	48
5.3.1 <i>Breaking the social contract</i>	48
5.4 DYNAMICS OF PROTEST SUPPLY	49
5.4.1 <i>Popular Receptivity to Protest Mobilization</i>	49
5.4.2 <i>Telegram as a Mobilizing Structure</i>	51

5.5 TELEGRAM’S AFFORDANCES	52
5.5.1 Telegram’s functions are constructive	52
5.5.2 Telegram’s functions are destructive	53
5.6 MULTIPLE LOGICS OF ACTION	53
5.6.1 The relationship between online and offline mobilization	54
5.7 PERSONALIZATION OF ACTION	56
5.7.1 Online Personal Action Frame Dynamics.....	56
5.8 COMMUNICATION AS ORGANIZATION	58
5.8.1 Organizationally enabled action	58
5.8.2 Crowd-enabled action	59
7. CONCLUSIONS ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY	62
ANNEX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE	68
ANNEX B: CODING SCHEME	70
ANNEX C: AUTOBIOGRAPHY	80

List of Abbreviations

CSO	–	Civil society organization
ICT	–	Information and communication technologies
POS	–	Political opportunity structures
VPN	–	Virtual private network

“It was three days of not knowing anything, because we didn’t have internet connection. For me, those days felt like it was a kind of war started. It was two different worlds, during the day everything is fine, municipal workers were cleaning the streets of all the garbage that was left after the night, and during the night war started.” (Informant 8)

1. Introduction

The post-soviet country of Belarus, often unflatteringly referred to as ‘the last dictatorship in Europe’ (Bedford, 2021), has had minimal experience with free and fair elections since its independence in 1991. Belarus’ current incumbent president, Alyaksander Lukashenka, gained office in 1994 during the country’s arguably first and only free democratic election. Despite events of democratic mass-mobilization around fraudulent elections in 2006 and 2010, popular uprisings in the country have had little progress in pushing regime change or significant democratization of politics and governance (Bedford, 2021). Belarus has arguably one of the least favorable domestic institutional and political environments for a democratic transition in Eastern Europe (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010). During the second half of 2020, after yet another fraudulent election (Bedford, 2021; OSCE, 2020), Belarus experienced unprecedented, country-wide peaceful mass-protests calling for free, fair, and democratic elections, respect for human rights, and ultimately for Lukashenka and his regime to step down (Mateo, 2022).

The 2020 post-election protests reached wide international attention, branded “the most significant mass mobilization witnessed in Eastern Europe in recent decades.” (Onuch, 2020), with weekly marches and rallies with up to 200,000 participants in the capital Minsk (Bedford, 2021). However, its significance was not just because of the protests’ scale and mass, but further for the utilization of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), specifically social media, and ‘tech-savvy’ solutions by protesters to circumvent authoritarianism (ibid.). The regime quickly shut down internet during the early days of the protests after the election day of August 9th (Herasimenka et al., 2020). However, the social media platform Telegram rose as a prevalent element in the protest events, pushing some to brand it a “Telegram Revolution” (Williams, 2020). Herasimenka et al. (2020) show, drawing on protest survey data from 12,000 participants, that 60 percent initially relied on the word of mouth for information, and more than 80 percent of those who joined after 10th of August did so after seeing protest on the streets. However, once internet was made available again, approximately 90 percent of protesters relied on the Internet for information, while around half employed *online* protest repertoires,

such as watching and sharing videos and live streams, uploading multimedia content of protests, and using protest hashtags (ibid.).

The visible online-offline dynamics of protest mobilization witnessed in the 2020 post-election protests in Belarus, is arguably re-invigorating the academic debate regarding the democratic potential of social media.

1.1 Aim and Relevance

1.1.1 Research Aim

This study aims to scrutinize the role of the cell-phone social media application Telegram as a protest mobilization structure during the 2020 post-election uprising in Minsk, Belarus. Its purpose is to further strengthen our understanding on *how* protest mobilizations online relate to offline protest participation in authoritarian states, and how the usage of social media in social movements impact, and is influenced by, its authoritarian context. Taking the 2020 Belarusian post-election protests as a research case, the study will contribute to the existing body of research looking into protest mobilization online, the relationship between online and offline mobilizing structures, and how individuals mobilize in contemporary social movements in repressive contexts.

By investigating individual micro-mobilization qualitatively, marrying theoretical perspectives accounting for online and offline, structural and individual explanations, this study further contributes to fill important research gaps (see section 2.4) with insights from more seldom utilized research approaches.

Finally, by utilizing an online, interview-based research strategy, this study hopes to inspire and inform future qualitative research methodology in authoritarian contexts, especially for students. This by providing input and detailed accounts on the research process, methodological steps and ethical considerations taken in this study to conduct safer online research in authoritarian states (See Chapter 4 and Annex C).

1.1.2 Research Questions

Overall research question:

What role did Telegram play as a mobilizing structure in the 2020 post-election protests in Minsk, Belarus?

Sub-questions to guide the research:

- i. *How did online Telegram mobilization contribute to the emergence of street protests in the 2020 post-election protests in Minsk, Belarus?*
- ii. *How did the authoritarian online and offline environment influence Telegram-usage in the 2020 post-election protests in Minsk, Belarus?*
- iii. *In what ways did Telegram-usage contribute to shaping favorable conditions to mobilize against authoritarian rule in the 2020 post-election protests in Minsk, Belarus?*

2. Review of Existing Literature

2.1 Social Media's Role in Protest Mobilization

Initially, scholarly skepticism regarding ICTs' influence on mobilization, protest and movement emergence was dominating within the field of social movement studies (Earl, 2019:291). However, literature to date can be categorized around three ideal camps: the techno- pessimists, optimists, and ambivalent (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016).

2.1.1 Techno-pessimism

The techno-pessimist stance generally views the promises of social media in terms of its democratic potential, mobilizing capacity, and effectiveness in bringing about social change through collective action as quite inflated, even naïve (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016). Early scholarly debate largely circulated around the Internet and its perceived limits in facilitating, developing, and sustaining strong social ties among individuals, important to micro-mobilization for collective action (Diani, 2000; Tarrow, 1998). Weak interpersonal social ties developed online cannot incentivize the high-risk behavior of going onto the streets and protests (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016). Additionally, the work of Morozov (2011) argues that the utility and democratic potential of ICTs and the Internet for democratic actors is superficial, outweighed by the additional repressive capacity and various surveillance methods it provides authoritarian regimes and malicious states. Rød and Weidmann's (2015) research concludes that repressive states are more likely to introduce the Internet to wider segments of society than more democratic states. Others raise concern of the potential impacts of a 'digital divide' among online-based protest forms, leading to online movements increasingly being composed of, and focusing on the issues and interests of well-off segments of societies who have access to the Internet (Tilly, 2004). More recent criticism focuses on aspects around modern ICTs and its effectiveness, questioning online protest's impact or ability to contribute to wider socio-political change. Concerns around so called 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' are often raised, understood as symbolic, effortless or less durable and impactful online activism. Such protest forms are argued to be ineffective and

decreases individuals' incentives for more radical political mobilization, as they provide a false sense of contributing to change (Morozov, 2011; Earl, 2019:290).

2.1.2 Techno-optimism

Contrary to the pessimists, the techno-optimists emphasize social media's ability to contribute to collective action, ranging from small local issues to mobilization against systemic issues such as climate change and authoritarianism (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016). While some scholarly work paint utopian pictures of the democratic potential of the Internet (e.g., Shirky, 2008), most techno-optimistic research acknowledge the limits to the Internet. Larry Diamond (2010) introduced the concept of 'liberation technologies', defined as any ICTs that "expand the horizon of freedom" (ibid.:70). He highlights liberation technologies' – such as social media – ability to facilitate alternative news reporting and consumption, expose wrongdoing, openly express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, and deepen civic participation. Diamond (2010) lists several cases from the last decades where social media have played important roles in mass popular mobilization.

Earl's (2019:296) review concludes that the general evidence-base to date is largely supportive of social media's positive influence on protest mobilization. Generally, social media is argued to facilitate *online* activism in three main ways. Firstly, they allow individuals to widely express experiences and opinions. Secondly, social media allow online network members to provide and raise support, organize activities, and challenge negative responses to their protest (Greijdanus et al. 2020).

According to Jost et al. (2018), there are two major pathways by which social media can affect *offline* social movement participation: informational and motivational. Accordingly, these are not mutually exclusive but work in tandem to influence political participation. News about transportation, protester turnout, police presence, level of violence, medical services, and legal support is spread efficiently through social media channels, providing vital information to the coordination of protest activities. Secondly, messages and multimedia content emphasizing moral indignation, social identification, group efficacy, political goals and grievances are transmitted, representing emotional and motivational messages both in support or

opposition to protest activity. Similar sentiments can be drawn from Fisher and Boekkooi (2010) and Enjolras et al. (2013).

ICTs facilitate engagement by reducing transaction and communication costs in mobilization (Anderson, 2020; Bennet and Segerberg, 2013) which could aid activists in sustaining engagement with a multiple number of causes, creating spillover effects between movements (Walgrave et al. 2011).

2.1.3 Techno-ambivalence

Modern social movements rarely rely on an exclusive online or offline format but are often hybrid in nature (Earl, 2019:297). Some research argue an ambivalent stance to internet-based technology, recognizing the mobilizing potential of ICTs while scrutinizing under what condition these hold and produce negative or positive mobilizing effects (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016). Beissinger's (2017) research across several authoritarian countries argue that social media can provide alternative avenues for civic engagement where 'conventional' civil society remains weak. However, it provides little basis for consolidating democratization processes, with little capacity to produce formal governing alternatives (ibid.). Along similar lines, Swain (2013) provides insights to the limits in the online and offline relationship in contemporary protest. Accordingly, internet offers easily accessible and effective means for coordination and mobilization. However, physical public spaces are still largely needed to take political claims and action from political peripheries to the societal center stage because of its wider access, outreach, visibility, and disruptive potential (ibid.).

There is evidence to the decreasing importance of formal network and organizing actors in contemporary digitalized protest (Benent and Segerberg, 2012). However, it is still unclear under what conditions and circumstances formal organizations, or networks, are necessary to facilitate, coordinate and stage protest (Earl, 2019:297). Vissers et al. (2012) study indicate that mobilization could be medium-specific, where online mobilization and communication mostly support online protest participation, while offline mobilizing structures facilitate offline protest.

Research sees social media as a catalyst, complementing (Anderson, 2020; Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012) or inseparable (Greijdanus et al. 2020), from offline

protest mobilization contributing to “an acceleration of processes that normally occur much more slowly” (McGarty et al. 2013:3). Online and offline activism correlate, either because people’s online and offline behaviours are increasingly intertwined, or individual online activism can mobilise others for offline protest (Greijdanus et al. 2020). Anderson (2020) found that digital and conventional protest organizing have a symbiotic relationship, constituting reciprocal modes of engagement, strengthening, and supporting each other. They compound with peoples’ pre-existing offline mobilizing networks, producing different impacts on participation based on how social media is used and by whom (Onuch, 2015). The separation of online and offline human realities becomes irrelevant, as Beissinger (2017:365) points out, individuals’ networks offline are transferred online through ‘contacts’, ‘follows’ and ‘friends’ etc. on social networks.

2.2 Social Media and Protest Mobilization in Authoritarian Regimes.

Most research on social movements and collective action centers on democratic countries (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), the few studies on ICT and protests in non-democratic contexts mostly focus on cross-country, macro-level analyses (Greijdanus et al. 2020), or disregard how ICTs interact with offline mobilizing structures (Anderson, 2020).

The vertical interaction between the state and citizen in authoritarian states are commonly characterized by force, dependence, and exploitation which hampers the production of protest-important social capital and ability for contentious action (Putnam, 1993:179). Social media promotes the development of social capital such as group identities and interpersonal trust among users through virtual ‘communities’ negotiating collective protest behavior (Anderson, 2020).

Most states fall somewhere in-between the spectrum of totalitarian and democratic. As expanded on in section 2.4.1 in this study, contemporary authoritarian states often allow for some controlled political competition to occur to maintain the impression of popular legitimacy (Chen and Moss, 2019:667). Rather than risking igniting the masses by illegitimate or indiscriminate violence, regimes often employ

both soft and hard repressive tactics to decrease dissidents' support and drain movements' momentum and recourses (ibid.)

Social movements in authoritarian contexts are characterized by many similar elements as social movements in democratic states (Johnston, 2015). However, mobilization involves significantly higher risks, potential cost, and constraints for participants. However, clearly, protest is not uncommon in repressive governments (Chen and Moss, 2019:667). Given the structural constraints, movement mobilization tends to occur 'underground', providing free spaces to express political opinions (ibid.).

Digital platforms themselves have become highly contested political spaces where civil society and the state fight for control (Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). The higher the perceived risks and potential cost associated with collective action, the stronger and more numerous the ties between participating individuals are needed (della Porta, 2006:117;118). Under authoritarian rule, social media offers a space to overcome collective action problems, that can galvanize opposition (Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar, 2013) providing lacking opportunities to air grievances and gauge public opinion (McGarty et al., 2013).

Micro-level evidence to date generally supports a positive relation between online activism and offline protest among citizens under repressive regimes, offering citizens access to alternative information, that typically keeps wider segments of aggrieved citizens at home (Greijdanus et al. 2020), reducing fears by providing evidence that opposition to the regime is large, committed, and united (Anderson, 2020), and reducing the coordination costs, instigating popular attitudinal change, decreasing informational uncertainty, increasing the mobilizing effect of protest claims (Ruijgok, 2017).

Brantly (2019) found robust evidence of the positive impact of social media in facilitating physical protest turnout in the Ukrainian Euromaidan revolution. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) conclude that social media played a central role in mobilizing street protesters during the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt 2011,

Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar (2013) reached similar conclusions regarding social media in the Tunisian revolution in late 2010.

2.3 Telegram and Protest Mobilization.

Generally, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have occupied most scholarly attention to date (Earl, 2019:299). This is significant as Telegram has reached over 700 million active users (Telegram, 2022), and became the most downloaded cell-phone application worldwide in January 2021 (Urman et al. 2021).

Few studies exist that scrutinize protest mobilization on Telegram (Urman et al. 2021). The studies found in English that explicitly look at Telegram-usage and its role in protest mobilization are: Urman et al. (2021) - analyzing protest mobilization on Telegram around the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill movement in Hong Kong; Wijermars and Lokot (2022) - investigate the practices, performance, and user perceptions of Telegram as an 'actor' in the 2020 Belarus protests; Mateo (2022) – investigating the role of pre-election (Telegram) social networks in influencing protest emergence and participation in Belarus 2020; and Rudnik (2022) – analyzing political online mobilization on Telegram in the 2020 Belarusian post-election protest. All four studies use content analysis method of electronic messages on Telegram, while Mateo's (2022) analysis further employs multivariate logistic regressions.

Urman et al. (2021) found that the Hong-Kong Telegram networks, while fragmented in the beginning, rapidly became cohesive which fostered the efficiency of information spread on police presence, protest related actions, and deliberation. They highlight the importance of local community channels and groups for the coordination and distribution of information in the wider leaderless movement network.

In Belarus, Wijermars and Lokot's (2022) study found that Belarusian citizens perceived Telegram as an ally in their struggle against repression and digital censorship. Users pragmatically weighed the desire to build and sustain communities of action, Telegram's channels and group administrator's reputation, against perceived protest risks. The Belarusian regime used Telegram's limited

content moderation as an opportunity to intervene and coopt grassroots civic approaches (ibid.). Mateo (2022) sheds light on the decentralized and country-wide nature of the 2020 election protests in Belarus. She found that that pre-existing social networks on Telegram played a significant role in driving early protest by facilitating communication, coordination, and engagement among citizens in towns and cities across Belarus. Mateo (2022) concludes that dissatisfaction and opposition in Belarus towards the regime was widespread pre-election, early activity on local networks prepared and motivated people to be ready to mobilize after election day on 9th of August 2020. Rudnik (2022) concludes that direct calls to action, coordination and dissemination of information, requests to send information and multimedia content by ordinary Telegram users to digital mobilization platform was important mobilization tactics visible on Telegram during the Belarusian post-election protests. She further calls into question the online-offline protest divide in Belarus, where online civic action synchronized with offline protest (Rudnik, 2022).

2.4 Research Contribution

Fewer studies exist on social movement and protest mobilization and emergence in authoritarian states as compared to democracies (Earl, 2019:295). Additionally, most of the studies presented in section 2.1 and 2.2 are quantitative studies, conducting macro-level analyses of the role of social media in protest. According to Greijdanus et al. (2020), micro-level analyses are rare in repressive contexts, mainly due to the lack of individual-level data on activism. Anderson's (2020) study employs individual survey data across a diverse set of non-democratic regimes. However, it does not allow the author to ascertain precisely how these media were used, nor in what ways they were influential to protesters. Additionally, few studies exist investigating how online technologies creates favorable environments for the emergence of movements, and how the potential for mobilization in restrictive contexts is enlarged by social media usage (Earl, 2019:295). There appears to be a lack of research in authoritarian contexts which consider the ways in which these ICTs coexist with, and relate to, pre-existing structures of mobilization (Anderson, 2020). Anderson (2020) concludes by emphasizing that the existing quantitative analyses must be complemented by theoretical and

qualitative work which “*carefully considers the ways in which new media interact with a system of pre-existing actors, behaviors, and political opportunities*” (ibid.:12-13).

Accordingly, additional research is needed investigating specifically the Telegram platform, and protest mobilization in authoritarian states. While it is important not to use technologically deterministic arguments, ascribing agency to technology itself, it is important to investigate *how* technologies are used by people (Earl, 2019:292; Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). Wijermars and Lokot (2022) research devote some considerations discussing the *affordances* of Telegram, i.e. the ways in which the materiality and features of Telegram allow users to mobilize. However, their study relates to popular perceptions and not the *process of mobilization* (ibid.).

Accordingly, this study will contribute to fill above-mentioned research gaps through: (i) situating social media’s role in protest mobilization in authoritarian states, (ii) qualitatively analyzing the interplay between the online and offline spheres of micro-mobilization of individuals and (iii) investigating the effects of the Belarusian repressive context (iv) examining in what ways Telegram have contributed to enabling protest in Belarus.

2.4 Contextual Background

2.4.1 Belarusian Authoritarianism.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by regime change triggering both democracy and authoritarianism, a process commonly referred to as the emergence of ‘hybrid’ regimes. (Hale, 2002; Silitski 2010a). Hybridity refers to a political climate where democratic and authoritarian forms of governance operate in tandem, where neither seem to clearly dictate the rules of the political game. Hybrid regimes allow for some formal political competition (such as elections), although executed and occurring on a heavily pro-incumbent institutional and political arena (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Protest groups in hybrid societies may voice some political claims within the officially accepted political discourse, but still risk facing significant political prosecution, repression, or censorship (Chen and Moss, 2019:668).

Belarus has commonly been referred to as a consolidated, hybrid authoritarian regime (Bedford, 2021), in practice meaning heavy restrictions on civil liberties, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression, widespread vote-fraud and nontransparent and punitive governance, a partial judicial system, and politically motivated violence and imprisonment (Way, 2010:251; FreedomHouse, 2022). Belarus has regressed further due to official responses to the 2020 post-election protests and is one of the lowest ranked countries in the world in terms of democratic governing, with very limited social and political freedoms (FreedomHouse, 2022; V-dem, 2022).

According to Silitski (2005;2010b) the Belarusian state has relied on a preemptive authoritarian system, where democratic groups are deterred before they become a significant threat to the regime. Accordingly, three levels of preemptive authoritarianism have been identified in Belarus. Firstly, on a tactical level the organizational infrastructure of the opposition and civil society is harassed and marginalized. Secondly, political institutions are organized and constructed in the incumbents' favor. This includes adopting extensive media regulations and criminalizing or severely restricting civil society operations. Thirdly, the cultural level, propaganda and controlling university teaching strategically manipulating the consciousness and collective memory of the Belarusian public, demonizing democratic dissident groups, the democratic governing model, and the opposition (Siltiski, 2005;2010b:76). The Belarusian regimes's coercive state apparatus, high degree of control over the national economy, and an hostile police force provides it with a strong repressive capacity. State control over the economy allows effective ways to buy support, and muzzle political dissidents by threatening the livelihood of employees of state-run business if they openly contest the regime (Way, 2010:251). Importantly, past electoral uprisings and pre-election democratic mobilization has been deflected, without resorting to extensive public coercion or indiscriminate violence (Korosteleva, 2012). In the past, the regime has relied on selective and targeted repression (and extreme violence) to a limited opposition population, creating a political environment of 'controlled openness' (Bedford, 2021).

In Belarus, independent civil society organizations (CSOs) and public associations are required to be officially reregistered by the state. Many are ‘liquidated’ on dubious or political grounds. Unregistered CSOs cannot formally operate, acquire bank accounts or offices, and are prohibited from receiving and spending off-shore financial support required by the state to be registered. Operations of unregistered civic organizations are unlawful, punishable by heavy fines or even imprisonment (Laputska, 2017). According to state law, any unauthorized gathering of more than three individuals is categorized as an organized activity, allowing for prosecution (ibid.).

The internet in Belarus is not free from regime control, including obstacles to access, heavy limits to content, and severe violations of user rights. The regime monitors social media activity and conversations in messaging applications of citizens, activists, and journalists (FreedomHouse. 2021). Alongside a general democratic decline after 2020, internet-freedom declined dramatically. Meaning further amendments to the country’s extensive media regulation laws, a sector the regime already has full control of. New laws regulating “extremism” in social and ordinary media have branded several independent media and Telegram channels as terrorists allowing for prosecution of followers and administrators (ibid.). The regime owns the only internet service provider, controlling internet through legal and technical means, now blocking access to over 100 news and media sites, including the widely popular internet portal TUT.by (FreedomHouse, 2022).

The regime arguably views online activity as a regime threat signified by the scale of the recent round of mass arrests of independent online journalism and crackdowns on popular use of social media (ibid.). An event signifying the lengths the regime will go to muzzle alternative information and freedom of expression online, is the forced grounding of the Ryanair flight traveling over Belarusian airspace, where authorities arrested passenger Raman Pratasevich, a co-founder and editor in chief of NEXTA [HEXTA] (one of Belarus’s most popular Telegram channels) (FreedomHouse, 2021).

Apart from internet shutdowns, site blocking, surveillance, criminalization of “extremist” content, the regime conducts online propaganda, e.g., infiltrating pro-

democratic Telegram channels, orchestrating a counter mobilization online in support of Lukashenka, and conducting cyberattacks on dissidents' social media accounts and pro-democracy websites (Ziniakova, 2022).

2.4.2 Telegram

The Telegram messaging application was founded by two Russian-born exiled tech-entrepreneurs in 2013. The application emerged in the backdrop of a growing crackdown on civil society and political expression in Russia (Wijermars and Lokot, 2022).

Today, Telegram is one of the most popular messaging platforms in the post-Soviet sphere. It is popular among activists and dissidents in Belarus who appreciate its relative anonymity, hands-off approach to content moderation and relative security (Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). Additionally, Telegram has a track record of remaining available despite state censorship, internet blackouts, and bans (ibid.). The application's main features and profile include public and private message channels and groups, encryption, secret chats, 'unsend' anything and anonymous media forwarding between individuals, voice, video or group calls, and bots made by third-party developers – essentially an account operated by software functioning as an artificial user capable of doing whatever the developer codes it to do (Telegram, 2022). While groups are ideal for close-knit, smaller user networks like family, friend, or ad-hoc groups, channels can support communities of up to 200,000 members, and an unlimited number of subscribers, ideal for broadcasting multimedia messages to large audiences (ibid.). Due to the absence of algorithmic filtering, Telegram users are argued to be in greater control of what they see on the application, whilst making it harder for authorities to hijack and coopt users' feeds (Urman et al. 2021). In essence, Telegram's affordances allow users to gain publicity through channels, and mobilize and coordinate through groups, while preserving relative anonymity (ibid.).

Telegram claims to promote internet security, resistance to state interference, privacy, and freedom of expression. However, popular perceptions of its security are arguably better than its de-facto performance (ibid.). Tech activists argue that the application misleads its users with inflated security assurances, this as the

platform does not share details of its encryption protocols and end-to-end encryption is not enabled by default or for group chats (ibid.). The lack of content and account moderations “*made protesters’ communications, and by extension their material actions, vulnerable to manipulation and provocations that have also served as pretext for prosecutions*” during the 2020 Belarusian protest (Wijermars and Lokot, 2022:140).

2.4.3 The 2020 Post-election Uprising

Past protests of fraudulent elections in 2006 and 2010 have failed to inspire mass-mobilization of Belarusian society - meeting harsh, but targeted repression (Bedford, 2021). Throughout his reign, Lukashenka has possessed a precarious legitimacy among the Belarusian population (Korosteleva, 2012; Ioffe, 2007; Bedford, 2021), where large segments of society identify with Lukashenka’s governance, knowingly legitimizing his politics and policies (Korosteleva, 2006). According to Korosteleva (2012) the social contract between the regime and citizens has been conditioned on a public withdrawal from politics and opposition, while the regime delivers stability, safety, and collectivistic economic opportunities. Lukashenka has managed to align himself with the representation of collective cultural, historical and traditional Belarusian values (Ioffe, 2007). The traditional political opposition on the other hand have along with demonization from the regime mostly enjoyed general unpopularity (Bedford, 2021).

According to Bedford (2021), mass political mobilization in 2020 was enabled by the erosion of the three pillars authoritarian stability: repression, cooptation, and legitimation. Past drivers of popular inaction: public fear, social and monetary security provided in exchange for regime loyalty, and the general understanding that there were no viable political alternatives, was dismantled (ibid.). Accordingly, since the last election, macroeconomic challenges have had a major negative impact on the socioeconomic situation in Belarus, effectively hampering the regime’s ability to provide the same level of welfare and financial stability for its population. Additionally, the regime’s ignorance of, and lack of official responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to popular anger and widespread community mobilization, rendering the social contract practically invalid (ibid.). Lastly, the

pragmatic and selective repression, or the ‘controlled openness’, in the political system proved to be unstable, allowing dissidents to build an anti-authoritarian foundation to facilitate change once opportunity was given (ibid.).

In the 2020 presidential runup, the businessman Viktor Babaryko; former Belarusian ambassador Valery Tsapkala, and the founder of a Minsk IT-hub Syarhei Tsikhanouski, all managed to collect the tedious 100.000 citizen-signatures required to compete in the election. Like past election challengers, the first to get imprisoned was Syarhei Tsikhanouski, later Viktor Babaryko – both on bogus charges. Tsapkala was barred from participation, although officially qualifying (ibid.). However, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Tsikhanouski’s wife, was allowed to run in the election despite her popularity. Babaryka and Tsapkala’s election teams officially joined her after they were kept out of the election. Tsikhanouskaya, Veronica Tsapkala (Tsapkala’s wife), and Maria Kolesnikova (Babaryka’s campaign manager), or the ‘triad’ of women - overlooked and underestimated by Lukashenka based on their gender, became the joint opposition to the regime under Tsikhanouskaya’s leadership (Bedford, 2021). The election campaign proved two things: there was widespread dissatisfaction with the regime, and the Belarusian population was willing and able to engage extensively in electoral activities, both online and offline (ibid.).

The election proceeded on the 9th of August without international observers, ridden with misconduct and fraud (OSCE, 2020), and unsurprisingly Lukashenka won with 80% of the votes. However, Tsikhanouskaya’s voters were asked to register votes on alternative internet polling platforms, such as Golos [Голос] (Voice) - with the help of a Telegram chatbot, Tjestnye Liudi [Честные люди] (Honest People), and Zubr. It revealed that Tsikhanouskaya was likely to have majority of votes, and that it was impossible that Lukashenka got 80 percent of the votes (Bedford, 2021).

The protesters taking to the streets the first nights following the rigged election, and journalists covering the events, were met with extreme brutality. The authoritarian security apparatus deployed mass-arrests and arbitrary detentions, systematic torture and degradation, beatings, rape, and even murders of protestors (Viasna, 2021). Protests were followed by Women’s Solidarity Marches. When these were

met with brute force, ‘marches of senior people’ emerged (Navumau and Matveieva, 2021). On the 16th of August, over 200,000 people met at the Stella square in Minsk, followed by peaceful mass-protest actions everyday for more than 160 consecutive days (ibid.), and all over the country (Mateo, 2022). Despite facing continuous repression and violence, protests and marches grew throughout autumn and started fading coming into December, however without ousting the incumbent regime.

Online initiatives not only allowed Belarusians to verify votes in the presidential election, but document electoral misconduct, crimes by law enforcement authorities, unfair trials, provide assistance to political prisoners, and coordinate new forms of protest (Ziniakova, 2022). These online initiatives have some distinctive features: they were (i) horizontal (made by citizens for citizens), (ii) decentralized (often without formal organizational coordination), and (iii) Telegram centric (some utilize anonymous chatbots to collect information or conduct public opinion, some maintain Telegram channels, and some use the Telegram chat function for coordination) (ibid.).

3. Theoretical Grounding.

Contemporary theorists generally emphasize attention to the role of identity, culture, emotion, networks, political process, and opportunity structures to explore the emergence and spread of collective action (Melucci, 1989; Jasper, 1997; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001; della Porta and Diani, 2006).

However, as in the case of the 2020 Belarusian post-election uprising, there has arguably been a visible shift in the modes of protest emergence and social movement formation with the introduction of interactive online social networks, vastly different from traditional offline communication mediums (Bennet, 2014).

3.1 The Logic of Connective Action.

In contrast to conventional theoretical notions of *collective action*, Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) concept of the logic of *connective action* builds on the recognition that contemporary political action is often underpinned by a personalization of politics, with digitally networked and organized action. Accordingly, connective action logics stem from large-scale, personalized and digitally mediated political engagement which is "*enabling people to commit to an action and recommend it to others by sharing their personal participation stories, photos, or videos*" (ibid.:16). Hence the digital organizational dynamics of contemporary social movements demand analysis on its own analytical terms (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013:28).

Bennet and Segerberg (2013:195) present three main concepts underpinning their understanding and analysis of the logic of connective action: (i) multiple logics of action, (ii) the personalization of action, (iii) communication as organization.

3.1.1 Multiple Logics of Action

Traditional theories generally associate collective action with averse individuals overcoming barriers to *collective action* through resource-rich social movement organizations, facilitating and creating incentives for people to take risks, invest resources and participate in networking process with others. The importance of leadership, resources, and brokerage among stakeholders are often stressed

(ibid.:196). Bennet and Segerberg (2013:196) argue for an additional logic to be at play, namely the logic of *connective action*. Here more fine-grained individual engagement, personal stories, and other engaging multimedia content, is communicated through technologies across and within social networks, yielding organizational dynamics outside the direct influence of formal organizations. Importantly, however, is that *connective* and *collective* action logics do not compete but should be viewed in complementary, relational terms (ibid.).

Bennet and Segerberg (2013:46-48) distinguish three *ideal* types of social movements along the spectrum of technologically driven mass action. First, at one extreme, *organizationally brokered collective action* forms are large-scale networks that *depend* on *brokering organizations* to carry the burden of facilitating cooperation and mobilizing individuals. Such networks use digital and social media vertically as means to mobilize and manage participation and coordinating. Second, *organizationally enabled connective action* are protest networks centered around several influential organizations who employ a variety of *broadly shared* digital mechanisms for *personalizing* the ways individuals may engage with the issues and causes of the actors. Third, at the other extreme from organizationally brokered collective action types, are *crowd-enabled connective action*. These networks are largely organized *without* traditional central organizational actors, but primarily through *technology-enabled communication* alone. The second and third build on

the logic of connective action, while still relying on face-to-face participation such as protests and rallies.

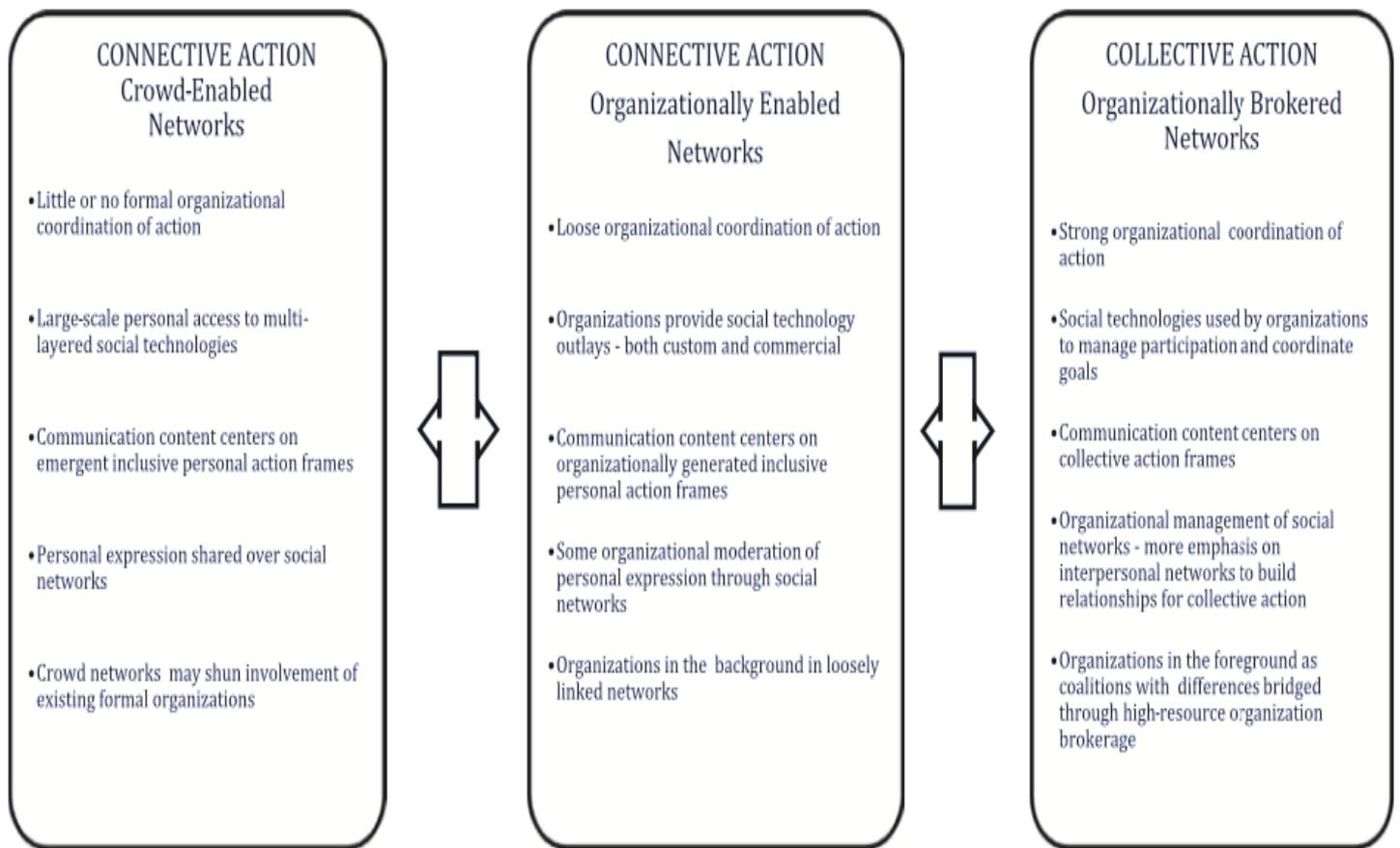


Figure 1. Connective and collective action networks (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013:47).

3.1.2 The Personalization of Action

According to Bennet and Segerberg (2013:197), digital communication has differing roles in different technologically driven networks. However, traditional collective action networks such as the organizationally brokered, tend to channel, and reinforce already pre-existing action dynamics. In connective action on the other hand, information and communication become organizers in their own right. This as connective action is argued to be based on self-motivated sharing and co-creation among individuals online (ibid.). People, through technology that allow the sharing of multimedia content, can engage, and consume protest themes that are susceptible to personalization, appropriation, and collaboration.

Accordingly, critical highly individually adopted, and versatile *personal action frames* that support the content sharing and consumption allow people to adopt their own connection to specific protest issues, rather than absorbing more ‘demanding’ models regarding how to think and act, as communicated in traditional collective action dynamics (ibid.). Hence, through social and digital media, people can share their engagement and contributions in connective actions, easily adopted by others, lowering demands on motivating identity factors (e.g., ideology, geography, culture, or group), transcending beyond traditional boundaries to protest participation more easily, offering multiple levels of entry into an action space (ibid.). Thus, personalization in *connective action* networks build up and scale mobilization rather than building on what is already ‘being done’ by formal organizational actors in *collective action*.

3.1.3 Communication as Organization

Central in the understandings of the operations of connective action through crowd- and organizationally enabled networks is the argument of *communication as central to organization* (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013:198). By looking beyond digital media as merely a tool to decrease costs of interaction in networks, but recognizing how action becomes significantly organized on, and through, digital media platforms, Bennet and Segerberg (2013) highlight how the organizational qualities of communication can define differences between connective and collective networks. Accordingly, in crowd- and organizationally enabled networks, online interpersonal communication takes a larger organizing role as compared to the organizationally brokered type. Here connective networks on social media act as organizations, where people can establish relationships, transmit information, and self-coordinate activities (ibid.).

As previously mentioned, the logic of connective action does not replace the existing theoretical perspectives behind collective action but infuses it with its digitalized networked dynamic. Arguably, structural constraints come into play in both the online and offline spheres (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013:41).

3.2 Political Opportunity Structures

To account for structural challenges of repression and emerging opportunities facing protest mobilization not captured by Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) theory, this study draws on Political Opportunity Structures (POS). A key aspect of analyzing POS is to investigate how 'windows of opportunities' in societal structures bring about new mobilization dynamics.

POS analysis focus on the interplay between political opportunities, organizational capacity, and a process of 'cognitive liberation' of populations (McAdam and Tarrow, 2019:21). Central factors of analysis include the availability of movement allies, civil society and regime strength, institutional setting and distribution of political power, movement opponents and strategies (della Porta, 2013). Generally, *regime suppression or facilitation* indicate the level of discouragement or encouragement emergent protest movements face by state actors (McAdam and Tarrow, 2019:21).

Important to underline is that opportunities, threats, and constraints are context-specific and subjective and should be visible to potential challengers and perceived as an opportunity (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001:43). Traditionally, political opportunities rather than threats have been emphasized in social movement studies (Almedia, 2019:43). Perceived threats influence preexisting popular grievances, as well as pushes individuals to take on new risks and identities as protest participants. Common themes of structural threats are economic, health, environmental, rights infringements, and level of state repression (ibid.:47-51). Repressive acts by regimes on contentious popular action produce non-linear results, sometimes deterring protest, other times it fuels heightened attempts at protest (ibid.:51).

In authoritarian states, counter-hegemonic protest tends to be treated as threats to the regime (McAdam and Tarrow, 2019:23). This ultimately has bearing on the "*arrays of performances*" available and utilized by social movements (ibid.). However, this relationship is reciprocal. Repertoires of contention can shape society once mobilized (ibid.:29).

POS have been criticized for being structurally biased, where political opportunities are treated as objective features of political contexts (ibid.). Therefore, it is

important to adhere to a more interpretive, interactive conception of political context (ibid.:32), arguably allowed for by introducing theoretical arguments on individual dynamics of protest participation and mobilization.

3.3 Individual Protest Participation

This section will highlight some essential theoretical arguments behind how and why individuals turn from passive bystanders into active agents in protests. These are later linked to the logic of connective action presented in section 3.1 and the structural concepts in 3.2 to marry the online and offline, individual and structural theoretical arguments guiding this study.

Klandermans (2004) summarizes individual participation in demonstrations into the three dynamics of *demand*, *supply*, and *mobilization*. Accordingly, *demand* refers to the individual drivers of protest participation. *Supply* refers to protest networks/organizations and the events providing protest opportunities, such as demonstrations and rallies. *Mobilization* is the process which ultimately links protests' demand and supply sides, the better the fit in a given population between the demand and supply, the greater turnout for a protest event (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, 2019:375).

3.3.1 The Dynamics of Protest Demand

The *demand* side of protests essentially makes up the reasons people protest, collectively making the pool of movement sympathizers. Individual protest factors are generally: (i) grievances (unsatisfied individual or collective political demands), (ii) perceptions on possibility of change, (iii) identification (collective identities increases individual will to protest on group's behalf), (iv) emotions (e.g. anger as motivator), and (v) social embeddedness (networks which facilitate grievance and emotion formation and consolidate protest and collective identities towards action) (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, 2019:377).

3.3.2 The Dynamics of Protest Supply

Even if people are willing to demonstrate, there must be demonstration opportunities, i.e. a supply of protest. The *supply side* of protests are made of the

array of protest networks, and the level of individual engagement in these, geared towards political action for collective claims of a protest population (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, 2019:379-380).

3.3.3 Mobilization Dynamic and Mobilizing Structures

Lastly, mobilization is the complex process which links the demand (willingness) and supply (opportunities and structures to voice political claims) sides of protest. It is the social process where individuals align their interests and willingness to act collectively to concrete protest action. A *mobilization structure* on the other hand represents all informal and formal, virtual and offline networks, inside or outside social movements, acting as vehicles for mobilization (ibid.:380). Generally, networks are argued to need adaptation, appropriation, assembling, and activation by protest agents to function as mobilizing structures. However, sometimes demands for protest can be strong enough so that very little mobilization is needed to turn social networks into mobilizing structures (ibid.). Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) logic of connective action help explain how social media networks themselves can become mobilizing structures, outside formal organizing actors, effectively interacting with the demand and supply side of protest.

It is argued that for a demand for protest to be formed, *consensus mobilization* (the advocating actions taken by movement agents to spread their message) and *consensus formation* (the subsequent absorbing of ideas, views and wishes by recipient individuals) is needed (Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, 2019:376). These processes can come about either online or offline (ibid.), however, drawing on the logic of connective action, this process online directly mirrors Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) logic of connective action (section 3.1.1), where individual grievances, emotions, motivation and identification with others, are formed and diffused through online communication of personal action frames on virtual networks, representing virtual organizational structures (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013).

While protest demand needs consensus mobilization to form, *action mobilization* turns sympathizers into active participants in the supply side of protest. As has been

argued (see 3.1), social media networks facilitate the connectivity and spread of information of diverse individuals, where communication is organizational through connective action networks. Issues are personalized and communicated, which has direct relevance to the spread of protest issue-awareness and is argued to contribute to or construct the organization density of the supply side in connective action.

Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, (2019:381-382) provide a sobering model behind the action mobilization process on the individual level: “(1) people need to sympathize with the cause; (2) people need to know about the upcoming event; (3) people must be willing to participate; and (4) people must be able to participate.”:

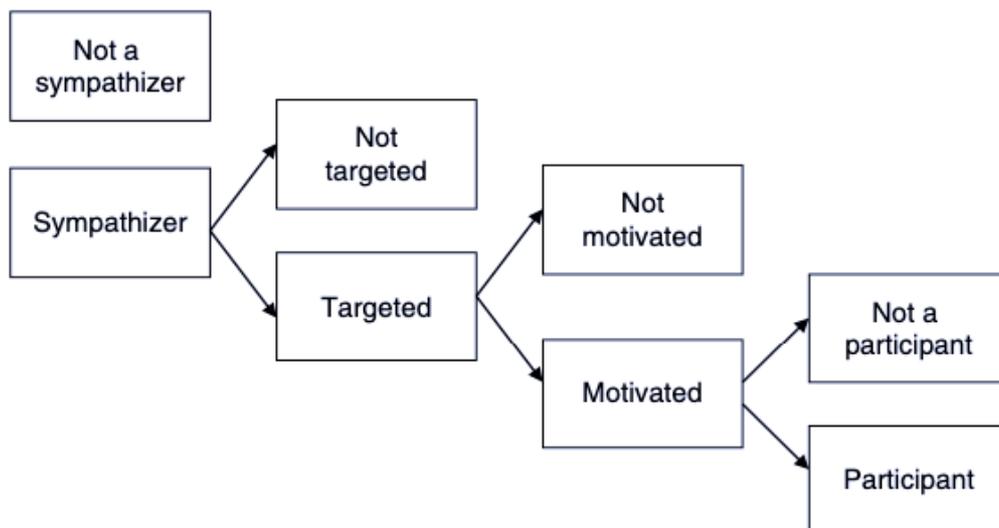


Figure 2. Four steps toward participation (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, (2019:382))

The theoretical concepts of dynamics of demand, supply and mobilization are further visualized in Figure 3 below (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, 2019:375). Figure 2 and 3, are the foundation on which the theoretical framework in next section is visualized.

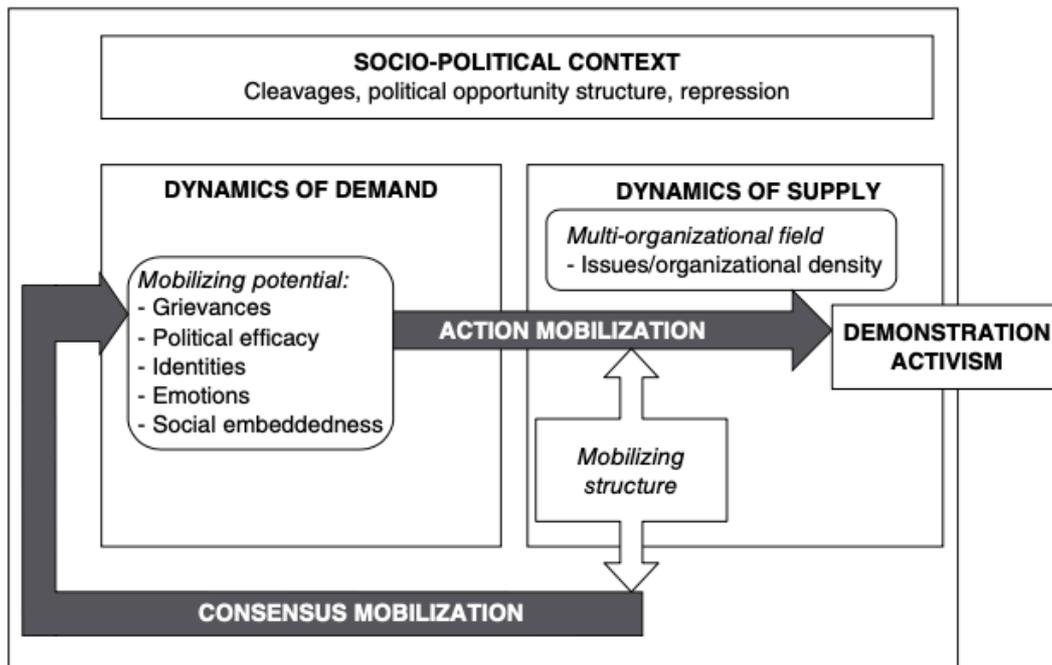


Figure 3. Demand, supply, and mobilization. (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Walgrave, (2019:375)

3.4 Theoretical Framework

To conclude, the three theoretical arguments provided by Bennet and Segerberg (2013), political opportunity structures (section 3.2), and individual protest participation in section 3.3 (and Figure 2 and 3) can be married. This to account for and distinguish the interplay between online-offline protest action, and structural and individual drivers.

The logic of connective action, through the three theoretical arguments drawn from Bennet and Segerberg (2013): (i) multiple logics of action (organizationally- and crowd- enabled networks), (ii) the personalization of action (personal action framing formation and dissemination), and (iii) communication as organization (social media network communication as a mobilizing structure) can influence each of the four steps in Figure 3. Firstly, the multiple logics of action (online and offline) influence the number of sympathizers and who receives and spread information about an issue and protest event through the process of consensus mobilization. Personalization of action through individual action framing processes online, target individuals through social networks, representing action mobilization across social media, further influencing motivation and awareness to act collectively offline. The

communication as organization within and across movement networks online organize action frames, influencing motivation of a protest population and incentivize and coordinate participation. The structural constraints from state repression and political opportunities both effect the supply and demand side of protests, i.e. the willingness and ability to act, as well as each of the steps in the participation chain either positively or negatively. Figure 4 below provides a visual representation of this synthesized model.

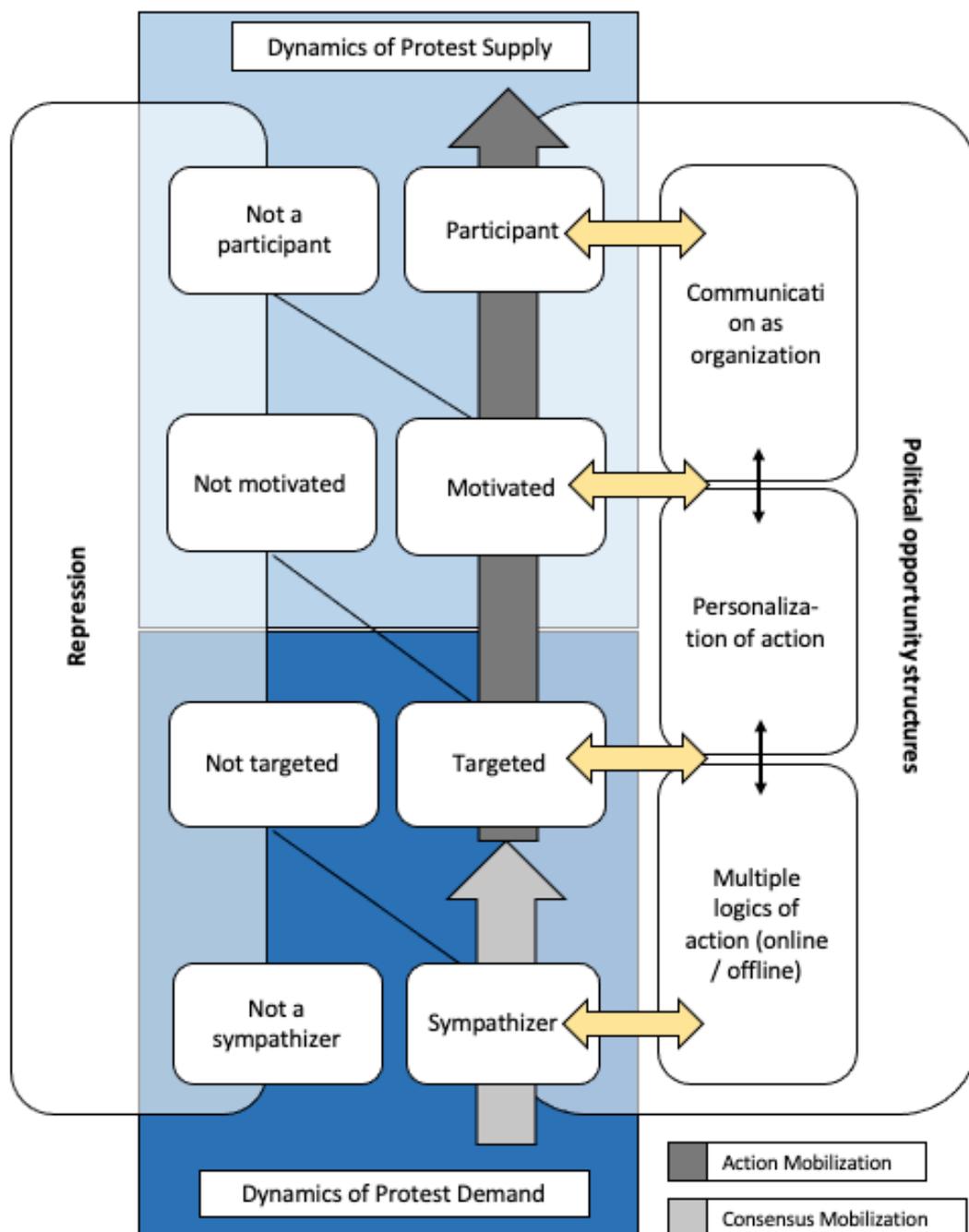


Figure 4. Theoretical framework

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Strategy

This study takes an abductive approach for interpreting data and drawing conclusions. The abductive approach is positioned in-between induction and deduction, allowing the researcher to be influenced by existing empirical findings and theoretical standpoints, while allowing the data collected to guide the analytical process (Hammet, Twyman and Graham, 2015:28). This is a fitting research approach in relation to the study's explorative aim and qualitative nature. Hence, the study is both data-driven and literature-based, where findings from the analysis are triangulated with the existing literature.

The research follows a single case study design allowing the context and phenomenon to be studied in-depth providing the research with precision within a bounded space (Bryman, 2012:12;66). This theoretically informed single case study, combining case selection elements such as an exemplary case, a digitally enabled protest instance, and a specific platform, signify important contributions to a larger mosaic of established knowledge by informing existing theory by combining online and offline theoretical explanations (Lijphart, 1971).

The reasons for using a qualitative research strategy are manifold. As mentioned in section 2.4, there is a call for qualitative research on the relationship between social media and protest mobilization in authoritarian states to further scrutinize this relationship in-depth. Rather than establishing quantitative correlation and causality (Bryman, 2012:35), qualitative methods provide rich, in-depth data which allows the researcher to generally gain a better understanding of people's motivations, attitudes, interpretations, value systems, behaviors, concerns, aspirations, culture, or lifestyle (Scheyvens, 2014:60). This research piece takes a social constructivist approach, interpreting the studied phenomena through the meaning's others ascribe and convey, based on their lived realities requiring the researcher to recognize his own background and experiences (see section 4.5).

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The study utilized online videoconferencing, semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary method for data collection. It applied a purposeful convenience sampling to reach key informants and a subsequent snowball sampling method to reach further interviewees. The purposeful sampling was used based on safety and reliability. According to Grimm et.al (2020:48), where research takes place is one of the most critical decisions in terms of strengthening safety in research. The purposeful sampling decision to only reach out to informants now based outside Belarus, and through contacts tap into the network of established organizations, significantly lowered the risk of online surveillance and interference by the Belarusian regime. Initial informants were based on the following three broad criteria to provide some consistency of informant profiles, and obtain qualified candidates able to provide credible information:

- i. knowledge and experience with online and offline protest mobilisation or democratic activism in Belarus;
- ii. knowledge and experience from online journalism or democratic advocacy in Belarus;
- iii. knowledge and experience from the online environment and digital rights in Belarus, especially social media, specifically Telegram.

The sampling was convenience-based as I have previous contacts within the democratic movement in Belarus, and established relationships with international development professionals working with democracy promotion in Belarus. The sampling represented an opportunity to generate high-quality and insightful data.

The purposeful convenience sampling of interviewees, based on broad categories, provided a heterogeneous informant group with experiences and backgrounds (journalists, activists, protest participants, media and advocacy experts, human and digital rights experts, election volunteers, NGO representatives) allowing the topic to be approached holistically.

4.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are particularly prone to generate data for intensive and a detailed examination of a research case (Bryman, 2012:68). Relying on a digitalized interview approach allowed the research to disregard geographical distances, minimize costs and risks, increase inquiry efficiency and access to informants. Digital research provides a deconstructed field environment allowing informants to steer the direction of the data collection, closes the distance between the researcher and the context under study. The semi-structured interview-style bestowed the data collection with flexibility to base the inquiry on the experiences, views, and perspectives of informants, while keeping thematic consistency between interviews (Bryman 2012:471).

The study's analysis relies on 9 interviews conducted between beginning of February to April 2022. A general interview guide was drafted to steer conversations and provided talking points in accordance with research questions (see Annex A).

The free communication application Signal was used to carry out most interviews¹. Signal is regarded as one of the most secure of the more mainstream communication applications by security experts, often used by journalists and human rights defenders for secure online communication (Grimm et al. 2020:100). With the consent of the interviewees, the conversations were audio recorded. Recordings were deleted as soon as interviews were anonymously transcribed (see section 4.6.1).

4.4 Data Analysis

Interview statements were transcribed based on audio recordings. All except one interviewee agreed to be recorded. The transcribed data was the corpus of the coding process, which followed a thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis focuses on systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns, or themes, across a data set. The method allows the researcher to make visible, and sense of, shared perceptions and experiences, ascribing meaning to identified themes across a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2012:57).

¹ One interview was conducted on Zoom and one on Telegram by the request of interviewees.

Generally, the analysis was based on the six phases outlined in Braun and Clarke (2012:60-69)² following the abductive approach. The initial coding categorized the data into the themes guided by concepts found in theoretical framework (Political Opportunity Structures, Repression, Dynamics of Protest Demand, Dynamics of Protest Supply, Multiple Logics of Action, Personalization of Action, Communication as Organization). The initial coding was descriptive and interpretive. Interview segments were thereafter coded in-depth a second time into different sub-themes. The sub-theme coding was guided by an analytical approach analyzing latent meanings across the data, exploring new insights to the studied topic. The abductive approach allowed the second coding of data to crystallize an additional main theme: Affordances, a concept mainly originating in communication studies (Earl, 2019:292). It was not part of the original theoretical framework of this study and provided valuable insights to the studied phenomenon (see section 5.5).

A coding scheme highlighting codes, frequency, sub-themes, concept themes and sample quotes are shown in Annex B.

4.5 Biases

In the spirit of reflexivity, this section explores and presents some of the identified, potential biases within this study (Bryman, 2012:39). In line with the constructivist view on science, it is argued that a complete separation between the researcher's self and the subject being researched is not possible (ibid.).

It is argued in this study (see Annex C) that having established, trustworthy relationships when conducting research in authoritarian context is viewed as a great strength and one of the most important assets to access informants, further regarded to mitigate biases towards social desirability or self-censorship in interview accounts (Ibid.:716).

² (i) Familiarizing Yourself with the Data, (ii) Generating Initial Codes, (iii) Searching for Themes, (iv) Reviewing Potential Themes, (v) Defining and Naming Themes, (vi) Producing the Report

Secondly, regarding my own stance on the issue of the lack of human, social and political rights under the Belarusian regime, I stand appalled. I have personally been following the situation in Belarus for more than five years and have previously conducted research on democratic civic participation in the country (Wassberg, 2019). I have visited the country, and I have several Belarusian friends who, to varying degrees, have felt the horrors of authoritarian rule. These experiences have motivated me in my search for further knowledge, to give ‘voice’ to interviewees, and familiarize myself to the greatest extent possible with the non-stereotyped understanding of Belarusian society. Lastly, this background was an asset in establishing trust with informants as prior engagement can mean approval of informants.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The fundamental ethical considerations in face-to-face research still apply in online research contexts, demanding awareness and commitment to established ethical principles (Lobe et al., 2020). According to Bryman (2012:135) four main considerations generally apply in research: potential harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, or if deception is involved. The study does not invade privacy or rely on deception, potential harm needs to be eliminated, and consent needed to be ensured. Based on these principles and the Lund University’s ethical guidelines for fieldwork within the Master's in International Development and Management program, an initial risk assessment was conducted guiding the methodological and practical steps taken stated below.

4.6.1 Risk and Security

As stated under section 2.4.2, internet in Belarus is not free from government control. This includes phone and internet surveillance, regime infiltration online, and ‘phishing’ on social media to identify dissidents. Before initiating the data collection, a consultation session was held with an IT-security expert to deepen my knowledge on data security, and safer communication online, informing safety considerations mentioned. Sound digital risk mitigation should assume that all activities online can be subject to state interference, scrutiny, or meddling. This has further bearing on the *amount* of data that is collected or generated, including

‘metadata’ such as user-generated smartphone, social media, and internet activity data. Therefore, as a ‘do no harm’ principle is paramount, research needs to weigh the process of reaching theoretical saturation against risk of further data inquiry. This as every instance of data collection constitutes as a situation of potential risk (Grimm et al. 2020:93).

Data was stored locally and encrypted, not on any cloud-based systems. Audio recordings were deleted as soon as anonymous transcriptions was done, and all transcripts were deleted after the analysis (ibid.:94).

4.6.2 Consent and Anonymity

All interviewees were read the initial statement of purpose (see Annex A) and research aims before interviews were conducted, informing about risks, non-compensation, and anonymity and data handling. Consent was assured orally to the researcher. Anonymity was assured throughout this thesis and in the transcribed data. No names of informants nor their respective organizations or associations can be found in data or in this thesis. Contextual information which could jeopardize anonymity is kept out of statements. Interviewees were encouraged to end the interview at any point, refrain from answering questions, or retract interview statements before May 1st, 2022, should the will to do so arise.

4.6.3 Psychological Strain

It is of grave importance that interviews did not add psychological stress to interviewees that could have experiences of trauma. Interviews were voluntary at all stages, conducted in a conversational manner between me and the interlocutors. Before starting the interview, 10 minutes was devoted to informal conversation and check-ins on general status before proceeding with the interview. As an indicator of ethical interviewing, most interviewees said after the interview that they looked back at their accounts and statements with pride. One interviewee said they were glad they conducted the interview as it reminded them about the importance of the continued engagement for a democratic Belarus, another wrote back that the interview was comfortable, inspiring, and left only positive impressions.

4.7 Limitations

Apart from contextual challenges (see Annex C), language barriers limited some informants' ability to express themselves freely. Since I do not speak Belarusian nor Russian, interviews were conducted in English. Since this is unfunded research, hiring an interpreter was not a valid alternative, further impeding confidentiality of informants. Furthermore, the snowball sampling method takes away some control of the sampling process from the researcher, which together with convenience sampling, is commonly argued to impact generalizability. Given the challenging context, time and scope for this study, snowball sampling was viewed as the most suitable option for this study. Unfortunately, the snowball sampling produced a smaller sample size than expected (see Annex C). However, too much data can be limiting in terms of hampering the researcher's ability of getting close involvement with their informants and generating fine-grained data (Bryman, 2012:425-426). Considering the added risk of data collection, and heightened insecurity during the research process, it was deemed important to not collect more data than 'necessary' to answer the research questions.

While reaching saturation in data collection processes is often the gold standard, it is arguably ambiguous, and a research context-dependent term. As stated, in this research context, data collection involves risks. While no universal rule exists, research points towards around twelve interviews as 'enough' to construct and support main themes from interview data (Guest et al. 2006), which guided the data collection.

The limits of convenience snowball sampling are argued to lead to lower external validity, however this study puts its emphasis on gathering an understanding of the case at hand rather than being able to generalize between cases. Applying a 'communicative' and 'pragmatic' stance towards validity, essentially having a questioning stance to the knowledge produced, rather than on the observation of robustness of claims (Kvale, 1995).

5. Analysis

The coding process produced 13 sub-themes, divided across eight main concept themes. References to interviewees are in their randomly ascribed number, from one to nine (1-9). The analysis will begin by scrutinizing the structural theoretical perspectives of the post-election protests, followed by the micro- and individual theoretical perspectives behind protest participation, ending by investigating the features of the logic of connective action.

5.1 Political Opportunity Structures

From the coding of POS, two subthemes materialized.

5.1.1 The Election

The election event itself was viewed by the interviewees as a major window of opportunity. Much like previous cases of electoral uprisings in Belarus show, although elections are not free nor fair, they often symbolize a destabilizing and loaded event in the political landscape of ‘controlled openness’ (Bedford, 2021).

“The spirit of revolution somehow started to arise, Babaryko announced his candidacy, Tsepkala announced his candidacy, we really felt that something was going on for the first time, these winds of change was coming, it was a lot of hope.”
(7)

As the above quote indicates, and as predominantly visible throughout statements about the 2020 election event (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8), the three initial alternative candidates Viktor Babaryko, Syarhei Tsikhanouski, Valery Tsepkala symbolized a visible break from the traditional political opposition, *inspiring change* and branding the 2020 election with providing something new, *an alternative*:

“We knew there was elections this year and me and my friends were not expecting anything serious about this. We had elections in the past and Lukashenka won with 80% present, and nobody protested, and life went on. I was expecting something like this from the 2020 elections. But in May in 2020 there appeared three

interesting candidates, I did not know them before this, and they appeared from nowhere. It was Viktor Babaryko, Syarhei Tsikhanouski, Valery Tsepkalo ...” (5)

5.1.2 The Internet

The Internet itself provided POS according to interviewees, mainly through *internet access*:

“The online environment was an extremely important part of the protests. A few factors which made it important was, like I said, big connectivity. Belarus is a well-connected country, a lot of people are on the internet and relatively digitally literate” (1) and;

“... many people use the internet, and that the IT-sphere is really on the rise, this generation is connected.” (5)

While maybe rudimentary at first glance, *access to the internet* is an important contemporary factor which affects political participation and mobilization, and as reviewed in chapter two in this study, is somewhat of a double-edged sword – providing repressive opportunities (Morozov, 2011) incentivizing autocrats to expand connectivity (Rød and Weidmann, 2015), while also providing opportunities and means to challenge repressive regimes (e.g. Diamond, 2010).

Interview statements highlight both these perspectives (see section 5.2). But *relative freedoms online* (1, 2, 4, 6), specifically on social media, was stated to provide freedom to challenge the regime:

“In today’s Belarus you have to counter the blocking of your websites, you have to find innovative ways to somehow bypass this blocking and to engage with your audiences. From what I know it’s much more difficult to block access to an app rather than to a website, same applies to social media.” (4)

Apart from its technical advantages as stated above, virtual structures have further anti-repressive opportunities:

“Traditional media proved to be shut down, their websites, and actually threaten the journalists since they have offices where you can go, employers and families, you can arrest the whole office like what happened with TUT.by. With new media online it is more sustainable in repressive states, which also increases the efforts that must be taken to find their audience.” (6)

On that note, increased *access to audience* through online technology is stated to provide new opportunities to engage constituencies and get messages across, as stated by interviewee 4:

“non-state media outlets were constantly experimenting and finding new ways of reaching out to their customers, readerships engagement not only outreach, through social networks” /.../ “It is important because of the dramatic changes that we have seen in news consumptions in the recent years” /.../ “around 2019 and 2020 mobile consumption won over laptop a lot of publications adopted to that change.” (4)

5.2 Repression

In relation to the second structural concept, repressive dynamics of the 2020 election, two clear sub-themes crystalized: online and offline repression.

5.2.1 Offline Repression

As the literature review showed, offline repression increased after the election. This was also corroborated by statements made by the informants. E.g.:

“I was not protesting the first three days after the election, because I was frightened of it, I saw that many people were going to it, but personally I understood that I could not pay such a high price” /.../ “I was going to these marches, every Sunday. In the beginning there was no [state] aggression, but then for every march aggression grew more and more. At the end the marches became smaller, people thought you might be put into prison, you might be killed, you might be tortured. If you go to prison, you would not even know the term, you might go in for a couple

of weeks but if you are at the wrong place at the wrong time, you can go to prison for years, so the price becomes too high.” (5)

As showed above, increased repression *affected* participation, motivation, and view of success (8, 9).

Additionally, less highlighted in the literature reviewed, the separation of online and offline repression became less visible during and after the election protest. Repressive measures and effects online and offline are repeatedly showed to be interacting:

“There is no line anymore between the online and offline repression” /.../ “online is used as a tool to suppress people more offline, make them fear, it is also used to spread the government propaganda, where beaten people make confessions. So, the government is also using the Internet, restricting access to some parts of it, with harsh punishments for even writing in their comments, while increasing its own presence in other parts.” (2) or;

“police can stop you and ask for your phone and if you follow NEXTA or TUT.by or other opposition channels you can end up in jail. I will probably have to unfollow those channels if I go back to Belarus” (3)

5.2.2 Online Repression

As stated previously, there are several accounts of the repressive measures experienced online, and how these affects interviewed individuals’ experience. Throughout interviews conducted, *increased online repression* is underlined in connection the post-election protests: regime anti-“extremism” efforts (2, 5, 6, 8), propaganda and cooptation (2, 6, 8), and technical measures to eradicate independent online spaces:

“they [the regime] can’t block them [independent Telegram channels] but they have chosen to brand them as extremist groups. What is interesting is that the list of blocked websites is not that long as compared to the list of so-called extremist groups on Telegram.” (6)

The *effects of online repression* are several, but the most prevalent in the data is fear of repercussions such as arrest or violence (1, 2, 5, 6, 9). This further results in online self-censorship (1, 2, 6, 8) potentially limiting your access to information (2, 3). As stated,

“What this creates is that people don’t want to engage in any information at all, which creates the feeling that they are alone. Society is deeply traumatized and polarized on many issues, even regretting coming out on the streets or staying nonviolent” (2)

However, the dual nature of the effects of repression, capable of impeding or motivating participation (Almedia, 2019:51), are also visible in the data on online repression, as stated by interviewee 6:

“But at the same time, I am hearing from common [Telegram] users that the extremism label [of Telegram channels] is a label of proof”/.../ “The fact that government put efforts into silencing and that they put in regulations shows that social media has a role to play in threatening authoritarian governments.” (6)

While the analysis in section 5.1 indicated, the Internet provided a space with relative freedom for counterhegemonic activities, pro-democratic online activity is clearly linked with offline repression in Belarus. However, interviewees mentioned several *online measures to circumvent repression offline*, such as renaming sensitive chats and using coded language (1, 8), deleting content (pictures, contacts, unfollowing/ unsubscribing) (5, 6, 8, 9), using VPN (virtual private network) services (1, 5, 8), showcasing a great awareness of, and maneuvering around, state repression. While arguably the sample interviewed for this study can be regarded as more professional activists and dissidents, it indicates that democratic actors are not just passive targets of digital authoritarianism. As interviewee 5 conclude:

“Yes, of course some people are not doing it [political activism online] anymore, I am still doing it, but when I share something, I delete it after I make sure that

someone has read it. But of course, you are always thinking about it, this fear is deeply in your mind now, you cannot [avoid] thinking about it” (5)

5.3 Dynamics of Protest Demand

The political opportunity structures outlined in section 5.1 and Repression dynamics in 5.2 provide some structural factors for individual protest opportunity. Based on the theoretical model of this research, these arguably interact with individual dynamics of protest supply, i.e., individual demand factors behind protest.

5.3.1 Breaking the social contract

The popular and individual grievances (socio-economic and political arguments behind protest participation) found in the data largely follows what has been identified in the existing literature (e.g Bedford, 2021). On a factor basis, electoral fraud (1, 2, 5, 8, 9), government inaction to the covid-19 pandemic (1, 2, 5, 6, 8), excessive violence (1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9), and arrests of protestors and the opposition (5, 6, 7, 9) were the main categories of grievances found in the data. However, while these served as important motivations for the individuals interviewed, the most significant demand for protest dynamic was what these factors really represented in terms of state-citizen relationships.

As mentioned, there has been a passive, informed, and precarious legitimacy towards the Lukashenka regime, rooted in the paternalistic social contract between state and citizen (Korosteleva, 2012; Ioffe, 2007). This contract started to erode pre-election (Bedford, 2021). As stated several times across interviews:

“When 2020 began, there came the Corona virus, and people started looking at what the government were doing to protect us from this virus. And their deeds were awful, it was like some joke it was not serious. I know a lot of people who began to actually follow what the government was doing just after the Corona virus began” (5)

While dissatisfaction for the regime was already well established before the elections across Belarus (Mateo, 2022), the pandemic's tear in the social contract developed to a full rip once the regime resorted to extreme and indiscriminate violence to break the protest after the election:

“So, what triggered the protests the most? It wasn't the official reactions to covid, which was largely spoken about here and there, but it was rather the amount of violence that erupted and documented following the three initial days of the rigged election.” (4)

Once the regime's real face was shown to the Belarusian population, arguably few personal barriers existed for protest participation. As interviewee 1 stated:

“It was a combination of society being ripe enough intellectually, being annoyed enough, a combination of being ready and being provoked by the violence that you could not turn away from. After that people started using their knowledge to build systems which could help the protests” (1)

Accordingly, while grievances were underlying motivating factors, high protest demand was arguably further created online by the regime repression itself: *“The arrests and violence also created the need for additional activism online, for creating platforms to count the number of people detained and arrested, but also to gather resources and self-help”* (6)

5.4 Dynamics of Protest Supply

So far, the findings of this study have shown how individual dynamics of protest demands coincides with stated political opportunity structures to mobilize collective protests online and offline. Furthermore, the action and inactions of the regime either worked to impede or facilitate action. Increased repression and relative freedom online made Telegram networks an important arena for contention.

5.4.1 Popular Receptivity to Protest Mobilization

As argued, the demands for protest were arguably high during and after the 2020 election. High protest demands generally require little organization in terms of mobilization (Klandermans and Walgrave, 2019:380). Several of the individuals who took part in protests had never been to a protest before 2020 (3, 5, 8, 9). In terms of specific protest events, few participated in the turbulent and more violent first three days of protest. The Sunday Marches and Women's Marches were stressed as particularly important protest events that supplied offline opportunities to channel political claims. They symbolized non-violence, peace, and civic unity against an oppressive, violent, and illegitimate regime (4, 5, 6, 8, 9).

“Then we had the women's marches on august 12th, I took part in the one during the day. It was like a miracle, these women in white clothes after this kind of war. I decided to take part. After this day it was like a new job that I got, because every day I was participating in different protests together with my friends” (8).

“The first peaceful march was on the 16th of august, it was my main memorable moment. We believed that we could change something because we are the majority.” (5)

Upon Viktor Babaryko, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and Valery Tsepkalo's arrest and exile, the triad of women: Maria Kolesnikova, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo are confirmed by interviews to serve as important inspiring political leaders, however not the central supplier of protest:

“The leadership of the three women, who were not organizing post-election protests per se' but served as symbols. First the feminine part was of crucial importance starting from the 12th of august where the Women's Marches appeared after three horrible nights of violence” (4)

“The trio of women who came in, it was a movement showing that: yes, you can put some leaders in prison, but others will emerge, you cannot stop the movement.” (1)

There are several statements which point towards the horizontal structure of the protests, underlining its decentralized and *popular dynamics of protest supply* and organization:

“It was very diverse, observer activists, women’s movements, elements within the state-owned companies discussing strikes there, medical workers uniting, I’m unsure if it was any specific structure to that, but it was happening simultaneously, in different circles, everyone was discussing how they could resist” (1)

As interviewee 5 further states,

“I was very proud that these three women was the face of this election. But leaders were everywhere: actors, musicians, teachers, sportsmen, students and a lot of groups and every group had their leaders, there was no one person which we counted as the leader, there was a lot.” (5)

[Researcher] *“How did you connect with all these leaders? How did you hear what they had to say?”*

“Well of course it was from Telegram. If some famous person in Belarus speaks about elections, protests, or about the terror it always got into Telegram and you saw it.” (5)

5.4.2 Telegram as a Mobilizing Structure

As above quotes indicate, Telegram repeatedly comes up as a central *protest supply structure*. There are some underlying reasons for Telegrams rise as a prevalent supply structure behind protest:

“During the active phase of the protests the consumptions of news generally in Belarus was endless, it was happening like 24/7, where people [in the past] usually was just browsing the main headlines and clicking the most liked ones” (4)

“... the existence of media on Telegram, that you could subscribe to, was handy because not so many people use Facebook and YouTube, and they were not really accessible as internet was shut down, so Telegram was the only messenger where

you could get any news, which also made people flock to Telegram during the protests” (2)

Arguably, since the protest demand was very high, it is not only the access to information itself which is of importance but what information consumption and spread allowed for during this critical event.

“Those big channels like NEXTA and Belarus Golovnogo Mozga [Беларусь головного мозга], people were preparing and organizing street protests. NEXTA was popular because they posted everything, they posted the journalist stuff, the unverified stuff, everything. And there was a demand for the information. There was a complete lack of information, people were scrolling all the time.” (7)

In conclusion, the amount of information available on Telegram, and its tight fit with audience needs, and the speed and *information pace* (1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9) made it a very efficient mobilizing structure towards popular protest demands, made possible by opportunities of internet usage and access, relative freedom online, aiding in circumventing authoritarian efforts and partly further fueled by repression during the election event.

5.5 Telegram’s Affordances

Statements regularly mentioned and brought up the specifics of the Telegram platform’s technological functions, structure, and unique properties. This resulted in the formation of the conceptual theme Telegram’s Affordances, which aids in differentiating between its technical functions and role as a mobilizing structure in protest supply. Also, it indicates why Telegram, as compared to other platforms, was largely used in the protests.

5.5.1 Telegram’s functions are constructive

The constructive functions of Telegram for protest participation mentioned by interviewees are:

- i. The ability to develop, interact with, and utilize Bots for various pro-democratic initiatives (1, 8, 9)
- ii. Its ability to stay online despite internet black outs (1, 3, 6, 8)
- iii. It is quick (1, 3, 8, 9)
- iv. It is easy (1, 3, 4, 5, 6)
- v. Its outreach/popularity (1, 5, 6)
- vi. More secure and anonymous (1, 2, 3, 5)
- vii. Multi-functional (1, 4, 6, 7, 8)

While the combination of these stated affordances was seen as unique and very constructive for the online environment of Belarus. There are some destructive features stated as well. Mostly relating to insecurity.

5.5.2 Telegram's functions are destructive

- i. Hate speech and online violence (1, 4, 6)
- ii. Telegram is 'secure but...' (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9).

What is evident is that Telegram, despite its issues in terms of security, are of great value as a technology. As interviewee 1 and 9 states:

"Telegram is not perfect. A lot of people in the digital rights realm know about it and you still have to be careful what you do on it, but its indispensable in this point in time" (1)

"Signal is often used because it is more secure, but Signal does not have the news, it does not have the channels, they don't have bots" (9)

This indicates that pro-democratic actors are willing to trade some security to use valuable technology in their activism. Showcasing careful considerations about the risks and opportunities with online mobilization.

5.6 Multiple Logics of Action

5.6.1 The relationship between online and offline mobilization

As emphasized by Bennet and Segerberg (2013:196), the logics of online connective and offline collective action do not compete but are complementary and relational. Several interviewees highlight this stance in their reflections on the *complementing* relationship between online and offline mobilization. As interviewee 1 states:

“They [online and offline protest forms] are co-dependent for sure. The online initiatives do not exist for the sake of themselves, they make up a better and more secure solution to something that people are lacking offline.” /.../ “During the protests, everyone understood that there have to be safer ways to be engaged” /.../ “Telegram was the communication channel, mostly, but still the protests were offline, especially in August till November, we did leaflets, marches, sit ins. Telegram was the space for information, and not the actual space for the protests”

While this is a contested issue in interviews (2, 5), the data clearly highlights and favors the influence Telegram had as a complementing mobilizing structure to offline protest (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9):

“Telegram had a huge role, no one can argue against it.” /.../ “the users of Telegram rose extremely during 2020 and significantly Telegram channels became the media in Belarus, it became some type of organization for social movement, the volunteer activism flourished on Telegram” (6)

Furthermore, as highlighted by Interviewee 7, Telegram is not “just a platform”, its interactive:

“Telegram is different because it’s two-sided, you can receive information but also give something. You can do meaningful action and participate in alternative vote counts and provide data. You can post content anonymously. On the one side you can report electoral misconduct and fraud, you can submit your vote, and towards the channels you can provide info about what is happening in your district, city, and street posting pictures. The combination of channel, chat. It was suitable infrastructure for us at the time.” (7)

According to several interviewees, much of the complementarity of Telegram is based on its ability to provide an *alternative space* for action mobilization:

“What a lot of online civic initiatives really did from a human rights perspective is when the state denies you certain rights, digital self-help initiatives sort of steps in and say, okay if the government is not going to count the votes, we are going to count the votes, if the state investigation committee is not going to investigate the crimes, we are going to investigate the crimes” (1)

“On Telegram you go, where you have never been before and do, think, write and read everything that you want” (9)

While providing an alternative space for more repressive offline mobilization, connective action further can *scale up* (1, 4, 6) offline mobilization, highlighting feed-back loops between the logics:

“These new technologies just allowed it [protests] to scale up quite a lot.” /.../ “It depends on the site of the audience, if it’s just one small village then probably it does not matter. But if we speak about country level, then the speed of distributing information and informing is very important and that can only be achieved through modern social media that we now have.” (4)

While complementarity between connective and collective action is visible, often in form of a complementing alternative space for action mobilization, data further indicate that they are increasingly *interlinked* (1, 6, 8):

“They [online and offline protest modes] define each other, the protests were a strong force when you actually see people on the streets fighting alongside with you, you relate to that a bit more than hundreds of thousands of participants in a chat, which gives you a stronger feeling of empowerment. The protests really determined that people wanted to be active online, they saw how much they can do with online coordination, how much it can translate into actual action, and they

remember this which helps them stay on the platforms and use digital resistance”
(1)

5.7 Personalization of Action

Up to here, the analysis has given several insights into how the logics of connective and collective actions relate in the case of the Belarusian 2020 post-election protests. They are largely seen as complementing and interlinked, the online sphere provides an alternative space for mobilization with potential to scale-up and catalyze offline protest. This section will provide additional insights into how this process operates.

Connective action is argued to be based on self-motivated sharing and co-creation of multimedia content among individuals in online networks. Rather than building on mobilization efforts by formal organizational actors. Co-creating and sharing multimedia content communicate highly individually adopted personal action frames, mobilizing social networks and incentivize and catalyze contentious action by individual adaptation and further sharing by others (Bennet and Segerberg:197-198).

5.7.1 Online Personal Action Frame Dynamics

Urman et al. (2021) argue that personalized public sharing does not play as much of a role on Telegram as other social media platforms due to the way the platform is structured. However, it is argued in this study that that is a misrepresentation of the connective abilities of Telegram, and a too narrow view on personalized sharing in connective action. It is important to highlight that media content on Telegram are both user-generated, sent to channel bots or administrators who later decides to distribute the media further, or communicated directly from channel editors. *Information* sharing served the basis for discussion, location direction, and the formation of personal action frames in private chats or groups. Hence the connective logic is less public, but more targeted and no less potent:

“We had this opportunity to coordinate our actions [on Telegram]. It was a great opportunity to make these horizontal connections with people, with your neighbors,

your friends, with people from your university. Also, it was a great tool to get information and share information. I was following a lot of Telegram channels; I was trying to get all the information. So, Telegram channels were the main sources of the upcoming protests. We had Telegram chats with my friends, and we were discussing on where we would go, or in private messages” (8) /.../ “But when it became obvious that we cannot go to some purposive places, people started to organize these local Telegram protest groups for their courtyards in their local territories. So, the protests started to be decentralized” (8)

“...on Telegram you see yourself as part of the community. It can feel like, for example, like this famous blogger is speaking right to you and that gives you the feeling to act.” (6)

Apart from the personalized sharing of information aiding mobilization, sharing media content triggering *emotions* are predominantly visible in the data as important basis for the formation of personal action frames.

“.... what we see in the analysis we have conducted, the mobilization was not only people following those calls to action, but in people experiencing feelings and emotions on what was happening next to them” /.../ “I remember, back in 2011 [past election mobilization] that yes reports came maybe 10-15 minutes after but only in the form of short phrases, but if we speak about visual content like photos and videos, they came hours after. Here, in 2020 the content came almost immediately and that was something brand new and extra to the reporting, which sparked immediate emotions.” (4)

“All Belarusians are intolerant to violence, and there were pictures depicting violence and grenades, people getting beaten, and killings of people!” (6)

Arguably, Telegram indeed allows for connective action to form. As already stated, the election fraud and violent repression symbolizing a split in the social contract between regime and citizen, were important protest demand factors behind participation. Through the uploading, spread and consumption of information of importance, and additionally visual media of regime violence, spurring mobilizing

emotions, Telegram networks facilitated and upscaled mobilizing structures offline. The personalization of action helps explain *how* Telegram was a mobilizing structure for offline protest, further informing, and nuancing its function as a supply structure in the election protest. The next section aims to shed light on how this translated into organizing actions on the streets.

5.8 Communication as organization

As discussed by Bennet and Segerberg (2013) there are three ideal types of technologically enabled protest networks (see Figure 1), Organizationally brokered (Strong organizational coordination of action), Organizationally enabled networks (Loose organizational coordination of action) and Crowd enabled networks (Little to no formal organizational coordination of action). The coding of the data gave two sub-themes *relating* to organizationally and crowd enabled networks: (i) Organizationally enabled action and (ii) Self mobilization. As was already evident in section 5.4.1, the protests in Belarus saw varying degrees of organization on the spectrum between organizationally and crowd enabled logics of connective action, representing less involvement from formal organizations.

5.8.1 Organizationally enabled action

There is continuous mention of public Telegram channels' role in providing *coordination and information*. Accordingly, channels contributed to direct calls to action (1, 4, 5, 6) and information on police presence (1, 5, 6), protest locations and turnout (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8).

“We had a big group of my friends, maybe 10 to 15 people, we were gathering often near my house, and then we went to a place where protesters were gathering, written in those public channels. There was a lot of Telegram channels and information about the peaceful marches was there. The main information we needed was the place, where we needed to go, I don't know how it was decided but the people went there and gathered on some square” (5)

Furthermore, as highlighted (4, 5, 6), direct calls to action on Telegram seems not to be the primary mobilizing factor, and were ignored by crowds several times if they represented unrealistic, unreliable, or reckless:

“there were some calls to actions like “go to the street, fight with the police” so it’s important to have your own head and filter information, there was a lot of people who did not support these kinds of actions. On one of the marches NEXTA was calling to go to the KGB office and that was a risk. A lot of people told them “We will not go here, thank you NEXTA but we will go somewhere else less risky”.” (5).

What appears to be most defining in the organizationally enabled action through Telegram channels was the *usability of the information* provided:

“I was in a protest for the first time in my life in 2020, but somehow I knew it was important to do it. I didn’t go to the street because I saw a call to action on telegram. I just used Telegram to know where to go, where a lot of people would be.” (5)

5.8.2 Crowd-enabled action

Coordination in private Telegram chats were mostly visible as an influential organizing feature of self-mobilization, representing more crowd-enabled connective action features of the post-election protests:

“The micro-chats they were really most crucial, this is where people in smaller communities had self-mobilized, and learnt maybe even for their first time about their neighbors’ views” (2)

Throughout the data sample from protest participants (also see 5.6.1), the information from public channels were usually shared, discussed, and brokered in smaller private chats of friends and other more tight-knit local social networks. So, while there is a visible relationship between public information and coordination communication on public channels, what appears to be an important determining factor in its organizational property was the outcome of socialization online in smaller groups and private chats, echoing Beissinger (2017:365), pointing to weak and strong social ties co-existing in virtual social networks, further highlighting the *importance of strong online social ties*.

7. Conclusions on Research Questions

Telegram did not start the post-election protests; it facilitated in channeling and mobilizing it both online and offline. The revolution was not Telegrammed, Telegram was revolutionized.

While official political opposition leaders served as important inspiring figures, they were not the main supplier of post-election protest. The protests had a decentralized online and offline nature, with popular dynamics of protest supply. Telegram repeatedly comes up as a central protest mobilizing structure, supplying popular protest opportunities, made possible by internet availability and usage, access to greater audience, and the relative freedom existing online, aiding in circumventing offline repression. The amount and speed of information available on Telegram, and its tight fit with audience needs, made it a very efficient mobilizing structure towards popular protest demands.

Several interviewees highlight the complementing, interlinked relationship between online Telegram and offline protest mobilization. Both connective and collective action logics are visible in the 2020 post-election protest. Protest mobilization on Telegram complemented mobilizing structures and networks offline, with the ability to further scale up and catalyze offline mobilization. Telegram channels' provided protest coordination and information, contributing with direct calls to action and information on police presence, protest locations and turnout. However, direct calls to action appear not to be the primary offline mobilizing factor. What appears to be most defining in the organizationally enabled action through Telegram channels was the usability of the information provided to protesters. Here, coordination in private Telegram chats and groups was an influential organizing feature, representing more crowd-enabled connective action. The information from public channels was shared, discussed, and brokered in smaller private chats of friends and other more tight-knit social networks. So, while information and communication on public channels provided coordination, what appears to be an important determining factor in its organizational property to offline protest was the outcome of socialization in smaller groups and private chats online. This points to

the co-existence of weak and strong social ties on Telegram, highlighting the mobilizing importance of strong online social ties to offline protest turnout.

Increased repression offline affected participation, motivation, and protesters' view of demonstration efficiency. As the post-election protests unfolded, the separation of online and offline repression became blurred, where repression online and offline are showed to be interacting. The effects of online repression are several, but fear of arrest or regime violence was dominating. This results in online self-censorship, potentially limiting your access to information. While internet provided a space with relative freedom for counterhegemonic activities, pro-democratic online activity is clearly linked with offline repression in Belarus. The dual nature of the effects of repression, capable of impeding or motivating participation online *and* offline, was visible in the data. Interviewees mentioned several online measures to offline repression, hence democratic actors are not passive targets of digital authoritarianism. Grievances were further exacerbated by the regime repression and inactions of the regime towards health threats. Increased repression offline and relative freedom online made Telegram networks an important arena for contention.

While the 2020 election event symbolized a visible break from the traditional political opposition, inspiring change and providing an alternative opposition. Individual dynamics of protest demands coincides with online and electoral political opportunity structures to mobilize collective protests online and offline. The complementarity of Telegram mobilization to the offline sphere is based on its ability to provide an alternative space for action mobilization for highly repressed offline mobilization, enabled by popular internet connectivity, and access to greater audiences online, providing new opportunities to engage constituencies and get messages across. Also, pro-democratic actors are willing to trade some online security to use valuable technological Telegram affordances in their activism. Showcasing careful considerations about the risks and opportunities with online mobilization on Telegram.

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Annex A: Interview Guide

Introduction

How are you doing, Is everything all right on your end of the screen?

How are you feeling?

Consent form

This is an interview for my Master thesis in International Development and Management from Lund University. This interview will take around 45 minutes and will be anonymous, your name or the name of your organization will not be documented in any form connected to your statement, nor in the final written thesis. If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering during this interview, you can always state you do not wish to address it. It is accepted to end the interview at any point, or retract parts, or the whole interview statement before 1st of May this year. By confirming to be interviewed by me, you are aware that participating in this interview may come with certain risks as it will touch politically sensitive issues. This interview comes without any compensation for your time, other than the possibility to get your voice and opinions heard in current academic debate and production of knowledge. With your consent, the interview will be audio recorded for me to better transcribe your statement. The recordings will not be stored on any online-based or cloud-system and will be deleted when the interview is transcribed. Do you agree to participate under these conditions?

Anything you would like to add or are there any further questions regarding me, this thesis or this interview before we begin?

With Consent Start Recording

“We will start the interview with some questions regarding yourself.”

- What made you get into your field of work / get engaged with the issues you are active for?
- Can you tell me about your experiences of being engaged in your work?
- What are the main challenges and opportunities in your work?
 - can you briefly tell me more about them?

“Now we will move on to some of your perceptions about the political

environment in Belarus currently and especially after the 2020 election protests.”

- How would you define the political landscape in Belarus today?
 - Does it differ from before 2020? If yes in what way?
- What do you believe was the main driving factors of the post-election protests?
- In your view, overall was it successful? Why/ why not?
- What were the key factors behind failure / success?
- In your view, who were some of the most important actors or groups in mobilizing people for the protests and why?

“We will now move on and talk about your view of social media and the post-election protests”

- How would you describe the online environment in Belarus?
- Do you believe that there is a difference between online and offline protest or activism in Belarus? Elaborate on answers.
- Do you believe social media played a role in the protest events of 2020? If yes, in what way, if no, why not?
 - If yes: Why do you think social media played the role it did?
 - If no: Why do you not think social media is believed to have played a role?
- In your view, would the protests have happened without social media?
- In your view, would social media activism happen without the street protest?
- Do you believe there are any difference between different social media platforms and their influence on the protests of 2020?
 - In what way? / why not?
- Are you aware of the app Telegram? Could you elaborate on your view of Telegram’s role in the protests of 2020?
 - If yes: Why did telegram play the role it did and not other platforms?
- How would you compare Telegram to other social media platforms, anything unique about it?
- Did you use Telegram during the post-election protests in 2020? In what way and to what purpose?
- How would you describe the online environment on Telegram?
- Looking ahead, do you believe social media to be important if Belarus is to experience democratization?

Stop Recording

Tank you so much for your time, as you know the interviews are anonymous, would you be comfortable recommending people you know to be interviewed?

Annex B: Coding Scheme

Main Concept Themes (theory-driven & data-driven*)	Sub-themes (Meaning across codes)	Codes	Frequency	Sample Quote
<u>Political Opportunity Structures</u>	The election	Providing alternative	#6	<i>“We knew there was elections this year and me and my friends were not expecting anything serious about this. We had elections in the past and Lukashenka won with 80% present, and nobody protested, and life went on. I was expecting something like this from the 2020 elections. But in May in 2020 there appeared tree interesting candidates, I did not know them before this, and they appeared from nowhere. It was Viktor Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Valery Tsepalo ...” (5)</i>
		Inspiring Change	#6	<i>“The spirit of revolution somehow started to arise, Babaryka announced his candidacy, Tsepalo announced his candidacy, we really felt that something was going on for the first time, these winds of change was coming, it was a lot of hope somehow.” (7)</i>
	The Internet	Access to internet	#3	<i>“The online environment was an extremely important part of the protests. A few factors which made it important was, like I said, big connectivity. Belarus is a well-connected country, a lot of people are on the internet and relatively digitally literate” (1)</i> <i>“many people use the internet, and that the IT-sphere is really on the rise,</i>

				<i>this generation is connected” (5)</i>
		Relative freedom online	#5	<i>“Traditional media proved to be shut down, their websites, and actually threaten the journalists since they have offices where you can go and employers and families, you can arrest the whole office like, what happened with TUT.by. With new media online it is more sustainable in repressive state, which also increases the efforts that must be taken to find their audience.” (6)</i>
		Access to greater audience online	#3	<i>“non-state media outlets were constantly experimenting and finding new ways of reaching out to their customers, readerships engagement not only outreach, through social networks” /.../ “It is important because of the dramatic changes that we have seen in news consumptions in the recent years” /.../ “around 2019 and 2020 when mobile consumption won over laptop, a lot of publications adopted to that change” (4)</i>
<u>Repression</u>	Online repression	Online repression increase	#9	<i>“they [the regime] can’t block them [independent Telegram channels] but they have chosen to brand dem ass extremist groups. What is interesting is that the list of blocked websites is not that long as compared to the list of so-called extremist groups on Telegram.” (6)</i>
		Effects of online repression	#5	<i>“What this creates is that people don’t want to engage in any information at all, which creates the feeling that they are alone. Society is deeply traumatized and</i>

				<i>polarized on many issues, even regretting coming out on the streets or staying nonviolent” (2)</i>
		Online measures to offline repression	#5	<i>“First is the measures of cyber-security. It’s like two step authentication, new accounts, VPN of course, when you say Belarus, you hear VPN [*laughs*]. Also, you always clean your messages, you always delete messages when you post some extremists sources. When you go to the street you also check your messages, but also delete some of your accounts and delete all your photos.”(8)</i>
	Offline Repression	Offline repression increase	#6	<i>“I was not protesting the first three days after the election, cause I was frightened of it, I saw that many people were going to it, but personally I understood that I could not pay such a high price” /.../ “I was going to these marches, every Sunday. In the beginning there was no [state] aggression, but then for every march aggression grew more and more. At the end the marches became smaller, people thought you might be put into prison, you might be killed, you might be tortured. If you go to prison, you would not even know the term, you might go in for a couple of weeks but if you are at the wrong place at the wrong time, you can go to prison for years, so the price becomes too high.” (5)</i>
		Repression offline effects	#3	<i>“I remember my big chock in the 9th of august. I was standing there and I see that people did not do anything</i>

				<i>wrong, the police grabbed them and said “go with us” and left the grenades among the people. These facts ruined my mind.” (9)</i>
		Online offline repression interaction	#5	<i>“police can stop you and ask for your phone and if you follow NEXTA or TuT.by or other opposition channels you can end up in jail. I will probably have to unfollow those channels if I go back to Belarus” (3)</i>
<u>Dynamics of Protest Demand</u>	Break from the social contract	Electoral fraud	#5	<i>“But in 2020 it was so clear to everybody, the older generations - your parents’ generations, they all went to the poles, all of them voted. There were no chances that the [official vote counts] numbers could have been true. I think that was a crucial point that people really understood that they were the majority.” (1)</i>
		Violence and arrests	#10	<i>“I think the government made their biggest mistake in that, if the government would not have so brutally, so evidently tortured and beaten these people, hoping that no-one would record since it was no internet, many people would not have come into the streets” (2)</i>
		Covid-19 inaction	#6	<i>“Since the runup to the elections Belarus was one of the countries which really ignored the existence of the pandemic, there were a lot of statements from Lukashenko which was like really suggesting that people are really to blame for when they get ill with covid, that was the moment when people realized that they could not rely on the government for</i>

				<i>anything, not even basic health needs” (1)</i>
<u>Dynamics of Protest Supply</u>	Popular Receptivity to Protest Mobilization	Pre-existing networks	#6	<i>“I saw these this information on the telegram channel of [NGO name]. Then I decided that I have to gather these signatures of people in my district. I also proposed it to my friend who together gathered signatures.” (8)</i>
		Peaceful /non-violence	#6	<i>“Then we had the women’s marches on august 12th, I took part in the one during the day. It was like a miracle, these women in white clothes after this kind of war. I decided to take part. After this day it was like a new job that I got, because every day I was participating in different protests together with my friends” (8).</i>
		Leaders	#9	<i>“I was very proud that these three women was the face of this election. But leaders were everywhere: actors, musicians, teachers, sportsmen, students and a lot of groups and every group had their leaders and as you know now many people are in prison and many of them were a leader of their group, there was no one person which we counted as the leader, there was a lot.” (5)</i>
	Telegram as a supply structure	Information availability	#7	<i>“Those big channels like NEXTA and Belarus Golovnogo Mozga [Беларусь ГОЛОВНОГО МОЗГА], people were preparing the movement and street protests. NEXTA</i>

				<p><i>was popular because they posted everything, they posted the journalist stuff, the unverified stuff, everything. And there was a demand for the information. There was a complete lack of information, people were scrolling all the time.” (7)</i></p>
		Information pace	#6	<p><i>“The internet was shut down the first five days since August 9th so the [Telegram] channels were quick, it become the source for instant information on what was going on” (8)</i></p>
		Supply function	#7	<p><i>“... the existence of media on Telegram, that you could subscribe to, was handy because not so many people use Facebook and YouTube, and they were not really accessible as internet was shut down, so Telegram was the only messenger where you could get any news, which also made people flock to Telegram and gave it a competitive advantage in the post-election August protests” (2)</i></p>
<u>Multiple Logics of Action</u>	Relationship between online and offline mobilization	Interlinked	#7	<p><i>“I mean they [online and offline protest modes] define each other; the protests were a strong force when you actually see people on the streets fighting alongside with you, you relate to that a bit more than hundreds of thousands participants in a chat, which gives you a stronger feeling of empowerment. The protests really determined that people wanted to be active online, they saw how much they can do with online coordination, how much it can translate</i></p>

				<i>into actual action, and they remember this which helps them stay on the platforms and use digital resistance” (1)</i>
		Completing	#6	<i>“Telegram had a huge role, no one can argue against it.” /.../ “the users of Telegram rose extremely during 2020 and significantly Telegram channels became the media in Belarus, it became some type of organization for social movement, the volunteer activism flourished on Telegram, it also helped to document of human rights violations gathering statistics” (6)</i>
		Online alternative space	#6	<i>“On telegram you go, where you have never been before and do, think, write and read everything that you want” (9)</i>
		Online upscaling offline	#3	<i>“The important thing to mention is that social media in general, and Telegram, empower people. It’s a two-way road, not a wone way road like the conventional mediums, like the TV for example or the from one political leader to his or her followers. Audience feedback is very important and the weight of this feedback.” /.../ “on Telegram you can not only contribute with your criticism but also your own content and emotions, share your input to what is going on with other people, and feel as a person feel.” (4)</i>
<u>Personalization of Action</u>	Online Personal Action Frames	Sharing / cocreation	#4	<i>“I was following a lot of Telegram channels; I was trying to get all the information. So Telegram channels were the main sources of the upcoming</i>

				<p><i>protests. We had Telegram groups with my friends and we were discussing on where we would go, or in private messages” (8) /.../ “But when it became obvious that we cannot go to some purposive places, people started to organize these local Telegram protest groups for their courtyards in their local territories. So, the protests started to be decentralized” (8)</i></p>
		Emotions as motivation	#4	<p><i>“... the informing function of the Telegram channels and the conventional media is not that big of a difference. What we see in the analysis we have conducted, the mobilization which both types of media played was not only people following those calls to action, but in people experiencing feelings and emotions on what was happening next to them” /.../ “I remember, back in 2011 [past election mobilization] that yes reports came maybe 10-15 minutes after but only in the form of short phrases, but if we speak about visual content like photos and videos, they came hours after. Here, in 2020 the content came almost immediately and that was something brand new and extra to the reporting, which sparked immediate emotions.” (4)</i></p>
<u>Communication as Organization</u>	Organizationally enabled action	Channel coordination	#7	<p><i>“We had a big group of my friends, maybe 10 to 15 people, we were gathering often near my house, and then we went to a place where protesters were gathering, written in those public channels. There was a</i></p>

				<i>lot of Telegram channels, I think I subscribed to maybe 10 channels, and information about the peaceful marches was there. The main information we needed was the place, where we needed to go, I don't know how it was decided but the people went there and gathered on some square" (5)</i>
		Information usage	#4	<i>"I knew it was important to do it. I didn't go to the street because I saw a call to action on telegram. I just used Telegram to know where to go, where a lot of people would be." (5)</i>
	Crowd-enabled action	Chat coordination	#6	<i>"The micro-chats they were really most crucial, this is where people in smaller communities had self-mobilized, and learnt maybe even for their first time about their neighbors' views" (2)</i>
		Peer mobilization	#3	<i>"The neighborhood telegram chats was also a thing, where people, how lived in similar areas who coordinated marching together or taking safety measures" (1)</i>
<u>Telegrams Affordances*</u>	Telegram functions are constructive	Bots	#3	<i>"This Voice [Голос] bot played a big role in showing the real opinion of people, the way they voted in the election, how they are thinking about different events" (8)</i>
		Circumvent repression	#4	<i>"For a lot of media channels their website can be blocked but you can just go and create a channel on Telegram." (1)</i>
		Quick	#4	<i>"In telegram you can get all the information in a quick way" (8)</i>
		Easy	#5	<i>"Telegram it was much more</i>

				<i>user friendly, not a lot of things that are not connecting with messaging, its simple” (5)</i>
		Outreach/ popularity	#3	<i>“We used it [Telegram] long before the protests. In Belarus it was, and it is the main messenger for chatting with friends often, not often always.” (6)</i>
		More secure and anonymous	#4	<i>“It’s secure and anonymous and you have less fears about it” (1)</i>
		Multifaced	#5	<i>“it’s not just the messenger, there is no other messenger with the function of chat bots and channels.” (1)</i>
	Telegram functions are destructive	Secure but...	#5	<i>“Telegram is not perfect. A lot of people in the digital rights realm know about it and you still have to be careful what you do on it, but its indispensable in this point in time” (1)</i>
		Hate speech and online violence	#3	<i>“There are huge problems with disinformation in Telegram, hate speech in Telegram, online violence in Telegram. Of course, you can report but Telegram is not responsible, and this is a huge problem, and we will see the repercussions of this in the future. And it is not secure! As we have seen in the Belarus case it is very easy to find administrators of every public channel” (6)</i>

Annex C: Autobiography

In line with this research's intended contributions, this annex will walk the reader through the de facto process of preparing for data collection, the process of inquiry, and personal reflections on the implications of the strategies chosen and its bearing to other researchers venturing into similar research in authoritarian contexts.

Quite unsurprisingly, conducting distanced field research in highly volatile contexts, needs flexibility and a high degree of trust in the research process. Qualitative research is generally depicted as unstructured and process oriented (Bryman, 2012:402-403), which is echoed here. Accordingly, I adopted a high degree of trust in my process, and this is not to say that it was at any means path dependent or *laissez faire*, quite the opposite. I took a stance to my research process where I 'lived my research' in everyday occasions. This included being actively communicative about my process, my goals and my struggles with friends and contacts, viewing everyday life through the research I was currently conducting. This strategy entails being receptive to opportunities and openings when they present themselves, and actively work towards providing research opportunities. An interesting example of this was when I informally meet a friend who's partner randomly had contacts within the Belarusian democratic movement, which provided the study with an additional well-informed interviewee, when all my entry-points had been depleted. On that note, informal relationships turned out *crucial* to access 'the field', information, and informants in a movement operating largely underground. This argument has two sides. Firstly, access turned out to be dependent on mutual trust, which is arguably hard currency in the Belarusian case. Relationships who provide interpersonal trust are not just a fundamental aspect in providing a safe research process, as argued by Grimm et.al (2020:44-46), but also allowed access to, and an open, sharing environment of data collection. I quickly found out that going through official channels of non-affiliated organizations and individuals provided zero opportunities for data collection. The snowball sampling was only fruitful when gatekeepers had trust in me, my research, and my intentions.

On that note, the snowball sampling only went one step away from initial informants. This is argued to be influenced by the difficult research context. Key informants often stated fear and fatigue as a reason for additional contacts to turn down interviews. The political wet blanket placed on the study was also *heavily* exacerbated by the recent political developments in Belarus (constitutional referendum) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February, which the Belarusian regime is involved in, where many Belarusian pro-democratic actors had fled. The invasion took a heavy toll on informants. Some dropped off, others relived trauma and found it hard to participate. All in all, this meant that the data collection had to be paused, and only continued with extreme caution. Of course, this had implications on the research process, the ability to access information and data.

Finally, I would like to end with some reflection on the process of obtaining academic knowledge in authoritarian contexts. As has been stated, qualitative interview studies are requested for in previous literature within this research field. However, based on my own experiences, this type of research is arguably not an easy endeavor for everyone. Accessing quantitative data and statistics, dislocated from the ‘real’ world, largely prevalent in studies already done, provide a research setting more controlled, easily managed, and arguably ‘safe’ - both in terms of lower risks for participants, and in research project’s success probability. Conducting an interview-based qualitative case study for someone who is somewhat invested in the context was a challenge. Something which I believe would be even harder for a complete outsider. Accessibility is arguably limited to those willing and able. Thus, the methodological, theoretical, and arguably empirical contributions of this study hope to counter this situation within research in authoritarian contexts.