

Echo of 1989? Protest imaginaries and identity dilemmas in Belarus

NELLY BEKUS

The revolution of 2020 in Belarus has often been described as a new 1989 and there is no doubt that the emancipatory appeal of the Belarusian protests is similar to the one that sustained the 1989 revolutions. But will building the democratic system—the major aspiration of the Belarusian protesters—follow the scripts of liberalization and westernization in evidence in other eastern and central European countries? Will self-determination in post-Lukashenka Belarus follow a scenario modelled on the patterns adopted by other east European and post-Soviet states, where ethnocentric national identities and the memory of victims of communism became distinctive markers of east European post-communism? Examining the symbolic dimension of the protest repertoire, this article demonstrates how the protests re-arranged the system of historical and cultural references that shaped the foundation of Belarusian collective memory and identity discourses since 1994. It reveals how a broad variety of actors engaged in contention activated a process of re-signification of cultural and political symbols and ideas and led to the formation of a blended socio-cultural imaginary, which integrates previously disconnected and competing projects and ideologies.

Keywords: Belarus, identity, revolution, protest repertoire, postcommunism

Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination

MISCHA GABOWITSCH

The Belarusian protest movement that started in August 2020 has been discussed from the point of view of strategy and objectives, and as the cradle of a new subjectivity. This essay goes beyond those two perspectives by looking at the regimes of engagement, developing in interaction with the material and technological environment, that have given the protests their distinctive style. The first part looks at coordination and representation at protest events and in producing protest symbols such as flags. The second part discusses the role of Telegram and the emergence of local protest groups. Even though the movement did not grow organically out of everyday concerns, there are some signs that it has begun to reassemble local communities from above. Yet there are also indications that politics continues to be seen as distinct from everyday life, making it uncertain that the movement will lead to a deeper transformation of society.

Keywords: Belarus, protest, regimes of engagement, flag-making, social media

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“Tear Down These Prison Walls!” Verses of Defiance in the Belarusian Revolution

SIMON LEWIS

This contribution examines the creative energy behind the ongoing protests in Belarus, with a focus on poetry and music. Belarus is traditionally a “versocentric” society, where poetry and music have historically played important roles in consolidating national culture. In the 2020 protest movement, fast and widespread distribution through social media has made poetry and music a crucial instrument for cementing a sense of collective identity among protestors, establishing transnational solidarity, and affecting the emotional regime of Belarusian society.

How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution? Female Agency and Participation in the 2020 Post-Election Protests

NATALIA PAULOVITCH

Belarusian women stand at the forefront of post-election protests. Their participation is seen as unprecedented and is often perceived as a “revolution with a female face.” It did not start as a feminist project, however, but rather as a reaction to mass-scale arrests of male participants during the first days of protests. At the same time, is it possible to characterize female involvement in women’s chains of solidarity and then regular Saturday demonstrations as a “feminist project” when one takes into account the usage of traditional feminine images and feminine aesthetics during the protests? On the other hand, even the symbolic subversion of patriarchal stereotypes present on the posters seems to have its limits when violence is inflicted by the representatives of special military forces. This essay will examine the agentic nature of female protests and the ways of expressing dignity in times when a basic sense of security is lacking. I will look at situational individual acts of agency and how these acts characterize female participants of the protests as a group that is aware of its resources and power. The text will be based on the analysis of media discourse and visual materials.

Keywords: elections, agency, subversion, women, protest

Class, Agency, and Citizenship in Belarusian Protest

ELENA GAPOVA

This paper focuses on the unprecedented mobilization that unravelled in the aftermath of the Belarusian elections of 2020. The argument made is that issues of agency and participation in political decision making are at its core.

The Anatomy of Impatience: Exploring Factors behind 2020 Labor Unrest in Belarus

VOLODYMYR ARTIUKH

The wave of labor unrest that accompanied Belarusian post-election protests had no precedents in the country’s independent history or recent post-Soviet

political protest mobilizations. These protests challenge the prevalent trend in the current literature on the post-Soviet working class to stress its weakness in terms of organization, as well as structural and material resources. This article relies on a database of workplace-related protest events (August 10–September 30) and a selection of statements, interviews, and social media discussions among participants of the protests, in order to explain this unexpected activation of the seemingly passive Belarusian working class. The author hypothesizes that it was the vagueness of the Belarusian opposition's ideology and workers' participation in the broader protest movement that helped them overcome the challenges of suppressed voice, bureaucratic despotism, and atomization. These mobilizing factors, however, limit the further development of autonomous labor organizations and their democratizing impact.

Keywords: labor unrest, populism, Belarus, labor organizations, protest mobilization

The Moral Economy of the Kolkhoz Worker, Or Why the Protest Movement in Belarus Does Not Seem to Concern the Collectivized Countryside

RONAN HERVOUET

The mass protests that have shaken Belarus since August 9, 2020 are occurring not only in the capital but also in provincial towns and even in smaller municipalities in Belarus. The protest does not seem to be affecting the countryside, however. This article, based on an ethnographic survey conducted in rural Belarus between 2006 and 2013, analyzes the roots of the attachment to Lukashenka's regime in these territories. The article describes the moral economy of kolkhozes, that is, the normative bases on which these social worlds are founded: equality, solidarity, and dignity. At the same time, the analysis reveals the figures of the moral offenders that rural inhabitants identify as posing a threat to their worlds: the profiteer, the idler, and the moralist. This defines the expectations toward politics that can be identified in the countryside, which essentially boil down to the conversion or punishment of these "moral offenders."

Calendar Reform under Peter the Great: Absolutist Prerogatives, Plural Temporalities, and Christian Exceptionalism

ANDREAS SCHÖNLE

The calendar reforms of Peter the Great introduced on January 1, 1700 have produced a surprising amount of confusion and misunderstanding. This article proposes firstly to clarify the aims and outcomes of these reforms, so far as the available sources allow. Secondly, through an examination of the New Year celebrations mandated by Peter's edicts, the article examines the legitimating arguments that have been deployed, including ideas about Russia's relation to western countries, about the position of the Orthodox Church in the polity, and about the prerogatives of the ruler in these matters.

As a result of the changing arguments invoked by Peter and his entourage, the reforms introduced a regime of plural temporalities that has affected the course of Russia's development and the elaboration of its identities to this day. The reforms had little to do with heralding a secular, modern society. If initially they represented a failed pragmatic attempt to create a civil calendar aligned with Protestant countries, their justification, once it finally settled, harked back to long-standing theological ideas about the time of the Incarnation.

An Ancient in Catherinian Russia: Classical Reception, Sensibility, and Nobility in Princess Ekaterina Urusova's Poetry of the 1770s

KELSEY RUBIN-DETLEV

This article argues for the importance of Princess E.S. Urusova's four poems published between 1772 and 1777 to scholarly discussions of both classical reception and noble culture. Urusova engages more intensively than any other Russian writer of the period with the European Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, formulating thereby unique responses to major literary and political concerns of the 1770s. In the literary sphere, the Quarrel allows Urusova to conceptualize with exceptional perspicacity the multifaceted cultural environment of the time: contributing to Russia's claim to be the direct heir of the Greeks and Romans, she also makes the interesting case that the emerging culture of sensibility ideally equips readers and writers to absorb the classics. In the political sphere, by evoking the framework of ancient virtue through classical intertexts, she envisages an alliance between the sovereign and a strong nobility based on both cultural refinement and a sense of duty and service to the nation. Urusova's case shows how imitating and reinterpreting the classics helped one woman to find her voice as a poet in eighteenth-century Russia.

"To a Dog, a Dog's Death!": Naïve Monarchism and Regicide in Imperial Russia, 1878–1884

DANIEL BEER

The article examines arrest protocols drawn up from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s by local policemen investigating thousands of individuals denounced to the authorities for having voiced criticisms of the monarchy and approval of the campaign of terror in the reign of Alexander II. The discussion proceeds in two stages. It first argues that the arrest protocols constitute grounds for a revisionist challenge to the existing historiography which charts enduring, if gradually declining, popular support for the monarchy in the final decades of tsarism. It then argues for a reappraisal of the efforts by revolutionaries in the reign of Alexander II to destroy the sanctity of the autocracy through the use of "propaganda by the deed." The campaign to assassinate the tsar emerges in the arrest protocols as an effective form of political messaging that gained real purchase in the popular imagination. It prompted lower-class Russians to articulate their own local grievances in terms of popular sovereignty, natural justice and political accountability.