

**THE GOOD WILL OF THE PEOPLE:
THE RISE OF A DEMOCRATIC WE
AND A CONTENTION OVER SOVEREIGNTY IN THE BELARUSIAN REVOLUTION OF 2020**

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Abstract. *This article examines the 2020 Belarusian Revolution, viewing the mass protests as a revolutionary transformation due to the emergence of a new collective political subject: the democratic multitude. The author discusses the specifics of this subject and the political antagonism of 2020, which is metaphorically characterized as a "contention over sovereignty" between a tyrannical ruler and a pro-democracy protest community. The article highlights the strategic importance of the nonviolent principle adhered to by the Belarusian protesters. The author argues that the long-lasting peaceful protest of 2020 had a particular subversive force rooted in the "mobilization of vulnerability" (Butler) and a unique temporality of the protest. The analysis proceeds by first examining the "affective origin" of this new democratic "We," then outlining the characteristics of this collective subject in relation to popular sovereignty and the collapse of plebiscitary democracy, and finally revealing the connection between the ethical imperative and the collective political agency of the protest community. The article concludes by summarizing the philosophical, moral, and political significance of the Belarusian Revolution in a global context.*

Keywords: *Belarusian Revolution 2020, democratic multitude, popular sovereignty, political antagonism, nonviolence, collective agency*

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This year marks the fifth anniversary of the 2020 Belarusian Revolution. I use the term ‘revolution’ confidently to describe the mass protests that swept across Belarus following the August 9, 2020, fraudulent presidential elections. The revolution’s primary political goal—overthrowing Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime—has not been achieved. However, this unprecedented attempt to establish democracy in our country had a performative effect, marking a truly revolutionary transformation of our society in itself. I mean the emergence and public manifestation of a new collective political subject—the rise of a democratic “We.” Five years of transnational resistance to the dictatorship and of cross-border solidarity, mutual aid, and care among Belarusians are a result of, and proof of, this revolutionary change in our collective civic agency (Jaroszewicz 2022).

In this article, I will discuss the specifics of this new collective subject and the essence of the political antagonism that shaped the revolutionary situation of 2020. I am interested in the philosophical significance of our protest experience—the ideas and principles actualized by the revolution that can claim universal significance in terms of ontological, moral, and political guidelines for societal development.

According to the vote results provided by the Golos platform,¹ the protest community opposing Lukashenko’s regime had grounds to define itself as “the people” in the constitutional sense—that is, as the source and bearer of the Republic of Belarus’s sovereignty. Thus, the essence of political antagonism in the country at that time can metaphorically be characterized as a contention over sovereignty. From August to December 2020, we witnessed a unique period in Belarusian history—a time of confrontation between two sovereigns: a tyrannical one and a counter-sovereign in the form of a pro-democracy protest community. In this article, I want to show the strategic importance of the principle of nonviolence adhered to by the Belarusian protesters. In this connection, it seems important to identify the historical correlation between the concept of a sovereign (monarch, dictator) in the political realm and the classical modern concept of the subject in epistemology and moral philosophy (Descartes, Kant). I will show that the Belarusian experience of nonviolent resistance is at odds with political Cartesianism (the projection of Cartesian dualism onto the political arena), as well as with Kantian moral philosophy. The long-lasting peaceful protests in Belarus can reasonably be viewed as a manifestation of the “goodwill of the people.” To understand this collective “goodwill,” we need to look for principles other than the principle of the “leading role of the party” or that of the “autonomy of practical reason.”

Thus, this issue’s focal question—that of will—will be examined here through the example of the post-election political antagonism in 2020, involving confrontation between different actors and different paradigms of social life based on mutually exclusive beliefs and principles. Understanding this difference should help us move beyond simplistic judgments that attribute the defeat of the 2020 protest movement to a “lack of will” on the part of the protest community.

¹ Golos (Eng.: voice). The Golos platform is an online platform created by Belarusian programmers (Pavel Liber and others) to monitor the integrity of elections and alternative vote counting. On August 14, the platform published research results indicating that Tsikhanouskaya had received 3 million votes (56%), while Lukashenka received 1.8 million.

The article proceeds as follows: In the first part, *An Affective (Traumatic) Origin of the New Democratic We*, I will examine how the authorities' behavior led to the actualization of the normative core of the protest community. In the second part, *The Democratic Multitude, Popular Sovereignty, and the Collapse of Plebiscitary Democracy*, I will outline the main characteristics of the new collective subject and clarify its relation to the concept of popular sovereignty. The third part, *A Subversive Force of the Protest: Non-Violence and Decentralized Agency*, reveals the connection between the ethical imperative and the collective political agency of the protest community. Finally, I will summarize what I believe to be the philosophical, moral, and political significance of the Belarusian Revolution in a global context.

1. An Affective (Traumatic) Origin of the New Democratic We

It was the outbreak of the authorities' unlimited physical violence after the election day that became a crucial trigger for the large-scale protests¹. Late in the evening on August 9, 2020, thousands of people took to the streets in Belarus to protest against the falsification of the presidential election results. As documented in the United Nations report on the human rights situation in Belarus (UN News 2022), between 9 and 14 August, approximately 13,500 people were arrested throughout Belarus. These arrests and detentions were accompanied by the unlawful use of force, resulting in severe bodily harm. The report notes that torture and ill-treatment were widespread and systematic, including instances of rape, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as a systematic denial of procedural norms and rights to a fair trial.

A week after August 9, unprecedented protests erupted across the country. Weekly Sunday marches persisted until December 2020 and were accompanied by various other forms of protest, marked by great diversity and civic creativity. Overall, surveys indicated that between 700,000 and 1.5 million people participated in different protest actions (representing about 14% to 29% of Belarusians) (Shelest 2022: 185). In Minsk, the largest Sunday marches attracted crowds of 300,000 to 500,000 people. At the heart of this mass mobilization of Belarusian men and women was moral trauma. During numerous processions and rallies, people chanted: "We will not forget! We will not forgive!" The protest movement was peaceful and took place under the slogan "Stop the violence!"

In order to comprehend the very genesis of the collective solidarity in the Belarusian protest movement, one must first take into account the strong emotions (affects) that motivated and coordinated the unprecedented mass self-mobilization. Elsewhere, I have shown that one can identify three phases in the affective genesis of the Belarusian protest community in the post-electoral period: the moment of traumatic shock, the caesura of the political sublime, and the rapid expansion of the peaceful protest movement (Shchytsova 2023). Taking my bearings from certain ideas of Jan

¹ According to a survey conducted by the German research institute ZoiS in December 2020, the main reason why people decided to join the protests was the violence perpetrated by security forces. Moreover, the disproportionate use of violence against protesters raises concerns for 70% of respondents. See: Douglas et al. 2021.

Patočka's philosophy of history (Patočka 1996) and modern affective phenomenology of joint action (Schmid 2009; Salmela & Nagatsu 2016), I argue that the traumatic shock caused by the confrontation with the unthinkable violence (the regime's monstrous inhumanity) resulted first and foremost in the collapse of the pre-reflective system of normality, or the *common-sense* system characteristic of the modern Belarusian society. From the first-person perspective, the collapse of this common sense is experienced as a particular existential shock that undermines an individual's basic trust in their lifeworld (Husserl). As a result of the events from August 9 to 12, 2020—the “three nights of terrors” (Wilson 2021: 287)—, *common sense*, which served as a given “healthy” foundation for communal life, cracked. The pre-reflexive belief that certain actions, such as open killings and torture ‘without trial and investigation’ by state representatives, could not occur, let alone become normalized, crumbled. Regardless of how naive this belief may have been, it was a part of the common-sense system characteristic of Belarusians as a specific cultural-historical community.

The common-sense system of post-Soviet Belarusian society was a product of the characteristic interweaving of the habitual elements of national culture on the one hand and the post-Soviet social contract characteristic of the authoritarian state on the other hand (Gaiduk et al 2009). We experienced a catastrophe that was radically incompatible with our understanding of collective identity (our sense of ourselves as a community) and with our social imaginary (our collective perception of our society). We “defaulted” to the belief that such events were impossible “here,” in our own midst. The shock was traumatic precisely because of this rift in our self-understanding and in our image of ourselves as a specific cultural-historical community. Our consciousness—individually and collectively—refused to accept what had occurred. While it was an individual experience for each person, this experience of shock was at the same time a shared one, i.e., it affected us as members of the community. In this sense, individual trauma was simultaneously collective.

From August 9 to 12, 2020, an atmosphere of anxious uncertainty prevailed in our society. People were faced with the *Unthinkable*, which they could neither understand nor ignore. Therefore, it is worthwhile to ask: how did the shocked manage to unite for a new collective political action, for their peaceful self-affirmation as a political community? It is precisely here, in the situation of anxious uncertainty and groundlessness, that we have to introduce the second affective phase mentioned above – that of the sublime. The experience of the sublime was pivotal in sparking the Belarusian protest movement. The mass revolutionary surge was made possible and activated, so to speak, by the emergence of the sublime dimension, which was notably established through the women's “white actions” on August 12–13. On August 12, a group of women dressed in white and holding white flowers gathered in front of the Komarovskiy Market in central Minsk. On August 13, similar white chains extended along streets and avenues not only in Minsk but also across other cities and towns. The dimension of the sublime was generated in response to the initial traumatic shock. More precisely, it was born amid an anxiously suspended condition in which society found itself—partially aware, partially guessing, and partially afraid to “even think” about the scale of the terror and the boundless excess of violence that had become possible in our country. The experience of the sublime was a disruptive event that allowed for reshaping the political imagination, encouraged people to resist

authority, and, generally speaking, opened up possibilities for creative political initiatives (cf. Shapiro 2018).

The mass protests that started evolving after the women's white chains contained a normative core that determined the form of the protest movement and the horizon of its creative possibilities. The normative core in question had been actualized at the very first affective stage (the traumatic shock). Pascal Delhom's article *The Normative Force of Suffered Violence* (2020), seems very helpful for understanding the very nature and genesis of that normative core. He emphasizes that rejection of the lived experience of suffered violence is a constitutive part of this very experience. Thus, the traumatic experience of shock implies a particular ethical imperative: "no violence!" Furthermore, Delhom also points out that what is perceived and suffered as violence is what is perceived as a violation of social norms regulating the way people can be affected by others or by a functioning social order in a way that injures them. Such social norms are the product of a long history of shared experiences and the shared rejection of certain kinds of injuries. It correlates with what has earlier been said about the collapse of the pre-reflective system of normality due to the outbreak of the authorities' violence after the election day. It follows that the ethics of non-violence were an inherent element of the given community as a concrete cultural-historical formation. The experience of the sublime, in turn, enabled a public reactivation of this habitual ethical element of our lifeworld and translated it into political practice, specifically into a nonviolent protest movement.

2. The Democratic Multitude, Popular Sovereignty, and the Collapse of Plebiscitary Democracy

The mass peaceful marches that followed the disruptive event of the political sublime were, to a considerable extent, spontaneous. We observed the physical emergence of a new democratic community of citizens as an embodied, solidary plurality. In this section, I will focus on the key characteristics of the new collective subject and define the political antagonism at issue.

Let us, firstly, clarify what this new collective subject was from a sociological perspective. According to various studies, the 2020 Protest movement was characterized by remarkable socio-demographic diversity. As Belarusian sociologist Oksana Shelest emphasizes:

Representatives of all generations, all sectors, different professional communities and social strata joined the active fight against the regime. (Shelest 2022: 185)

Drawing on a broad database, she formulates the following characteristics of the protest movement:

- almost equal gender balance, insignificant prevalence of men;
- prevalence, but not domination of the age group of 20–45 y. o.; inclusion of all generations;

- prevalence, but not absolute domination of the private sector and new forms of employment (freelance, self-employed, etc.) over the state-run sector (which representatives are about a third of participants of active forms of the protests);
- almost equal division of activity between Minsk and regions (about 50% of activity was in the capital);
- prevalence of higher education (ibid., 186).

Thus, *We* appeared to be a sociologically diverse community with a common political agenda, yet very far from any form of monolithic collectivity, uniformity, or homogeneity. To define the ontological specificity of this new collective subject, I suggest using the term *multitude* or *democratic multitude*. I borrow this term from the post-Marxist philosophical theories of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) and Paolo Virno (2004). The *multitude* is conceived by them as a new type of collective subject that is distinct, on the one hand, from the people (the people of the nation-state) and, on the other hand, from the masses. The post-Marxist *multitude* is a productive social force that opposes the dominance (sovereignty) of globalized capitalism, which Hardt and Negri designate with the characteristic term “*Empire*.” Unlike the people, the *multitude* is not tied to the borders of nation-states and is not bound by a homogenizing national identity. So, it unfolds and acts transnationally. In contrast to the masses, the *multitude* is not an impersonal, irrational force that is frightening and susceptible to manipulation simultaneously. On the contrary, the *multitude* is characterized by the ability to creatively self-organize.

The pluralistic democratic community of the Belarusian revolution shares several common features with the post-Marxist concept of the *multitude*. Both concepts refer to a heterogeneous, non-monolithic community of the *many*, characterized by decentralized horizontal self-organization and creativity. The *multitude* is essentially an “ensemble of singularities,” which are irreducible to any common identity (totality). In both cases, the *multitude* is a democratic subject *sui generis*, a pluralistic form of community that opposes any absolute authority (power beyond anyone’s control). However, unlike the global, transnational perspective of post-Marxists, we are dealing with a pluralistic democratic community that has emerged within the framework of the nation-state and is driven by the idea of its political reorganization (regime change). The protest against Lukashenka’s regime was (and remains) simultaneously a protest against how the principle of popular sovereignty was understood and implemented under this regime. With the emergence of the democratic *multitude*, a new perspective opened up for rethinking both the concept of popular sovereignty and that of democracy.

Until 2020, the political regime in Belarus could be classified as a particular form of plebiscitary democracy, characterized by a synthesis of a strong personalist autocracy and the use of presidential elections and nationwide referendums as the main instruments for expressing “the will of the people”. As for the role of the people as a political subject, Grigory Yudin defines it as follows:

The political role of the people is reduced to *acclamation through regular plebiscites and other electoral procedures*. In these moments, the people present themselves as a real unity; in other periods, however, they appear as a fragmented mass with

low political engagement and lacking their own agency. Plebiscitary democracy, in general, is characterized by a profound distrust in the ability of the people to act as a genuine and, even more so, responsible political subject. (Yudin 2021: 33)

Yudin believes that plebiscitary democracy is the most appropriate definition for the contemporary Russian (Putin's) political regime. Despite the differences between the Russian and Belarusian political systems, they share common typological features that can be described using the concept of plebiscitary democracy. The key characteristics identified by the Russian scholar in this connection can be readily applied to Lukashenka's regime: a political model defined by the "Führer principle" and immutability of the supreme power, which elevates the president above the political system, relegates other political institutions to a secondary and weakened status, establishes a direct connection between the president and the people, and invokes the people as the source of authority from which the president receives a direct mandate to represent the state as a true political unity. In this context, "acclamation" refers specifically to the direct "confirmation of decisions announced by the leader and the symbolic acceptance of the leader's figure (the decision and the leader's persona are inseparable here)" (Yudin 2021: 20).

The stunning elections and the emergence of the revolutionary protest multitude as a new political subject signified the collapse of plebiscitary democracy in Belarus that had lasted nearly a quarter of a century. The political antagonism unfolded in a fundamentally novel form for Belarusian society: the democratic multitude versus the illegitimate dictatorship—the people versus the tyrant. The protest movement was directed against the political regime based on the principle of sovereignty as it was formulated by Carl Schmitt:

Sovereign is he who decides on the exception. (Schmitt 1985: 5)

Sovereign "stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety" (ibid., 7). Schmitt's understanding of sovereignty allowed for the possibility of the illegitimate use of violence if the sovereign deemed the situation in the country to be a "state of exception," which is precisely what happened in Belarus. Lukashenko formulated it in his own manner when, in his speech to the prosecutor's office staff on September 10, 2020, he said, "*This is not the time to abide by the law*" (lit.: "иногда не до законов").

Thus, the outbreak of illegitimate repression by the authorities revealed the constitutive moment of sovereign power: the dictator's decisionism, which is separate from the rule of law and unrestrained in its use of violence. The very essence of the post-electoral political antagonism was a confrontation between two sovereigns: the sovereign dictator and the democratic multitude, as the counter-sovereign. The antagonism arose because the people were determined to protest non-violently against the repressive regime without the authorities' permission. This was how the popular sovereignty manifested itself. There was a certain paradox: while opposing the tyrant's sovereign power, the democratic "We" as a subject of protest had to act *decisionistically*—i.e., to rely not on the law but on their own decision. This necessity was imposed by the state of exception enacted by the sovereign's demonstration of "principally unlimited

authority” (Schmitt 2005: 12), particularly in terms of the use of violence. To the extent that each side of the political antagonism acted decisionistically, thereby maintaining or strengthening its political weight, one could say that dual power existed in the country (Matskevich 2020).

The situation of dual power, or the “contention over sovereignty,” revealed popular sovereignty as a collective ability to oppose the existing state order and to subvert it. The plebiscitary democracy is a form of governance where power seeks to preemptively prevent any discrepancy between popular sovereignty (“the will of the people”) and state sovereignty. At the heart of the political imaginary in a plebiscitary regime is the notion of collective identification of the people with the dictator. In contrast, Butler emphasizes that “the political form of democracy and the principle of popular sovereignty... are not the same” (Butler 2015: 2), and that “popular sovereignty makes sense only in this perpetual act of separating from state sovereignty...” (ibid., 170) In other words, democracy is only viable when the distinction is maintained between these two; when popular sovereignty can manifest itself as a capacity to question state power (not only in terms of electing different representatives but also regarding revising institutions of power and their relationships with society). Our analysis of the Belarusian protest movement shows that, in a plebiscitary democracy, popular sovereignty can oppose the sovereignty of state power only in a state of exception. Moreover, the specificity of the Belarusian case lies in the fact that it is no longer sufficient to say that “the invocation of ‘we’ separates popular sovereignty from state sovereignty” (ibid. 170). Within the contention over sovereignty, the popular delegitimization of the state ruler separates the question of state sovereignty from the figure of the tyrant-sovereign. From August to December, the country's political antagonism revolved around the question of whether sovereignty would remain in the form of a personalist dictatorship or be used to build a democratic state based on the rule of law. In other words, it was a question of who should have the right to define political order in this state, for this national community within the given territory.

3. A Subversive Force of the Protest: Non-Violence and Decentralized Agency

The consistent nonviolent nature of the Belarusian protest was a key factor in forming the new collective political subject. Nonviolence should be understood not as an occasional characteristic but as a paradigmatic category defining the essence of the ethical-political alternative embodied and promoted by the democratic multitude. The peaceful form of protest was a crucial part of its political message: demands to stop violence and restore the rule of law stemmed from the democratic multitude that supported its principles with its own model of behavior. The peaceful marches were not a gesture of self-sacrifice or desperation, but a determined public assertion of the collective agency of the democratic multitude, and thus a permanent subversion of the autocratic rule. The protest was a performative act where the very form of protest itself served as a constitutive argument against the sovereign power of the tyrant and his state apparatus. In this regard, special attention should be paid to two distinctive features of the Belarusian protest movement: a) its unique “mobilization of vulnerability” (Butler),

which was particularly evident in the repeated marches of specific social groups such as women, pensioners, and people with disabilities; b) the extraordinary temporality of large protest marches: their regularity (every Sundays) and overall duration (up until November¹ 2020).

In what follows, I will elaborate on these two features, thereby revealing a profound link between a genuine ethical imperative and the collective agency of the protest community.

3.1. Mobilization of Vulnerability and Overcoming Kantian Formal Ethics

The emergence of separate marches of women, pensioners, and people with disabilities within the overall dynamics of protest² exemplified a “mobilization of vulnerability” in an eminent sense. By distinguishing themselves from the broader protest multitude, these social groups physically expressed and highlighted the paradigmatic significance of vulnerability for the very genesis of the revolutionary upsurge. Their bodily self-exposure to the police force turned their “weak bodies” into vehicles for their protest, directed simultaneously against the patriarchal-authoritarian body politics and against the brutal sovereign power. By protesting against Lukashenka’s brutal autocracy, they not only demonstrated their liberation from paternalistic subjugation but also pointed to vulnerability as the key phenomenon at stake in the antagonism between the ethics of nonviolence and the arbitrary violence of Lukashenka’s sovereign power.

Combining agency and vulnerability, the protest groups of women, pensioners, and people with disabilities acted as a subversive force that overturned the traditional hierarchical relations between them and the power regime and articulated through their vulnerable bodies an ultimate ethical-political demand (imperative) incompatible with patriarchal sovereign autocracy. Given the affective genesis of the collective revolutionary subject, the imperative at issue must grasp human beings as both vulnerable and endowed with dignity. It follows that the imperative should demand approaching the person (*as a living being*) with both care and respect. In other words, it has to overcome the dualistic view in accordance with which a person’s physical life (embodiment, emotions) and a person’s dignity are considered separately. Or, referring to Butler, we could say, the imperative has “to recast the living as worthy of value” (Butler 2020: 25), overcoming the dichotomy of physical life and dignity.

Surprisingly, in the Belarusian language, there is a word that encompasses the two fundamental meanings mentioned above. This is a verb *shanavats’* (*шанаваць*) which derives from the German word *schonen* (protect, take good care of, spare, treat, save). However, in Belarusian this word has a wider range of meanings: 1) take good care of, keep intact, spare; 2) protect, treat save; 3) respect; to value, to attach great importance

¹ Regular protest marches continued until December, but due to the high level of repression they did not gather as many people as earlier.

² Women’s marches took place on Saturdays and served as an inspiring prelude to the largest Sunday demonstrations. Pensioners’ marches were also conducted more or less regularly on Mondays, with the last one occurring on January 4, 2021. The marches of people with disabilities were organized twice on Thursdays (October 15 and 22) under distinctive titles such as “March of the (Non)Disabled” and “March of People with (Non)Limited Abilities.”

to something; to preserve something, to adhere to something; 4) to cherish (Bulyka 1999: 347). These meanings are intertwined and implied in each other. In summary, the verb *shanavats'* unites two key meanings: "take care of" and "to respect." Thus, the imperative "*shanavats'!*" designates the ethical-political demand of the caring and respectful attitude to the person. The social groups discussed here expressed this imperative through their protest marches, which manifested the phenomenal unity of vulnerability and agency, life and dignity.

The affective genesis of the collective revolutionary subject (from the moment of traumatic shock, through the caesura of the sublime to the large-scale protest solidarity) implies that the protest originated from the being-affected by the violence inflicted on fellow citizens by the authorities and the (co)existential impossibility of not responding to this being-affected. Thus, emotions played a constitutive role in the formation of the collective agency of the protest community. It was reflected in the imperative "*shanavats'!*" (the caring and respectful attitude to the person), which is grounded in the view of the person as a living unity of vulnerability and agency. All of the above shows that Kant's formal ethics cannot help us understand the Belarusian protest experience, which definitely has other philosophical implications. As a representative of modernity—of Enlightenment rationality—, Kant excluded the emotions from the moral sphere. The dignity of the person as a rational being was grounded by him in the obedience to those laws that the rational being gives to itself (Kant 1996: 4:435). The exclusion of the emotions allowed Kant to formulate a paradigmatic idea of autonomy as a kind of moral sovereignty of the rational being:

[A]utonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature. (Kant 1996: 4: 436)

In phenomenological tradition, there are thinkers who developed a radical critique of Kant's formal approach: Scheler, Bakhtin, Levinas, and Waldenfels. All of them elaborated alternative versions of ethics. Despite certain differences between their conceptions, they shared the basic assumption that there is an ethical a priori that is given in experience and cannot be reduced to the formal autonomy of the rational being. Consequently, their approach presupposed another vision of the person and her dignity as well as another account of responsibility and emotions (affectivity). The Belarusian protest experience gives reason to re-actualize this contra-Kantian tradition. In particular, the above statement about "the (co)existential impossibility of not responding to this being-affected" aligns very well with the theories of radical ethical responsibility of Bakhtin (1993) and Levinas (1998). Both overcome the paradigm of modernity by asserting a fundamental ethical priority of the other (i.e., a primordial ethical asymmetry) in social relations. They tried to show that in real coexistence, a person's responsibility to the other precedes autonomy, that is, I am always already affected by the address (the need, the pain) of the other(s) to which *I have to respond*. Therefore, the primary ethical experience of the person is the recognition of ethical asymmetry. Scheler (1973) and Waldenfels (2013) clarified the emotional grounds of solidarity that link together a person's co-responsibility for the community and every member in the community.

It is noteworthy that a kind of “emotional turn” has occurred recently in social sciences and humanities, including political theory. Emotions have been systematically reconsidered as a constitutive aspect of both the social and political life (Hall 2005; Krause 2006; Kingston 2011; Fleming 2013; Steinbock 2014; Nussbaum 2015). The case of the Belarusian protest movement serves as a good example, illustrating the necessity of taking moral and political emotions seriously. Here I would like to highlight that the imperative “*shanavats’!*”, which was implied in the affective genesis of the democratic multitude, is aimed at overturning of two fundamental concepts of modernity: a) the Kantian concept of the formal moral autonomy of the person as the rational being, and b) the Hobbesian-Schmittian concept of the personalist sovereign power.

3.2. Temporality of Protest Marches and Collective Agency of the Protest Community: Beyond ‘Partisan Cartesianism’

The protest community had been gaining subjecthood and agency through the development of the protest movement itself. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to the unique temporality of the main protest marches—their remarkable duration and paradoxical rhythm: a week of work followed by a Sunday march, repeated for three months. We have to uncover the constitutive meaning of the temporality of the main protest marches in the formation of the subjecthood of the new democratic We. I argue that it is the sustained conduct of large-scale marches over time that enabled this new collective subject to establish itself convincingly as an independent political actor. The assertion of its collective subjecthood and agency occurred through prolonged, repeated physical self-manifestation of the democratic multitude: presenting itself as a *political body*, which is a fundamental condition for all subsequent political demands. Through the regular mass marches, the protest community communicated the message: here we are; there is *the* “We”, the people who are/is against the usurping dictator and his political regime. This format and rhythm of protest expressed a specific, persistent patience and endurance (in Belarusian: *upartasc’ tryvalasc’*), determination, and steadfastness in demonstrating civil dissent. The regular, weekly collective self-mobilization demanded “strength and patience,” as one participant astutely noted, imbuing the protests with a work-like quality:

Morally it [the strategy of peaceful protest] is definitely correct. As for its effectiveness... I can’t say there have been no results whatsoever. It seems to me there are results; it’s just that this will obviously take time. If we can maintain... our strength and patience and keep working...Indeed, it seems to me that we are truly working already. (Shchytsova 2024: 230)

The new collective political subject was given to itself in the mode of *patient endurance*—a consistent, persistent, regular, and “routinely creative” polyphonic expression of resistance to the regime (cf. Kirschbaum 2022). The resilient determination of the protest multitude made patience a political virtue: a mode of resistance characterized by active endurance and perseverance in peaceful opposition—*persevering endurance / enduring perseverance*. Thus, the very subjecthood of the protest community was constituted and solidified through its rhythmic physical persistence in rejecting the status quo. The regular Sunday marches served simultaneously as a way of forming a new

collective subject and as a way to exert pressure on the authorities. The subject was coming into being by asserting its demands. By regularly participating in peaceful marches, the plural democratic community “came into being” as a political subject, asserted itself, and its alternative way of life. That is why the protest can be considered a performative action. Weeks passed one after another, while the protest subject continued to persist on the same thing—on itself as ‘the source and bearer of sovereignty’—as if it were asserting itself beyond this horizontal time: traversing all those weeks and months, it affirmed itself eternally within itself and for itself. Furthermore, the essential complementarity between what this collective subject demanded and how it expressed itself must be noted. In its very form, the protest was not only a demand but also a demonstration and affirmation of an alternative: a polity grounded in the imperative “*shnavats’!*” (the caring-and-respectful attitude to the person).

The collective subject of the protest stood as an antagonist of the sovereign-dictator due to the politics of non-violence and exclusion of any *absolutely authoritative instance*. The agency of the democratic multitude lay in its ability for de-centralized horizontal coordination and spontaneous political creativity. The protest’s resilience was not based on centralized leadership, whether from a political organization or an individual. Accordingly, it was not the result of a unified strategy developed in advance by any ruling authority. As is well known, many criticized the protest precisely for its lack of centralized leadership. In my view, such an ambivalent appraisal of the Belarusian protest movement is something natural. And it is not my intention to idealize the Belarusian protest movement or to deny its probable mistakes and organizational shortcomings. What I want to show, however, is the specificity and important philosophical implications of this collective political action. In this regard, I argue that the absence of centralized leadership was not a defect or a purely negative characteristic of the protest. It should be understood in a positive sense as a constitutive feature of the new collective political subject whose emergence was a revolutionary phenomenon in itself.

In this context, I would like to recall that within the Marxist tradition (broadly speaking), there had been various authors who strongly criticized charismatic leadership and party vanguardism, that is, the idea of the leading role of the party as a revolutionary vanguard providing centralized political leadership for the masses. As Fracchia (2013) and Smyth (2024) note, this vision easily led to “a kind of communist Cartesianism that organizationally reproduces mind-body dualism” (Smyth 2024: 13). It is clear that such a partisan Cartesianism is radically at odds with the decentralized nature of the Belarusian protest movement. In addition to the post-Marxist thinkers mentioned earlier, it is worthwhile to refer here also to Rosa Luxemburg, whose legacy is actively revisited today as potentially offering a sounder and more timely conception of revolutionary agency. Luxemburg, being one of the leading figures in European Marxist circles during the Second International, was actively involved in strategic debates concerning the relation between party and class, and she criticized Leninist vanguardism, proposing an alternative approach to revolutionary change that prioritized the “spontaneity” of proletarian mass action over formal centralized organization (see *ibid.*). As Smyth stresses, Luxemburg’s view was “deeply anti-Cartesian in that she regarded the proletarian

multitude in terms of the mind-body unity of fully-fledged agency” (ibid. 15). This overcoming of the ‘partisan Cartesianism’ resonates well with the experience of the democratic multitude of the Belarusian revolution.

The type of collective agency cultivated by the protest community, with its numerous Telegram chats serving as the main communicative tool for coordination, relied not on charismatic leadership but on decentralized horizontal self-organization and effective digital networks. An impressive variety and richness of horizontal civic initiatives implicitly indicated the undemocratic nature of top-down centralized decision-making. The protest was characterized by spontaneity, which meant not “irrationality” (to define this way would be precisely an example of Cartesian logic) but a particular mode of manifestation of agency and creativity of the democratic multitude (Gabowitsch 2021).

Conclusions

The use of the word ‘revolution’ to characterize the post-electoral protest movement in Belarus in 2020 seems justifiable, as the latter indeed brought about radical social change—the emergence of a new collective political subject, which we conceptualize as the democratic multitude.

The stunning elections and the emergence of the protest multitude as a new political subject signified the collapse of plebiscitary democracy in Belarus. Our analysis of the political antagonism underlying the protests revealed that a revolutionary separation of the people’s sovereignty from the sovereignty of the existing state power occurred in Belarus. The post-election political landscape was characterized by radical asymmetry. While the dictator and his state apparatus (‘power vertical’) interpreted the situation as a *state of exception*—continuing to operate within the Schmittian logic of sovereignty—for the majority of Belarusians, the sovereign swiftly transformed into a tyrant: a dictator unlawfully maintaining power through coercion, in defiance of the will of the people. In this context, political antagonism manifested as a rapid unfolding of peaceful civil protest juxtaposed with an escalation of state repression.

The democratic multitude, performing its collective agency as “the source and bearer of sovereignty”, opposed the tyrant’s rule and demanded a re-establishment of the Belarusian state on the principles of the rule of law, respect for human rights, and recognition of the absolute value of human life. The long-lasting “contention over sovereignty” (as we metaphorically defined the very essence of the political antagonism) resulted in stable international delegitimization of Lukashenka as the head of state, which is a significant political achievement of the Belarusian revolution.

The genesis, core principles, and nature of the protest indicate that its aims extended beyond simply replacing Lukashenka; rather, it sought to transform the regime, or the system of state power, represented by this person. The protest was directed against the state regime built on the principle of sovereignty in the Hobbesian-Schmittian sense. The pluralistic democratic multitude of the Belarusian revolution opposed the state system in which the “highest authority” (the sovereign) could make decisions independently of legal norms, arbitrarily positioning himself above the law.

The Belarusian peaceful protest highlighted a core characteristic of the modern state, clearly articulated by Weber in his classical definition:

A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. (Weber 1994 [1919])

The combination of this definition with Schmitt's understanding of sovereignty allows for the possibility of the illegitimate use of violence if the sovereign deems the situation in the country to be a "state of exception," which is precisely what happened in Belarus. Thus, by chanting "Leave!", the protesters sought to reject the paradigm of institutionalizing monopoly rights to violence that Lukashenka embodied.

In this context, the peaceful nature of the protest was of the utmost importance. The protest community embodied and promoted an ethical and political alternative to the regime, which was based on a pathological combination of sovereign decisionism and unlimited power to use violence. The protest was a performative act where the very form of protest itself served as a constitutive argument against the sovereign power of the tyrant and his state apparatus. In short, the non-violent protest movement had a subversive effect on autocratic rule. Through regular marches, various local actions, decentralized coordination, and networks of mutual help, it actualized and asserted an alternative normative and axiological horizon in the given life-world. The normative core of the protest movement was the ethos of non-violence, which we proved to be encapsulated in the imperative "*shnavats'!*" – in the demand of the caring-and-respectful attitude to a person's life.

By resisting and subverting the principle of sovereign power, the protest community has outlined conceptual and practical guidelines for creating a new democratic polity. First, no instance can be absolutely authoritative. In this regard, the Belarusian protest questioned the institution of the state as an apparatus of power possessing a monopoly on the use of violence and prompted a radical reassessment of the relationship between the state and civil society. Furthermore, the democratic multitude, as a non-homogeneous and decentralized form of collective subject, has fostered non-representational modes of civic engagement, enabling greater inclusivity and a strong sense of self-agency co-existing with the agentive sense of We-agency. In summary, the 2020 Protest movement has made democracy a central part of both the political and philosophical agendas. In light of the Belarusian experience in 2020, the fundamental question 'What should democracy (as a form of life and governance) look like?' gained new topicality. As we have seen, the philosophical aspect of this agenda presupposes a systematic dismantling of the different modes of a sovereign position that were imagined in modernity. These modes include the epistemic mode, based on mind-body dualism and the subject-object dichotomy (Descartes); the moral mode, amounting to formal rationality (Kant); and the political mode, culminating in the Schmittian sovereign.

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