

The political potential of the feminist movement in the Belarusian revolution of 2020

Zusammenfassung

Das politische Potenzial der feministischen Bewegung in der belarussischen Revolution von 2020

Dieser Artikel untersucht den Einfluss der belarussischen Protestbewegung von 2020 auf eine neue feministische Ausprägung politischer Teilhabe. Unter Verwendung eines qualitativen, interpretativen Ansatzes stützt sich der Artikel auf die Erfahrungen, Praktiken und Erfahrungsberichte der belarussischen Protestbewegung von 2020, um nachzuzeichnen, wie Fürsorge, gegenseitige Unterstützung und individuelle Formen des Widerstands das kollektive Handeln unter autoritären Bedingungen geprägt haben. Die Analyse zeigt, dass die Mobilisierung von Frauen sowohl das Erscheinungsbild als auch die Strukturen der Protestbewegung verändert hat, indem sie den Fokus von heroischen Konfrontationen auf mikro-solidarische Vorgehensweisen verlagert und so trotz Repression politische Subjektivität bewahrt hat. Sie zeigt, dass feministische Bewegungen in Belarus das Konzept von Politik erweitert haben, indem sie Fürsorge, Beziehungsnetzwerke und alltägliche Überlebensstrategien in den Mittelpunkt der Protestbewegung stellten. Dies bietet einen tragfähigen Rahmen für den Kampf gegen autoritäre Macht jenseits konventioneller institutioneller Politik.

Schlüsselwörter

Belarussische Protestbewegung, feministische Politik, Fürsorge, Solidarität, Autoritarismus, Patriarchat, Gemeingüter, Infrastruktur

Summary

This article examines how the Belarusian protest movement of 2020 has generated a distinct feminist reconfiguration of political participation. Employing a qualitative, interpretive approach, the article draws on the experiences, practices and testimonies of the 2020 Belarusian protest movement to trace how care, mutual aid, and embodied forms of resistance have reshaped collective action under authoritarianism. The analysis shows that women's mobilisation has transformed the aesthetics and infrastructures of revolution, shifting attention from heroic confrontation to the micro-practices of solidarity that sustain political subjectivity in the face of repression. It concludes that feminist movements in Belarus have broadened the concept of politics by focusing on care, relationality, and everyday survival strategies in revolt. This offers a durable framework for challenging authoritarian power beyond conventional institutional politics.

Keywords

Belarusian protest movement, feminist politics, care, solidarity, authoritarianism, patriarchy, commons, infrastructure

1 Introduction

The 2020 Belarusian protest movement brought the feminist agenda to the centre of political struggle in a way the authoritarian regime had not anticipated. For decades, the regime had framed women through the language of unpaid care labour, motherhood,



social support, and political inferiority. Alexander Lukashenko's claim that "the Belarusian constitution does not foresee a woman president" (Worsch 2024) served less as a legal argument than as an expression of a broader ideological framework in which women were expected to support and uphold the social order rather than influence it politically. Within this framework, women were either seen as symbolic markers of stability and social harmony or as reproductive bodies responsible for the biological and social reproduction of the nation, while autonomous political agency remained associated with male authority (SB.by 2024).

In what follows, I argue that this order was disrupted during and after the 2020 protests through the transformation of reproductive, supportive, and care-based practices into forms of political agency. I focus on women-led protest actions, practices of mutual aid, women's prison testimonies, and reflections on sisterhood as sites where care, bodily vulnerability, and everyday survival became politically operative.

Using a qualitative and interpretive approach that combines the analysis of the emerging women's visibility, public statements, testimonies, and human rights reports, I trace the emergence of an alternative political approach that articulates care, solidarity, and reproductive labour as the ground of collective existence. This perspective reveals how the patriarchal regime loses its grip: zones that fall outside its field of control and perception, where relations are reorganised without being fully legible to power. At the same time, the article shows how these relations take infrastructural form, creating modes of connection that repression can disrupt but not fully break apart. This is particularly evident in the condensed conditions of prisons, where practices of sisterhood sustain individual and collective survival under extreme constraints. By 'infrastructures of care' I refer to relatively durable arrangements of practices, relations, spaces and material supports through which collective life becomes sustainable.

Women's collective actions have unsettled the political landscape from heroic public action (although this symbolism was significantly perpetuated and present) to micro practices of care, support, redistribution of political attention, and survival. By transforming embodied vulnerability into a political resource and reimagining solidarity as a form of infrastructural power, the 2020 feminist mobilisation has suggested a radically different political horizon in which the struggle against authoritarianism is inseparable from the reorganisation of social relations, the redistribution of care, and the emergence of a collective politics.

I understand the notion of the political to be the collective capacity to constitute and transform forms of life through practices of acting together. Such practices are rooted in relations of care, mutual aid, and interdependence, through which subjects do not simply cooperate but become capable of collective action. From this perspective, political agency emerges through processes of mutual becoming that generate forms of autonomy, enabling collective life to be initiated, sustained, and renewed even under conditions of repression. The significance of these forms of autonomy lies in their capacity to interrupt and reconfigure relations organised through domination, violence, precarity, and dependency.

This article argues that the Belarusian protests revealed a distinct feminist political potential, transforming the meaning of political action in an authoritarian context. Therefore, the focus is on the transformation of reproductive, supportive, and care-

based practices into forms of political agency during and after the Belarusian protests of 2020. The 2020 Belarusian revolutionary movement has made visible and politically significant those forms of labour and relations that are not generally considered to bear revolutionary potential.

2 The gendered limits of authoritarian politics

One of the slogans frequently repeated by Marya Kalesnikava (2020) during the protests was: “Hammer away, hammer away, hammer away at this regime!” At the time, the phrase referred to the persistence of protest and the refusal to accept electoral fraud, violence and authoritarian rule. Yet, looking back from today’s perspective, its meaning appears considerably broader. What did it mean, in practice, to continue hammering away at the regime? It meant not only confronting state power directly but to participate in the daily reproduction of the revolution itself: maintaining channels of communication beyond state control, supporting political prisoners, building archives, preserving memory, sustaining relations across prisons, borders, and exile, and creating spaces in which people could continue to act together despite fragmentation.

The 2020 protests that swept the entire country have revealed that political protest can emerge where authoritarian power fails to anticipate it: in bodies historically erased from political visibility and in gestures that exceed the state’s normative scripts of participation. The combination of a global pandemic (The Guardian 2020), an openly fraudulent election (BBC News 2020), and the regime’s mobilisation became one of the driving forces of political transformation (Human Rights Watch 2021).

According to all human rights reports (UN News 2020), 2020 was the most violent year in Belarus’s recent history. Mass detentions, torture, beatings, enforced disappearances, punitive courts, and the destruction of independent media and civil society (Human Rights Watch 2020) turned the country into a place where the very concept of *vita activa* (Arendt 1998: 7–8) was under threat. Five years later, in 2025, the machinery of repression continues to operate both inside Belarus and abroad, targeting activists, exiled communities, and anyone engaged in political action (Amnesty International 2025). However, 2020 also marked a turning point of unprecedented civic mobilisation. Society rose up against not only the regime’s three decades of unchallenged rule, but also the slow bureaucratic violence of Soviet-era institutional structures (Viačorka 2020) and the explosive street violence inflicted on peaceful demonstrators by the authorities (NPR Staff 2020). Belarusian society has entered a protracted state of trauma (Korshunau 2024), exacerbated by the regime’s complicity in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Despite the suppression of street protests, the revolution has not come to an end. Instead, it has shifted in terms of both, time and form, evolving from visible marches to underground networks of mutual aid, diasporic initiatives, digital activism, artistic interventions, and research projects that continue to articulate the ongoing political significance of 2020. These long-lasting practices demonstrate the endurance of horizontal, decentralised, non-violent modes of resistance grounded in care, solidarity and collective presence. The exceptional visibility of women as autonomous political actors became one of the defining ruptures of the movement. Women were not an auxiliary force, but

have reshaped the architecture of protest. The first women's solidarity chain on 12 August 2020, for which women dressed in white and stood silently to protest against police brutality, established a new form of resistance (Dryndova 2021).

The nomination of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a presidential candidate in 2020 and the widespread public support she received, came as an unexpected disruption for the Belarusian regime. Her campaign, together with the visible alliance of three women leading the opposition, challenged the established gendered order of political representation. The scale and intensity of public mobilisation around Tsikhanouskaya revealed a form of political agency that the regime had neither anticipated nor effectively incorporated into its existing framework (Dorokhov 2020).

The regime's response exposed the limits of its political repertoire. Rather than treating Tsikhanouskaya as an opponent within the field of political competition, it proved largely incapable of responding through mechanisms of negotiation, institutional contestation, or controlled inclusion. The response predominantly relied on repression and delegitimisation (Deutsche Welle 2020), exposing a structural inability to process internal crises. Tsikhanouskaya's case was particularly revealing in this regard. As a figure who did not emerge from established political institutions and whose political agency developed in real time, under conditions of pressure, she could not easily be neutralised as a conventional opponent. The regime lacked the mechanisms to transform her into a manageable political actor, as a controlled competitor or a systemic spoiler, for instance. Gender became one of the principal instruments of this disqualification. Lukashenko and pro-regime officials repeatedly framed Tsikhanouskaya as unsuitable for politics, reducing her to the domains of domesticity, emotionality, and motherhood (Deutsche Welle 2021). This discursive strategy was accompanied by material threats, including pressure on her family and the possibility of removing her children, as well as broader patterns of humiliation and symbolic degradation. These reactions revealed how political authority operates through a patriarchal logic that regulates who can appear as a legitimate political subject. When confronted with a form of agency that could not be absorbed into its existing structures, the regime responded by attempting to reassign it to a gendered order of subordination. In this sense, the 2020 crisis has exposed the gendered foundations of the regime's power.

Belarusian feminist scholars Irina Solomatina and Victoria Schmidt come to the conclusion that the regime's retributive violence against female protesters was not incidental but ideologically motivated, aiming to restore a specific order of gendered subservience. Solomatina and Schmidt (2021) introduce the concepts of *father-populism* and *femocracy*. Together, these concepts capture the paradox of gender politics under the Belarusian regime. Political authority is organised around the figure of the paternal leader, while the visible presence of women in state institutions is presented as evidence of the regime's alleged commitment to gender equality. However, the proximity of high-ranking female elites and bureaucrats to this patriarchal body creates the illusion of gender equality while actually supporting the regime's logic. This suggests that even in positions of power, women within authoritarian patriarchal systems remain politically expendable and symbolically subordinate. Despite consistently ranking among countries with a high proportion of women in public administration and political institutions – reaching up to 49 per cent of legislators, senior of-

ficials, and managers – the actual role of women within the Belarusian regime remains largely secondary and service-oriented. This reinforces rather than transforms existing power structures (Equal Future Eurasia 2025).

In the 2020 protests, the united campaign of three female leaders nominated Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the presidential candidate, and women's marches became a regular occurrence. In response, pro-regime female bureaucrats and Lukashenko himself employed dismissive rhetoric towards protesting women. This was an attempt to undermining the legitimacy of non-conventional political engagement and to reintegrate the image of Belarusian women into the normalised framework of state propaganda through violent repression. Unexpectedly, this shattered the myth of the nation's father and his claim to be the president of women, exposing the hollowness of the regime's commitment to social policies supporting women and motherhood.

Olga Shparaga traces a similar structure of domination from the micro-politics of the family to the macro-politics of the state. She identifies the patriarchal logic of authority that governs both domestic and political life. She argues that the Belarusian regime replicates the same model of care through control (Shparaga 2021a), in which protection and coercion become indistinguishable. In this sense, Shparaga reveals how the language of love and care can be weaponised by those in power and demonstrates that feminist politics must reclaim these terms as tools of resistance and collective reorganisation. According to Shparaga, the practice of love thus becomes the groundwork for a democracy rooted in care – a redefinition of politics as the shared labour of sustaining life against domination. These notions capture how feminist politics emerge in the cracks of patriarchal violence as a reorientation of political life away from domination and towards shared responsibility and horizontal attachment.

Tatsiana Shchytsova describes the astonishing rhythm of marches and daily actions, which served as a regular means of maintaining connection and love for what had already awoken into becoming: a new political life and a new political subject. In the interview excerpts Shchytsova cites, participants, directly or indirectly, point to this regularity and the slow reproduction of the revolutionary movement (Shchytsova 2025: 231). Although the revolution has not yet resulted in institutional change, this sustained labour of solidarity has not been entirely unsuccessful. It was experienced as meaningful and transformative in itself, reshaping how participants understood collective life and responsibility. As Ronan Hervouet (2023) observes, Belarusian society after 2020 is no longer the same; the experience of protest and solidarity has left traces that cannot be erased, persisting as memory, expectation, and a latent capacity for renewed collective action.

These dynamics demonstrate that the 2020 crisis did not simply expose the violence of the Belarusian regime. Rather, it revealed the limits of its political form: a system based on patriarchal authority, affective control, and the management of disposable individuals proved was unable to respond to new forms of collective action. This failure revealed a different configuration of the political, in which practices of care, attention, and everyday coordination redefined solidarity as an ongoing labour of sustaining relations. This displaced the regime's logic of atomisation and reconstituted political agency as a distributed, interdependent process.

3 Reconfiguring the political: Feminist practices of collective action

The days and nights between 9 and 11 August 2020 became a symbol of the regime's mass violence against peaceful protesters across Belarus. These days were marked by beatings, killings, arrests, torture, and (sexualised) violence. The full extent of what had occurred became known three days later, after the total internet shutdown was overturned. Yet, instead of paralysing the protest, this shock wave triggered a different response: peaceful, silent, but persistent.

On 12 August 2020, the first women's solidarity chain took place. Women dressed in white gathered in one of Minsk's central squares, holding flowers and posters. They stood without speaking or moving, yet they refused to disperse in the presence of security forces. From these initial chains, a new rhythm of collective action began to take shape. Women's gatherings quickly became regular and expanded into marches that brought together thousands of participants, spreading across the country. Unlike the protests and barricades of the first three nights after the election, these actions were not immediately met with mass violence by the authorities, although participants continued to face surveillance, threats, arrests, and abuse in detention. Each gathering shifted its tactics, slogans, and locations, yet consistently brought together thousands of participants across the country. Spontaneous forms of support emerged: volunteers distributed water, food, and medical aid, while participants were able to use digital coordination channels and search networks for detained protesters across the city. Over time, these practices ceased to function as ad hoc responses to immediate needs and developed into durable infrastructures of care that sustained collective action on an everyday basis.

The women's marches transformed the affective and social status of protesting bodies. Rather than becoming objects of fear, avoidance, or ridicule, they became focal points around which relations of trust, care, and collective participation could crystallise. Women reworked the logic of protest through embodied and situational practices. They redirected routes, dissolved into riot police formations like water (Tolstov/Stebur 2021), met armed force with gestures that did not follow the script of confrontation such as laughter, tears, singing, dancing, and moments of unexpected intimacy in the form of hugging guards outside the presidential residence (Boguslavskaya 2020). They placed their bodies between the police and male protesters, turning exposure to violence into a form of collective protection. Through these actions, vulnerability ceased to function as a mark of passivity or weakness and was reworked as a shared resource that could be distributed and sustained in common. Affect, vulnerability, and care became operative, reorganising how people appear and act together under pressure.

This transformation can be understood not as an expressive layer added to protest, but as a rework of its conditions. As Olga Shparaga (2021a) shows, the practices that appeared in 2020 did not accompany the movement from the margins, but redefined its internal logic, making care and interdependence central to collective action.

In this sense, the protests brought into view what Judith Butler describes as the space of appearance as something that does not precede political action but is produced through it. The gathering of bodies does not simply fill an existing space; it generates the conditions of appearing together, in the "between" that binds one body to another and

brings into spotlight the question of “we” (Butler 2011), probably for the first time. The Belarusian case makes this visible in a particular way: the capacity to remain together, to adjust, disperse, and reassemble, became inseparable from the work of sustaining relations. Political action emerged not as the assertion of individual agency, but as the ongoing coordination of bodies exposed to violence that refuse isolation.

The capacity to appear together and to sustain relations under pressure did not remain confined to embodied practice; it was taken up, condensed, and circulated in language. The protest space was not only held through bodies but continuously rearticulated through slogans, chants, posters, and improvised forms of expression that emerged within it. These linguistic forms did not simply describe the unfolding events, they participated in organising them, stabilising connections, and making shared experience legible to those inside and beyond the immediate scene of protest. In this sense, the emerging protest lexicon functioned as an extension of collective practice, a way of fixing, transmitting, and reworking the fragile infrastructures of togetherness that had to be constantly produced in action.

The production of metaphors rooted in everyday experiences exposed the dysfunctionality of relations that exhaust and commodify connections. The slogans that appeared during the marches, such as “Patriarchy, you’re fucked”, “Revolution – it is her”, “I’m not scared, I gave birth”, “Sasha, no means no”, “One doesn’t beat one’s beloved”, “Hide your limp baton”, “Give up your seat to a woman”, “A woman’s place is at the tombstone of dictatorship”, “Your beloved doesn’t want you”, “Belarus is her, I voted for her” (Kostyugova 2020, translation V. D.), expressed the frustration with and the structural critique of a system that had long intertwined authoritarian rule with patriarchal domination.

Olga Shparaga captures this linguistic boost as the birth of a vocabulary of care that had always been latent, but was never fully articulated or made infrastructural. The Belarusian revolution, as Shparaga argues, gave rise to a new political lexicon, a fragile yet persistent vocabulary of care, solidarity, and shared responsibility. In her essays and public interventions, she introduces notions such as “fragile resistance” (Shparaga 2023), “caring democracy” (Shparaga 2025), and “caring solidarity” (Shparaga 2021b).

These notions articulate the tension between vulnerability and endurance that have defined the protest movement. The metaphors of weakness become propositions for a relational understanding of the political. Political agency appears not as an attribute of autonomous individuals or organised institutions, but as something that emerges through practices of care, mutual support, and collective endurance. What took shape in the open space of the square does not disappear under repression, but contracts into more constrained conditions, reappearing in prison as an intensified form of the same practices of sustaining relations under deprivation.

“‘In prison, women called each other sisters’, Belarusian poet Hanna Komar summarized her own experience and that of other women imprisoned in 2020. Like me, she connected this experience with various practices of self-care and care for one another among women in prison ... from constructing a protest femininity, practicing attentiveness to one another, giving lectures, and providing each other with psychological, material, and other support, to fighting for one’s rights in prison” (Shparaga 2023: 290).

What links the street protest to the prison is a shared set of practices. Care, coordination, and attention move across these spaces and take different forms while preserving their relational logic and capacity to persist through transformation that gives them durability under repression.

4 Care under repression: The persistence of political life

Recent reports by the Viasna Human Rights Centre indicate that repression in Belarus remains continuous: arrests on politically motivated charges occur daily, despite ongoing international negotiations over the release of political prisoners. Many detainees remain incarcerated, while new arrests sustain the system of repression. The situation of women political prisoners is particularly severe. They are held in conditions that amount to torture, including incommunicado detention, forced labour, denial of medical care, and gender-specific violence (Viasna Human Rights Centre 2026).

The testimonies of women political prisoners in Belarus after the 2020 protests have revealed a deliberate system of gendered repression, where the carceral space functions simultaneously as a punitive institution and a mechanism for the destruction of relationality. The regime deploys imprisonment to isolate political opponents and to dismantle the forms of care, kinship, and agency associated with women's political subjectivity.

As the interviews reveal, imprisonment is engineered to collapse both physical and affective capacities under conditions in which survival becomes a daily negotiation of basic needs. A recurring theme in women's testimonies is the systematic erosion of autonomy over the body. "You have no right to your body. You have no right to your thoughts. You have no right to choose anything", observes feminist activist Darya Afanasyeva (Vasyukovich 2025). This statement condenses the logic of total disciplinary exposure: the female body is rendered permeable to surveillance and deprivation, stripped of privacy, and subjected to practices that aim to reduce it to bear life. In the women's colony in Homel (district centre in Belarus, the city close to the Russian border), detainees describe routine conditions that reach the threshold of torture: freezing cells, contaminated food (Vasyukovich 2025), chronic sleep disruption, prohibitions on church attendance or outdoor areas, and constant threats of punitive isolation (Volynets 2024).

Beyond physical degradation, the prison also targets women through maternal vulnerability, turning children into instruments of political pressure. The threat of losing paternal rights appears consistently across testimonies. Journalist Ksenia Lutskina recalls that authorities repeatedly threatened to take her child: "They promised to strip me of my parental rights [...] and you understand that they really can do it" (Voytkovskiy 2025). The regime's willingness to confiscate children without trial under Decree No. 18 (Viasna Human Rights Centre 2007) transforms motherhood itself into a site of coercion. Testimonies of women such as Elena Movshuk and Victoria Onokhova-Zhuravleva show how minors were seized directly from schools or removed from families under the pretext of "social danger" (Current Time TV 2024).

The erasure of relational ties is intensified by controlled deprivation of communication. Women report that they have not received letters for months, shutting them off the

outside world and the political community. As Lutschina recounts, she received dozens of letters from strangers and not a single one from her son (Voytkovskiy 2025). This selective withholding of communication functions as an affective punishment, aimed at disorienting prisoners and attacking their most vulnerable bonds. Communication becomes a battleground in which the state asserts interpretive authority over the prisoner's world. Alongside this systematic destruction of bodily autonomy and external ties, imprisonment also enforces isolation within the prison itself, fragmenting relations between inmates through fear, stigma, and controlled proximity. Many of these practices are explicitly gendered, targeting women through threats to motherhood, deprivation of basic hygiene, invasive inspections, denial of reproductive healthcare, and forms of labour and coercion that exploit bodily vulnerability. It is within these conditions of intensified deprivation and separation that practices of sisterhood and creative forms of mutual support emerge.

Developed practices of survival transformed the prison into a site of political relation. Even when solidarity was fragile, as some women describe a social environment fractured by fear or hostility (Volynets 2024), political prisoners generated microstructures of mutual aid. These practices were not uniform or romanticised, but they were consistent enough to form what Olga Shparaga calls “caring solidarity” (Shparaga 2021b: 278): the co-creation of life-sustaining practices in a space of impossible structure. One of the central practices was the maintenance of bodily dignity. As Alesia Bunevich says, prison life is organised in such a way that a woman can think only about eating and washing:

“A woman's penal colony – there's nothing to say about that. It's definitely not a general regime, more like a maximum-security prison. Women are put in a position where they really have to think only about their basic needs. You don't think about anything lofty, you don't think about any plans, you basically live one day at a time and think: what should I have for breakfast tomorrow, because tomorrow will be something unappetizing? What time should I shower between shifts? When is that allowed?” (Volynets 2024, translation V. D.)

In this sense, deprived daily practices could be performed as acts of disobedience, the restoration of self-dignity. Similarly, the gesture of applying red lipstick before court hearings or transfers, a practice well-documented across testimonies, served as an embodied assertion of presence, a counter-image to the state's attempt to render the prisoner faceless and humiliated. Red lipstick becomes a political devise, a surface on which the inmate reclaims visibility. Other practices of survival operated through intellectual and creative labour. Women gave lectures, drew, shared ideas, and these improvised pedagogical networks were modes of collective self-production, creating temporal continuity in the complete withdrawal of dignity and self-respect. These micro practices of care, knowledge, and creativity mitigate harm and reveal the limits of authoritarian control over bodies.

These practices do not remain confined to survival. They arise as a spontaneous and necessary response to imprisonment itself, as gestures through which one holds onto oneself and others. What functions as a fragile anchor in detention – care, play, shared routines – later becomes material for reflection. This experience was reflected in an artistic form, exposing the conditions of subjectivity under pressure: how agency is sustained, how will is reappropriated, and how human presence persists where it is systematically stripped away.

Nadya Sayapina, a Belarusian female artist who was imprisoned in 2020 and was forced to flee the country, elaborates on the idea of emerging sisterhood in her art project *DOLLHOUSE* (Sayapina 2020–2021). The project describes the personal experience of the artist and the experience of the fellow inmates in the pre-trial detention centre on Akrestina¹ (Minsk) and Zhodzina² (Minsk region, Belarus), sadly known for the most horrible conditions and tortures. Sayapina reflects on this process of building a fragile architecture of care within the dehumanised, impossible space of the prison. She describes in detail the practices of simple interaction and everyday life that the artist and the fellow inmates created every day. In the interview, Sayapina explained:

“We washed each other’s hair and combed each other’s hair. We told our personal stories and told fortunes from books. We gave each other massages, impromptu beauty treatments, and ballpoint pen tattoos. We played simple games and created our own out of paper. We drew, sculpted, and painted. We kept diaries and sang songs. We argued or made nice with the guards, as if they were boys from a different group or counselors with different personalities. It was like we were playing children’s camp in a correctional facility. We spent 24 hours in a cell for ten people, turning it into a dollhouse” (Vasilek 2020).

Sayapina compares the experience of being in prison to a total loss of will and control over life, to the state of childhood. And the spontaneous response to this deprivation of agency was a game, both as a form of escapism and as a form of transformation of the unbearable, disorienting reality in which she found herself. Sayapina describes the experience of being and interacting with other female inmates as building sisterhood through various forms of playful interactions, mutual support, and care. The search for various practices, including artistic ones, helped to accumulate mental resources and record moments in time, fix the built networks of cooperation, so as not to completely lose the possibility of oneself.

Sayapina does not focus exclusively on repression itself. Alongside descriptions of violence, isolation, and deprivation, another story repeatedly emerges: the story of care. Women share food, distribute medicine, exchange information, teach each other, support those who became ill, help newcomers adapt to the prison conditions, and develop collective strategies for survival. The significance of these practices lies not only in helping each other survive imprisonment. They created spaces for collective living, fostering connections across different spaces while maintaining their connective function. These spaces ranged from the streets to neighbourhood communities, from kitchens to digital networks, from prison correspondence to archives, artistic practices, and diasporic initiatives.

However, these relations should not be idealised. Care is fragile, unevenly distributed and constantly exposed to exhaustion, conflict, and erosion. Infrastructures of solidarity emerged through continuous labour, negotiation, and repair. Their political

1 The common name ‘Akrestina’ has been associated in Belarus for many years with illegal detentions of citizens for political reasons. This place has become a symbol of the torture of civilians who disagree with electoral fraud, participants in the protests in 2020–2022 (RADA 2023).

2 The prison in Zhodzina is known for its torturous conditions and abuse of political prisoners. During the mass protests, many of those detained and convicted were held in this regional prison (Vasyukovich 2021).

significance lies not in moral purity, but in their capacity to create temporary grounds for collective existence under conditions of repression.

5 Conclusion

The 2020 feminist mobilisation achieved more than just making women visible in the streets. It changed the practical forms of political action. Protests began to rely on practices that were previously considered forms as secondary, such as care, coordination, bodily protection, mutual attention, and maintaining connections. These practices enabled collective action where confrontation had become dangerous or impossible.

Their force lay in their flexibility. They spread from public squares to online chats, courtyards, homes, prisons, exile networks and artistic reflections. Spaces altered, yet the underlying logic remained recognisable: sustaining relations under pressure. This capacity to survive displacement made them resistant to repression. Violence could disperse bodies, close streets, and imprison participants, yet it could not fully undo the established habits of support and recognition. Prison revealed this logic in its most concentrated form. The carceral system attempted to break autonomy, communication, bodily dignity, and ties to the outside world. However, it was under these conditions that practices of sisterhood, care, play, teaching, grooming, drawing, and shared routines became a means of maintaining selfhood and connection with others. These practices did not abolish violence, but they interrupted its claim to total control.

This is why these practices can be understood as an alternative political infrastructure. They do not depend on institutions, parties, or formal leadership. They exist through the ongoing work of maintaining relations: feeding, protecting, remembering, writing, accompanying, and rejecting isolation. In this sense, the revolution continues beyond the event. It persists as a distributed process through which people learn to support one another, and a new political subject emerges from this work.

References

- Amnesty International (2025). *Belarus: Authorities hold presidential election in climate of total fear and repression*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/belarus-authorities-hold-presidential-election-in-climate-of-total-fear-and-repression/>.
- Arendt, Hannah (1998). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- BBC News (2020). *Belarus election: Opposition disputes Lukashenko landslide win*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53721410>.
- Boguslavskaya, Alexandra (2020). *Khorovody i zaderzhaniya: protestnye vykhodnye v Belarusi* [Round dances and detentions: Protest weekend in Belarus]. Deutsche Welle, 9 September 2020. Date of access: 5 June 2025 at <https://www.dw.com/a-54835729>.
- Butler, Judith (2011). *Bodies in alliance and the politics of the street*. *Transversal*, September 2011. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en>.
- Current Time TV (2024). *“Rezhim osleplen zhazhdoy mesti”*. *Kak vlasti Belarusi otbirayut detey u zhenshchin-politizaklyuchennykh* [“The regime is blinded by a thirst for revenge.” How the

- Belarusian authorities are taking children away from female political Prisoners], 15 May 2024. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/vlasti-belarusi-ot-birayut-detei-u-zhenshin-politzaklyuchennyh/32947190.html>.
- Deutsche Welle (2020). *Chto govoril Aleksandr Lukashenko o protestuyushchikh* [What Alexander Lukashenko said about the protesters]. YouTube. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKQR8tDw__8.
- Deutsche Welle (2021). *Zhenshchiny protiv Lukashenko: chto stalo s aktivistkami protesta? Tok-shou DW "V samuyu tochku"* [Women against Lukashenko: What happened to the women activists of the protest? DW Talk Show "To the Point"]. YouTube. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYXckI6IO4k>.
- Dorokhov, Vladimir (2021). Tikhonovskaya kak zerkalo belorusskoy avtokratii [Tsikhonovskaya as a mirror of the decline of Belarusian autocracy]. Deutsche Welle, 6 August 2020. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.dw.com/ru/svetlana-tihanovskaja-kak-zerkalo-zakata-belorusskoj-avtokratii/a-54437710>.
- Dryndova, Olga (2021). *Revolution in Belarus: Surprisingly female?* Green European Journal. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/revolution-in-belarus/>.
- Equal Future Eurasia (2025). *Women's representation in politics and public administration: Belarus*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/women-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/belarus>.
- Hervouet, Ronan (2023). *Belarusians are no longer the same as before 2020: Memories cannot be destroyed*. Decoder, 30 June 2023. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.decoder.org/ru/article/belarusy-uzhe-ne-te-cto-do-2020-goda-vospominaniya-unichtozhit-nevozmozhno/>.
- Human Rights Watch (2020). *Belarus: Systematic beatings, torture of protesters*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>.
- Human Rights Watch (2021). *Belarus: Unprecedented crackdown. Arrests, torture of peaceful protesters follow disputed election*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/belarus-unprecedented-crackdown>.
- Kolesnikova, Maria (2020). *"Prodolzhaem idti k obshchey tseli"* [We continue moving towards a common goal]. YouTube. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AegklCrFtNJ8&t=61s>.
- Korshunau, Henadz (2024). Collective trauma: The case of Belarus after 2020. *Topos*, 1, 5–36. <https://doi.org/10.61095/815-0047-2024-1-5-36>.
- Kostyugova, Valeria (2020). *Revolutsiya – eto ona. Kak zhenshchiny stali glavnoy siloy belorusskogo protesta* [Revolution is she: How women became the main force of the Belarusian protest]. The Insider, 5 September 2020. Date of access: 5 June 2025 at <https://theins.ru/opinions/valeriya-kostugova/234539>.
- NPR Staff (2020). *Belarus' massive and unprecedented protests*. NPR Picture Show, 21 August 2020. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.npr.org/sections/picture-show/2020/08/21/904252939/photos-belarus-massive-and-unprecedented-protests>.
- RADA (2023). *"You Will Die Here": Testimonies of the Prisoners of Akrestina, 15 March 2023*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://en.rada.fm/2023/03/15/you-will-die-here/>.
- Sayapina, Nadya (2020–2021). *DOLLHOUSE. Multimedia installation: Series of drawings*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://cargocollective.com/NadyaSayapina/DOLLHOUSE>.
- SB.by (2024). *Lukashenko warmly congratulated Belarusian women: You are the best that we have*. SB.by. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.sb.by/en/lukashenko-warmly-congratulated-belarusian-women-you-are-the-best-that-we-have.html>.
- Shchyttsova, Tatsiana (2025). *Solidarity of the shaken: On the collective subject of the Belarusian revolution of 2020*. Stuttgart: ibidem Press.

- Shparaga, Olga (2021a). *The face of the revolution is female: The case of Belarus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Shparaga, Olga (2021b). Caring democracy as a response to the far-right populism: A feminist perspective from Belarus and beyond. *Ideology and Politics Journal*, 1(27), 272–289. <https://doi.org/10.36169/2227-6068.2025.01.00012>
- Shparaga, Olga (2023). Fragile resistance: “The more you care for others, the better you feel.” Belarusian women political prisoners 2020–2023. In Cordelia Dvorak (ed.), *Wenn du durch die Hölle gehst, dann geh weiter! Zeugnisse inhaftierter Frauen in Belarus* (pp. 286–300). Berlin: Edition.fotoTAPETA.
- Shparaga, Olga (2025). Über die Notwendigkeit der fürsorglichen Solidarität in der Situation des russisch-ukrainischen Krieges. In Birge Krondorfer & Irmtraud Voglmayr (eds.), *Krieg und Friedensbewegung: Feministische Perspektiven* (pp. 75–85). Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag.
- Solomatina, Irina & Schmidt, Victoria (2021). Gendernyi populizm v Belarusi [Gender populism in Belarus]. *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 135(1), 147–160. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://nlobooks.ru/article/15424/>.
- The Guardian (2020). *Belarus crowdfunds to fight coronavirus as leader denies it exists*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/belarus-crowdfunds-to-fight-coronavirus-as-leader-denies-it-exists>.
- Tolstov, Alexey & Stebur, Antonina (2021). My – zhivye i uyazvimye [We are alive and vulnerable]. *Moscow Art Magazine*, 116. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://moscowart-magazine.com/issue/104/article/2303>.
- UN News (2020). *Violations continuing against Belarus protesters, UN Human Rights Office warns*. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1077662>.
- Vasilek, Tanya (2020). *Minsk artist Nadya Sayapina painted portraits of her cellmates*. Green Belarus. Date of access: 1 July 2025 at <https://greenbelarus.info/articles/08-12-2020/minskaya-khudozhnica-nadya-sayapina-risovala-portrety-sokamernic-chtoby>.
- Vasyukovich, Roman (2021). “V dvukhmestnoy kamere 10 chelovek, vylivayut vedro khlorki, dyshat’ nechem”. Arestovannyye rasskazyvayut o pytkakh v belorusskikh SIZO [“Ten People in a Two-Person Cell, They Pour a Bucket of Bleach, There Is Nothing to Breathe.” Detainees Describe Torture in Belarusian Detention Centers]. Current Time TV, 14 April 2021. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-zhodino-okrestina/31202055.html>.
- Vasyukovich, Roman (2025). “U tebya net prava na tvoe telo, net prava na tvoji mysli”. *Belorusskie politzaklyuchennyye – o kolonii v Gomele, gde sidit Mariya Kolesnikova* [“You have no right to your body, no right to your thoughts.” Belarusian political prisoners on the penal colony in Gomel where Maria Kolesnikova is held]. Radyo Svaboda, 14 November 2025. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belorusskie-politzaklyuchennyye-kolonia-gomel-mariya-kolesnikova/33591135.html>.
- Viačorka, Franak (2020). *Belarus is a reminder that the USSR is still collapsing*. Atlantic Council – BelarusAlert, 26 August 2020. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/belarus-is-a-reminder-that-the-ussr-is-still-collapsing/>.
- Viasna Human Rights Centre (2007). *Legal analysis of decree of President of Republic of Belarus No. 18 of 24 November 2006 on additional measures of state defense of children in socially troubled families*. Viasna Human Rights Centre. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://spring96.org/en/news/16367>.
- Viasna Human Rights Centre (2026). *164 women behind bars: What is known about the political persecution of women in Belarus*. Date of access: 10 April 2026 at <https://spring96.org/en/news/119779>.
- Volynets, Anna (2024). *Kogda ty – “politicheskaya”* [When you are “political”]. Dekoder, 22 November 2024. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.dekoder.org/ru/article/kogda-ty-politicheskaya/>.

- Voytkovskiy, Evgeniy (2025). “*Dna net voobshche. Ty prosto dolzhen kak-to sokhranit'sya*”. *Eks-politizaklyuchennaya Kseniya Lutskina o tyur'me i Belarusi posle 2020 goda* [“There is no bottom at all. You just have to somehow preserve yourself.” Former political prisoner Ksenia Lutskina on prison and Belarus after 2020]. Radio France Internationale (RFI), 21 March 2025. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/европа/20250321-бывшая-политзаключенная-ксения-луткина-о-тюрьме-и-беларуси-после-2020-года>.
- Worsch, Laura (2024). The Regime did not take us women seriously. Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP), Berlin. Date of access: 27 November 2025 at <https://iep-berlin.de/en/projects/enlargement-neighbourhood-and-central-asia/visiblity-belarus/belarus-insights-episode-4/>.

Author's details

Volha Davydzik, MA in philosophy, PhD Candidate, researcher in social philosophy and cultural studies at Leuphana University. Research focus: protest art, feminist politics, and infrastructures of solidarity and care under authoritarianism, particular focus on the 2020 Belarusian revolution, feminist theory, collective political agency, digital infrastructures of resistance, and practices of care.

Email: volha.davydzik@gmail.com