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# The rise of a new transnational political nation: the Belarusian diaspora and its leaders after the 2020 protests

**Powstanie nowego transnarodowego narodu politycznego: białoruska diaspora i jej liderzy po protestach 2020 roku**

**Summary:** When an authoritarian country lacks opportunities for free political activity, the diaspora and its leaders often take on the role of the democratic opposition against the authoritarian government and act as a political force for democratization. Although political activity abroad is very challenging and limited *per se*, the example of the Belarusian diaspora and its leaders demonstrates that they can play the role of an internationally recognized political entity. The pro-democratic activity of the Belarusian diaspora focuses on three main areas: the continuation of resistance against the authoritarian regime, the advancement of political representation, and the development of a credible democratic alternative including a political program for a future democratic Belarus. Yet the Russian aggression against Ukraine has put Belarusian opposition abroad at the front of a dilemma as to whether they should also take on a clear nation-building in the new geopolitical context.

**Keywords:** Belarus, diaspora, democratic transformation, nationhood

**Streszczenie:** Kiedy w kraju autorytarnym brakuje możliwości swobodnej działalności politycznej, diaspora i jej przywódcy często przyjmują rolę demokratycznej opozycji przeciwko autorytarnemu rządowi i podejmują działania na rzecz demokracji w kraju pochodzenia. Choć aktywność polityczna za granicą jest dla emigrantów trudna i często ma ograniczony zasięg, to przykład diaspor białoruskiej i jej przywódców pokazuje, że mogą oni z powodzeniem pełnić rolę podmiotu politycznego na arenie międzynarodowej. Prodemokratyczna działalność diaspor białoruskiej koncentruje się na trzech głównych obszarach: kontynuacji oporu przeciwko autorytarnemu reżimowi, rozwoju reprezentacji politycznej oraz wypracowaniu wiarygodnej alterna-

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tywy demokratycznej w postaci programu politycznego dla przyszłej demokratycznej Białorusi. Rosyjska agresja na Ukrainę postawiła jednak białoruską opozycję za granicą przed dylematem, czy w nowej sytuacji geopolitycznej zająć radykalne stanowisko narodowowyzwoleńcze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Białoruś, diaspora, transformacja demokratyczna, naród

## Introduction

Previous research suggests that the mass protests following the fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020, and the demands for democracy that accompanied social unrest, indicate that Belarusian society is undergoing a revival of the national idea in a modern democratic version<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, as the regime increases repression, Belarusian society, or at least the part of it that demands pro-democratic changes, can perform its political activity only to a limited extent and in a more or less passive form (by symbolic contestation). Other forms of activity such as political campaigning in the public sphere or in the media, either creating new or supporting existing political or social organizations critical of the authorities, are practically impossible in Belarus today. This article argues that the role of a pro-democratic opposition to Alexander Lukashenko's rule has been taken over by the Belarusian diaspora, which, despite being abroad and not being able to directly participate in political life in the country, actively works towards building a democratic transnational Belarusian nation.

The size and course of the protests in Belarus after the 2020 presidential election astonished both the country's authorities and international public opinion<sup>2</sup>. It is worth noting the atypical features of this movement, which also reflects the specificity of Belarusian society: the protests were widespread, spontaneous, and grassroots (representatives of all social groups took to the streets); they were characterized by perseverance and flexibility (in response to repression, innovative forms of protest emerged such as marches by women and pensioners);

- 1 A. Kazharski, *Belarus' new political nation? 2020 anti-authoritarian protests as identity building*, "New Perspectives" 2021, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 69-79; I. Petrova, E. Korosteleva, *Societal fragilities and resilience: The emergence of peoplehood in Belarus*, "Journal of Eurasian Studies" 2021, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 122-132; N. Douglas, *Belarus: From the Old Social Contract to New Social Identity*, "ZOiS Report" 2020, vol. 6, [https://en.zois-berlin.de/file-admin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS\\_Reports/2020/ZOiS\\_Report\\_6\\_2020.pdf](https://en.zois-berlin.de/file-admin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2020/ZOiS_Report_6_2020.pdf) [30.10.2022].
- 2 S. Sierakowski, *Belarus Uprising: The Making of a Revolution*, "Journal of Democracy" 2021, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 5-16.

social media were also used on a large scale, and the pro-democratic demands were voiced together with claims for social and national changes<sup>3</sup>. It should be emphasized that only peaceful forms of resistance appeared (there is no information about any form of aggression on the part of the protesting Belarusians, in contrast, for example, to the protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022).

However, as time passed and repression by the authorities intensified on an unprecedented scale, the protests were crushed, and Belarus experienced another large wave of emigration. Many opposition activists – including Lukashenko's opponents in the presidential election – received long prison sentences or were detained for months without trial, and hundreds of social organizations (NGOs) were delisted. As active forms of political opposition became practically impossible or were penalized with long-term imprisonments, reducing opposition presence in public spaces, including in media and new organizations advocating for human rights, many activists, for lack of an alternative, left for neighbouring countries, mainly Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. Among others, and for this reason, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who, according to both Belarusians and international observers, defeated Lukashenko in the presidential elections<sup>4</sup>, also left the country. By creating structures and continuing their political activities abroad, the Belarusian diaspora has become the main, and in practice, sole active public opposition force working for the democratization of their country.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, in which Lukashenko allowed Russia to use Belarus territory as a springboard for attacking troops and a base for rocket and missile attacks on Ukraine, was not only an unprecedented violation of the principles of international law, order, and peace in Europe, this turn of events presented the Belarusian diaspora with a new challenge. From that moment, the priority of its actions became not only the struggle for

3 A. Kazharski, op. cit.; I. Petrova, E. Korosteleva, op. cit.

4 Voice platform, Zubr platform, and Honest People initiative, *Final Report on 2020 Presidential Elections in Belarus*, August 2020; for external reactions see for instance the statement by High Representative of the European Union Joseph Borrell in Radio Free Liberty Europe, *EU does not recognize Lukashenko as Belarusian President, Borell Says*, 15 September 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-does-not-recognize-Lukashenko-borrell-says/30840563.html> [02.11.2022].

democratization of its country of origin but also one of creating a clear vision of Belarusian nationhood and distinctiveness from Russia, stopping the participation of Belarusians in the Russian aggression, and for international public opinion not to associate the Belarusian nation with the Lukashenko regime. Although this paper primarily analyses the period 2020-2021, we also consider the challenges of the recent Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Sources used in the article in addition to the literature review, include own research in the form of thirteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Belarusian diaspora in Poland (10) and experts (3) as well as a content analysis of social media (selected portals and websites), which included posts published on the profiles of organizations of the Belarusian diaspora (Belarusian House, Belarusian Youth Hub, Belarusian Solidarity Centre) and open thematic groups (e.g., Belarusians in Poland, Belarusians in Warsaw) on Facebook and Telegram in the period August 2020 to September 2021.

## **1. The role of the diaspora in the democratization process**

In general terms, democratization can be defined as a multi-stage and long-term process of transforming an authoritarian system into a democratic one, which involves not only the system of power (laws and institutions) in a state but also its societies<sup>5</sup>. The first phase of the democratization process is called transition (which should be followed by consolidation and institutionalization) and refers to the period when political actors negotiate the basic rules of the game that will apply in the future<sup>6</sup>. A classic example of this stage is the Round Table Talks in Poland, where, in 1989, representatives of the then-socialist government and the democratic opposition sat down together to establish the principles of the political transformation<sup>7</sup>.

5 R. Dahl, *On Democracy: A Citizen's Guide*, New Haven 2000; J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore 1996; C. Boix, S. Stokes, *Endogenous democratization*, "World Politics" 2003, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 517-549.

6 V.M. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society. The Emergence of Democratic Spain*, Cambridge 1993.

7 E. Wnuk-Lipiński, *Civil Society and Democratization*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, R.J. Dalton, H.D. Klingemann (eds.), Oxford 2007.

In 2022, more than a year after the rigged presidential elections, mass peaceful protests, and the bloody retaliation of autocrat Lukashenko, who allowed Russia to launch attacks on targets in Ukraine, Belarus can hardly be described as a country that is even close to the first stage of democratization. However, witnessing the actions of the Belarusians abroad, we would like to reflect on the role of the diaspora and its leaders as a democratic opposition against the actions of the autocratic regime, and as a force to build a vision of a new Belarusian nation – a transnational political community based on democratic values and civil society.

The diaspora, as a group for whom, either exiting physically or remaining only in their imagination, home is a source of value, identity, and loyalty<sup>8</sup>, repeatedly attempts to influence the political situation in the country of origin, especially if the reason for leaving was political and not merely economic emigration. Contemporary national thought often develops in exile; an example of such a process is the Irish diaspora in the US and its influence on the development of the idea of a nation in modern Ireland. In times of a political or economic crisis or loss or weakening of state sovereignty, the diaspora can confirm the legitimacy of state authorities and institutions<sup>9</sup>. History is replete with such examples, only has to mention the governments of Central European states in exile in London during the Second World War, and long after it ended. Also, pre-war Belarusian emigration holds the tradition of electing the Chairman of the Council of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (*Rada BNR*) in exile since 1919<sup>10</sup>.

The diaspora plays a special role in cases of authoritarian states undergoing a political transformation toward democratization. The existing research indicates that members of the diaspora who reside in democratic countries are more involved than others in activities for the democratization of their country of origin, and their influence may take different forms<sup>11</sup>. The diaspora can be focused primarily on

8 R. Brubaker, *The 'diaspora diaspora'*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 2005, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 1-19.

9 Y. Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty. Political Exiles in the Age of the Nation-State*, University of Michigan Press, 2005.

10 *Rada BNR* long ago abandoned plans to form the legitimate government, it has seen its mission as helping in maintaining Belarusian identity and supporting the pro-democratic movement.

11 M. Koinova, *Diasporas and democratization in the post-communist world*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies" 2009, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 41-64.

the cultivation of national traditions (especially in conditions when the existence of an independent state is threatened), but it may also include in its agenda the promotion of the principles and institutions of liberal democracy. Importantly, the diaspora does not have to aim at overthrowing a dictatorship, but rather at the incremental process of “authoritarian erosion”, in particular, by creating a credible democratic alternative<sup>12</sup>.

In the following analysis of the activities of the Belarusian diaspora, reference is made to the research that theorizes the democratization process, more specifically, the lessons learnt from the so-called third wave of democratization (a global trend when many countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa underwent a democratic transition in the late twentieth century)<sup>13</sup>. The authors argue that the goal of the democratic opposition’s actions is not only to weaken the authoritarian regime but also to direct it towards a democratic transformation. We found the approach of Alfred Stepan particularly inspiring, who lists six functions of the democratic opposition that, in his opinion, cover the entire complexity of the process of such a political transformation. These are: 1) staying in, or coming into, existence; 2) resisting integration into the regime; 3) guarding zones of autonomy against it; 4) disputing its legitimacy; 5) raising the costs of non-democratic rule; 6) creating a credible democratic alternative<sup>14</sup>. Some empirical works have attempted to make the concept operational and to apply it to individual case studies in the post-soviet area. For instance, David White refers to Stepan’s typology and describes the mobilization of the opposition in Russia in 2011-2012, including the intensification of mass street protests, as raising the costs of non-democratic rule, while creating social organizations non-subordinate to the state are viewed as guarding areas of autonomy<sup>15</sup>. Following a similar path, this

12 S. Bedford, L. Vinatier, *Resisting the Irresistible: “Failed Opposition” in Azerbaijan and Belarus Revisited*, “Government and Opposition” 2019, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 686-714.

13 J.L. Linz, A. Stepan, *Toward Consolidated Democracies*, “Journal of Democracy” 1996, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 14-33; A. Stepan, *Democratic Opposition and Democratization Theory*, “Government and Opposition” 1997, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 657-673.

14 A. Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 662.

15 D. White, *Political opposition in Russia: the challenges of mobilisation and the political-civil society nexus*, “East European Politics” 2005, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 314-325.

paper aims to empirically analyze the function of the Belarusian diaspora as a democratic opposition.

The authors confront the classic concepts of democratization with recent research on the consolidation of authoritarianism. According to Levitsky and Way, transitions do not always lead to democracy, and many of the competing authoritarian regimes existing for many years should be regarded as distinct non-democratic regime types instead of defining them as countries awaiting transition<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, pro-democracy trends are often overlooked because the role of the opposition in authoritarian countries is compared to those in mature democratic countries. In particular, non-traditional methods of resistance to the authoritarian regime are overlooked, or tools to analyse it are lacking. As suggested by Sofie Bedford and Laurent Vinatier, “in this sense (...) opposition’s participation in popular dissent and protest should not be seen as a means to an ultimate end (regime change), but rather as a general act of resistance”<sup>17</sup>. Following these authors, it is recognized that opposition “needs to be studied more in its own right” and the political activities of the diaspora are placed as the main axis of the analysis.

After the wave of repression in the country, the Belarusian diaspora took on the role of the opposition, becoming a symbolic representation of the democratically oriented section of Belarusian society. Three key areas have been distinguished in which the Belarusian diaspora acts as a democratic political force, fulfilling at the same time the functions of a democratic opposition. The first area of activity is a *socio-political mobilization* to continue resistance to the authoritarian regime. Through activities in this area (such as mass protests or the use of social media), the Belarusian diaspora performs the function of staying in or guarding zones of autonomy. The second area of activity of the Belarusian diaspora is *building stable (opposition) structures of political representation*, where the possibility of disputing the regime’s legitimacy and raising the costs of non-democratic rule primarily through the international activity of the diaspora can be seen, which publiciz-

16 S. Levitsky, L.A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge 2010.

17 S. Bedford, L. Vinatier, op. cit., p. 687.

es the regime's crimes and invalidates its legitimacy. The third area of activity is *conceptualizing a democratic future for Belarus*, which is directly related to the function of creating a credible democratic alternative. These three distinguishable areas of activity of the diaspora and the functions ascribed to them will be analyzed in detail in the subsequent parts of this article.

## 2. Socio-political mobilization of the Belarusian diaspora

After August 2020, protests as a symbolic continuation of the struggle for pro-democratic changes became an everyday reality for Belarusians abroad, from street action, grassroots mechanisms of self-organization and mutual help, to individual initiatives of resistance<sup>18</sup>. The widespread mobilization of Belarusians abroad not only became a unifying factor for dispersed Belarusian groups but also constituted them as an active political subject opposing the regime and preserving areas of unfettered political freedom and independence.

The scale of the mass mobilization of the Belarusian diaspora that began in 2020 was unprecedented<sup>19</sup>. Also, for the first time, a new feature of the Belarusian diaspora is its widespread politicization and civic involvement. This transnational community, not accepting the results of the 2020 elections, claimed to be "the new political majority", which was reflected in the symbolic slogan "the 97%"<sup>20</sup>. Together, closely following the situation in the country, Belarusians abroad united with protests organized in Minsk and other Belarusian cities. The community of beliefs and emotions that united Belarusians across national borders was particularly visible in the form of widespread protests and through social media.

Protest as a socio-political tool of mass opposition has redefined the power relations between society and the regime. The protests made it possible to identify zones of autonomy where the diaspora can act freely (in contrast to the opposition in the country) and which

18 N. Bekus, *Struggle over identity: The official and the alternative "Belarusianness"*, Central European University Press 2010.

19 S. Sierakowski, op. cit.

20 The 97% refers to a meme claiming that Lukashenko only commands a 3% approval rating, which is based on an opposition website's informal poll before it was closed down by the authorities.

are strategically important for the process of the country's democratic transformation. These include reliable information about the situation in Belarus, use of national symbols, use of the Belarusian language, building national identity, exercising political rights and participation in political decision-making, and representing Belarusians in the international environment. The Belarusian diaspora tries to be active in these areas using various tools, from traditional actions such as street protests to innovative solutions possible in the virtual space.

The widespread, grassroots, and peaceful character of the protests, as well as a generational shift (recognized leaders have been joined by young activists who are particularly visible in the virtual space), are becoming characteristic features of the socio-political mobilization of the Belarusian diaspora. The movement has become more heterogeneous and open, uniting Belarusians who were previously spatially dispersed, uninvolved, and apolitical. The unifying point for Belarusians abroad is the vision of a future democratic Belarus and the creation of a new political identity for Belarusian civil society<sup>21</sup>.

Since the presidential election, the political activity of the Belarusian diaspora has evolved. Initially irregular and spontaneous actions turned into cyclic events. In addition to marches, pickets, solidarity chains, performative actions such as concerts, picnics, flash mobs, exhibitions and many other protest actions were undertaken on a large scale. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the forms of protest quickly adapted to the epidemiological constraints; protest activities moved into the virtual sphere and changed to individual expressions of protest. The evolution of forms of protest reflects the creativity and resilience of mass mobilization to external conditions (increased repression and lack of hope for quick solutions, mobility and pandemic restrictions). It became common, for example, to hang the white-red-white flag in windows of flats or to meet and walk in small groups with Belarusian national symbols. Another wave of mobilization of the Belarusian diaspora occurred in response to the renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, as a protest against the policy pursued by Putin and Lukashenko towards their neighbour. Since public mass protests were impossible to carry out in Belarus, the di-

21 N. Bekus, *op. cit.*; N. Douglas, *op. cit.*

aspora abroad undertook the main role in organizing solidarity protests. Opposing the involvement of Belarus in the war, protests were held under the statements of the *occupation* of Belarus and emphasized the threat that the regime's policy poses to Belarusian national idea and its independence. Social media play an important role both for the opposition movement in the country and for the Belarusian diaspora. The increased restrictions on freedom of media and civic activism, censorship, and control of the information flow, have forced Belarusians to develop an extensive system of alternative tools for communication and protest in the virtual sphere. Digitalization and the previous experience of separate functioning information systems – governmental and independent media – have created a solid background for mass mobilization on the internet<sup>22</sup>. The messenger channels Telegram Nexta and Nexta Live have become strategic tools for the exchange of up-to-date information, the creation of new political thought, and a space for public debate on further mechanisms of resistance and strategies for the political transformation of the country. Under conditions of restricted mobility and political repression, the virtual space has become a tool connecting Belarusians at home and abroad. Acting as an information hub alternative to the regime's propaganda remains one of the most important functions of the diaspora. In this role, the diaspora combines the duties of being a source of reliable information on the situation in Belarus, representing the voice of society and advocating for those protesting in the country as well as leading the discussion on the future of a democratic Belarus both within the diaspora and including other actors at the international level.

### **3. Building (opposition) structures of political representation**

As a result of successive waves of repression before and after the rigged 2020 elections, opposition leaders were either imprisoned or fled Belarus. Presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya settled in Vil-

22 S.A. Greene, *You are what you read: media, identity, and community in the 2020 Belarusian uprising*, "Post-Soviet Affairs" 2022, vol. 38, no. 1-2, pp. 88-106.

nius and began to act as a legitimized representative of the Belarusian people in exile. Other institutional structures have also been created such as the Coordination Council, National Anti-Crisis Council, and more recently – the interim government. Opposition structures formed abroad are aimed in three directions; as a democratic opposition to the authoritarian regime in Minsk, towards the diaspora in order to unite it around the common goal of the fight for a free and democratic Belarus, and towards external entities (governments, international organizations, and public opinion) in order to be recognized as the leader of the Belarusian people and to support the fight against the authoritarian Lukashenko regime.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is building her political strength on the claim of the legal and moral right to represent Belarusians (both at home and abroad). She was the truly elected president in the 2020 election, whose results were falsified by Lukashenko, a fact which can be confirmed by the mass support of Belarusians demonstrating against the official election results on an unprecedented scale. The protests have convinced international public opinion that Tsikhanouskaya holds the support of Belarusian society, in contrast to Lukashenko, who has not only lost popular support but has remained in power merely through the security apparatus and repression. All this means that, at least for the time being, the strong point of the democratic Belarusian opposition is Tsikhanouskaya's unified leadership. Tsikhanouskaya often refers in her speeches to the community and the necessity to preserve the unity of the nation. Regular visits and meetings with leaders of other countries and with the Belarusian diaspora also serve to maintain her authority as the leader of the Belarusian nation. After Russia's aggression on Ukraine and in the context of a worsening political and economic situation in the country, her leadership has however started to be questioned by the representatives of the Belarusian diaspora calling for more decisive actions against the Lukashenko regime. Tsikhanouskaya reacted by increasing cooperation among the diaspora's leading fractions and forming the interim cabinet on 9 August 2022<sup>23</sup>.

23 K. Klysiński, *Belarus: formation of Tsikhanouskaya's interim cabinet*, Analyses of OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 10 August 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-08-10/>

During the 2020 events, women became the political leaders and faces of the Belarusian opposition. A triumvirate of three women – wives of two of Lukashenko’s opponents, Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo, and a third, the presidential candidate’s staff coordinator, Maria Kalesnikava, together with the organization Women’s March in Minsk, i.e., the mass protests of women dressed in white with flowers in their hands, became a symbol of Belarusian resistance in the spirit of non-violence. The leading role of women is also visible in the opposition structures: Tsikhanouskaya’s staff and the Coordination Council include many women. It should be noted, however, that the leading role of women is not a reflection of their widespread presence in the political sphere of Belarus or of the feminization of Belarusian society but is rather a result of an unplanned turn of events, namely the arrest of the main opposition leaders who were substituted by their female partners. It is difficult to predict whether this trend will last since even Tsikhanouskaya claims that as soon as she fulfils her mission and free elections are held in Belarus, she will gladly return to the role of wife and mother. However, the presence of women on the front line of the political struggle will certainly contribute to the familiarization of Belarusian society with women as political leaders. Before leaving the country, Tsikhanouskaya established the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power in Belarus<sup>24</sup>, which was to coordinate protests and conduct negotiations with the authorities after her departure to Lithuania. The Council was short-lived in the country as key members found themselves in prison or were forced to emigrate (Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich was the last to leave the country). The Coordination Council currently continues its activity abroad and declares itself to be the only “representative body of the Belarusian society”. Another structure within the opposition in exile is the National Anti-Crisis Management, established at the end of 2020 and intended to serve as an expert body<sup>25</sup>. Its main task is the formulation of more detailed plans for the opposition’s activities in the period of transition and for necessary reforms. Belarusian structures operat-

belarus-formation-tsikhanouskayas-interim-cabinet [04.11.2022].

24 More on Coordination Council: <https://rada.vision/en> [04.11.2022].

25 More on National Anti-Crisis Management: <https://belarus-nau.org/by#rec447619916> [04.11.2022].

ing abroad are so extensive that they are called the “new opposition”; apart from Tsikhanouskaya’s staff and the Coordination Council, and the National Anti-Crisis Council, they include Belarusian media and social organizations operating abroad. An example of the democratic and grassroots thinking of the structures operating abroad is the idea to convene a World Congress of Belarusians, i.e., a gathering of representatives of clusters of the Belarusian diaspora from all over the world, to discuss openly the future of Belarus, which took place at the end of October 2020 (remotely, due to the pandemic)<sup>26</sup>.

In the authors’ opinion, the actions of the opposition political elites operating abroad so far express an evolution towards the function defined by Stepan as disputing legitimacy and raising the costs of non-democratic rule. The aim of Tsikhanouskaya’s staff and other opposition structures is to delegitimize Lukashenko as the head of the Belarusian state (to contest the legitimacy of the home regime). In view of the limited tools at their disposal, they try to engage governments, international organizations, and world public opinion for this purpose. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 in close military cooperation with Belarus and the international community’s recognition of that latter country as complicit in the invasion of Ukraine, fundamentally changed Tsikhanouskaya’s position as the leader of the opposition abroad. Tsikhanouskaya declared herself the “national leader” of Belarus, announced plans for the creation of a government in exile and drew a sharper line between the Lukashenko regime and Belarusian society among others by calling on the Belarusian society to sabotage the involvement in the regime activities that support Russian aggression against Ukraine<sup>27</sup>.

On 9 August 2022, during the “new Belarus” conference, Tsikhanouskaya announced the creation of a so-called transition government under her leadership. Four other representatives of the Belarusian position entered into this new structure: Valery Sakashchik to be responsible for defence policy, Valery Kovalevsky, in charge of foreign policy, Alyaksandr Azarau, in charge of public order and security, and

26 World Belarus Congress 2020, <https://belarusabroad.org/en/world-belarus-congress-2020/> [04.11.2022].

27 *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya declared herself as the national leader of Belarus*, 24 February 2022, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/ca51ca6ecof8686.html> [04.11.2022].

Pavel Latushka (chairman of the National Anti-Crisis Management), in charge for the transition of power<sup>28</sup>. The decision to create this new organizational structure that also emphasizes a growing interest in the issues of national security is undoubtedly a next step towards the development of a more formal power structure abroad, challenging the existing Belarusian regime.

## 4. Building a democratic political alternative

One of the most important challenges that the Belarusian opposition needs to tackle is the operationalization of possible political and economic transformation. This is an exceptionally difficult task in the case of Belarusian society, which has only commenced the process of developing its national identity and with no historical experience of a democratic system. As researchers point out, unlike other societies in Central and Eastern Europe, Belarus did not experience the period of “drawing of national borders” in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Moreover, Belarusian national identity suffered deep effects from the Sovietisation process, which continues under Lukashenko’s rule<sup>29</sup>. As a result, Belarusian society tends to be susceptible to an “authoritarian worldview”, atomized, accepting the limitation of individual rights in the name of a so-called “social contract” with the dictator<sup>30</sup>. Undoubtedly, Lukashenko’s so-called “pre-emptive authoritarianism”, relying on the elimination of all possible institutions or social groups that could potentially resist<sup>31</sup>, is also to be blamed for the current state of Belarusian society. All the aforementioned have caused that the opposition movements in Belarus did not have the character of a mass social movement until 2020.

28 Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya announced the United Transitional Cabinet and named its first members, 9 August 2022, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/e1e57cee6d4a3a9.html> [04.11.2022].

29 P. Rudkouski, *Powstawanie Białorusi*, Wrocław 2009; V. Akudovich, *The code of absence [Код адсутнасці]*, Minsk 2007.

30 A. Lahvinets, A. Papko, *Unfinished Business. Challenges for Belarus on its Way to Democracy*, “European View” 2010, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 253-262.

31 V. Silitski, *Preempting democracy. The case of Belarus*, “Journal of Democracy” 2005, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 83-97.

The concept of creating “a credible democratic alternative” can be operationalized as follows<sup>32</sup>: first of all, the alternative should be attractive to a wide spectrum of society; for the staunch opponents of the existing regime, as well as for its supporters and those who adopt a more indifferent attitude towards the political situation in the country. Secondly, the democratic alternative should include both a political component (plans to reform the political system, including fair elections as a precondition for the transformation) as well as an economic component (reforms towards a market economy and respect for private property) and a state and nation-building component. Regarding the third element, the greater the degree of cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism, the more challenging the transition. Commenting on the application of the “triple” transition theory to the analysis of the transformation of post-Soviet countries, Taras Kuzio even proposes to extend the dimensions of transformation to four aspects, by splitting the third one into two parts: stateness, understood as the existence of an independent state as a *sine qua non* for the subsequent democratic transformation, and nationhood, which is defined as a collective sense of identity, with national, ethno-cultural ties being the basis not only for cultural unity but also for a strong civil society, without the existence of which democratic transformation is not possible<sup>33</sup>.

There is no obvious answer as to the model of the future Belarusian democracy that the opposition abroad is fighting for. Before 2020, several political concepts emerged among the opposition to which the current leaders in exile may indirectly refer. One should mention here the heritage of the Belarusian National Front (BNF), which promoted the construction of a Belarusian identity based on ethnicity and the Belarusian language, referring to the tradition of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (founded in 1918) and its symbolism, on which the demonstrators in August 2020 drew *en masse*. On the other hand, the current Belarusian opposition is acting in accordance with the principles of a civic revolution, relying to a large extent on the idea of an alternative opposition, unofficial support groups, and the concept

32 J.L. Linz, A. Stepan, op. cit.

33 T. Kuzio, *Transition in Post-Communist States. Triple or Quadruple?*, “Contemporary Politics” 2001, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 168-177.

of peoplehood<sup>34</sup>. The sources of these transnational and non-hierarchical forms of political activity can be traced in the culture of memory of the Great Patriotic War, and in particular the experience of partisan fighting during the Second World War<sup>35</sup>. The concept of the national liberation policy has grown in response to the involvement of the regime in Russian military aggression in Ukraine.

The analysis of the empirical material allows distinguishing several areas of activity that contribute to the process of the democratic opposition in exile creating a credible democratic alternative for a Belarusian state in the future. Of particular relevance are the grassroots democratic character of the diaspora's activity, the formulation of political programs on the country's future political and economic transformation, and the formation of new political elites ("new Belarusians").

In order for the opposition movement to keep the momentum and create a credible democratic alternative, it is vital for them to practice democratic values. An important manifestation of this approach is the very form in which a movement of contestation of the regime is created. Our analysis shows that the Belarusian opposition movement manifests a grassroots democratic character in which a horizontal rather than hierarchical structure is apparent, and structures of direct democracy are being created. This is in line with the demands of the protesters, who not only opposed Lukashenko's unlawful retention of power but also postulated recognition of Belarusian civil society, its right to enforce political rights, and the recognition of the will of the people<sup>36</sup>. "National leader" Tsikhanouskaya thus seeks the diaspora's continued support for her program by organizing "national votes". Serving an informal function as foreign representations of Belarus, the network of National Embassies has been created from the bottom up by representatives of the diaspora in its members' countries of residence<sup>37</sup>. In keeping with its status, the informal par-

34 I. Petrova, E. Korosteleva, op. cit.

35 N. Bekus, *Echo of 1989? Protest Imaginaries and Identity Dilemmas in Belarus*, "Slavic Review" 2021, vol. 80, no. 1, pp. 4-14.

36 T. Shchytsova, *Overcoming authoritarianism: path-dependency and new citizenship, in Overcoming authoritarianism: Belarus and the Eastern European Region 30 years later*, "Topos. Journal for Philosophy and Cultural Studies" 2021, vol. 2.

37 People's Embassies of Belarus, <https://belarusabroad.org/en/peoples-embassies-of-belarus/> [30.10.2022].

liament, the Vilnius-based Coordination Council, is open to accepting new members. Finally, created in August 2022, the new transition government under the lead of Tsikhanouskaya was de facto a measure that limited her power, even if of a more symbolic character, and confirmed the bottom-up character of the opposition movement.

The second area of activity to be distinguished is the formation of political programs. The political program presented by the opposition leaders in exile till February 2022 can be described as moderate (rather than revolutionary), which on the one hand gives it a higher chance to be supported by the majority of Belarusians, including the politically inactive ones, but, on the other hand, carries the risk that it may be assessed as too general and unspecific to unify Belarusians around its assumptions. The program presented in 2020-2022 made little reference to national traditions while basing itself more on features characteristic of contemporary Belarusian society (the coexistence of Russian and Belarusian languages, aversion to violence, and attachment to social solutions). The opposition called for roundtable discussions with the participation of representatives of the current political regime and the introduction of “transitional justice” solutions.

In March 2021, the Coordination Council adopted a key act entitled “Concept for the renewal of the rule of law and social consent”<sup>38</sup>. It called for the preservation of national unity and announced the introduction of transitional justice mechanisms. Interestingly, the Council made it clear that low-ranking members of the regime’s structure will not be held accountable as long as they did not participate in acts causing harm to the life or health of citizens. As far as the economic sphere is concerned, the emphasis is not so much on a free market economy, but on the transformation of the state into “a guarantor of the development of social institutions and infrastructure”<sup>39</sup>. This indicates a strong social dimension to the new opposition’s program, which provides no plans to radically change the existing economic model, thus postponing the economic transformation.

38 Coordination Council, *The concept of law reinstatement and national reconciliation*, March 2021, <https://rada.vision/en/the-concept> [30.10.2022].

39 Ibidem.

The programs of the opposition have drastically changed since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, with the stance towards the official authorities in Minsk and Russia both altered. In March 2022, at the UN forum, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya called for Belarus to be recognized as a “temporarily occupied” country<sup>40</sup>. During the “New Belarus” conference during which the interim government was created, representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition declared that alongside the release of political prisoners, their main goal is the “liberation” of Belarus from the presence of Russian troops<sup>41</sup>. Already in March 2022, an informal umbrella initiative called the anti-war movement commenced that, together with activities outside Belarus, includes protests against the presence of the Russian troops and employs sabotage actions in Belarus. Finally, in February 2022, the Belarusian volunteers created the Kastuś Kalinoŭski regiment to fight against Russian aggressors on the side of the Ukrainian army<sup>42</sup>.

The third dimension is the process of creating new political elites (“new Belarusians”) abroad as the nucleus of a civil society. This is undoubtedly a long-term strategy, and although it is not directly present in the political programs, certain clues point to its implementation. Due to the factors mentioned above, i.e., the specific conditions of Belarusian national identity and the long history of Sovietisation and collectivization of society, the idea of a Belarusian nation among Belarusians themselves is neither widespread nor strongly rooted. However, the nurturing of the idea of change (“rebirth”) in the national dimension and national symbols (the historical Belarusian flag) are strongly visible in the actions of the diaspora. An unresolved question is whether the widespread use of the historical Belarusian flag is due to the fact that it is widely accepted as a symbol of civil resistance of Belarusians against Lukashenko’s regime, or whether it is a sign of the manifestation of genuine attachment to the national idea. Perhaps for many Belarusians, both meanings of the white-red-white flag are equally important. However, an unquestionable priority of the national embassies in the target countries is the promotion of Belarusian culture

40 K. Kłysiński, op. cit.

41 “New Belarus” conference, *Draft declaration on the aims and values of the Belarusian democratic forces*, Vilnius, 9 August 2022, <https://conferencenewbelarus.org/declaracija> [04.11.2022].

42 See the official site of the regiment at: <https://www.kalinouski.org/> [04.11.2022].

and language. Also, the Belarusian opposition program, over time, at least on the symbolic level, has been evolving towards direct references to the idea of a Belarusian nation.

## Conclusions

The approach of the Belarusian diaspora towards democratization of the country of origin reflects both the internal transformation of the opposition movement, and its political activities for the systemic change of the regime. When discussing possible scenarios for the future development of the political system, the internal (in Belarus) and external conditions (in particular, the role of Putin's policy in the region and ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, and the strategic interests of EU countries) should be considered.

Analysing the political transformation of Belarus, it is important to point to the varied experiences of other countries in the region on the road to democratization. On the one hand, the negotiation strategy adopted by the Polish opposition in 1989, i.e., meetings and talks with the participation of both sides – the opposition and regime – led to the Round Table Talks. On the other hand, there is the path of revolution, i.e., an open fight with the regime as seen during the Maidan in Ukraine in 2013. Neither of these scenarios is possible in the case of Belarus, at least not in the short term. The negotiation scenario certainly does not seem likely. Also, the revolutionary one seems quite far. In the face of repression, restrictions on political rights and free media, mass emigration, and the increasing social, and political apathy of Belarusian society at home, it is difficult to imagine it rising up against the authorities in Minsk.

The leaders of the Belarusian opposition are also aware of these limitations. For the democratic opposition abroad, the most important goal at present is to maintain the unity of the Belarusian elites and society against the regime. The main tools are invariably the narrative about Lukashenko's lack of legitimacy to rule the country, support for citizens at home, knowledge transfer, demonstrations of solidarity, and hybrid forms of protest. Another task is to continue political activity abroad (forming an alternative to the current government), particularly the preparation of the "background" for a transition of power by creating a political strategy, together with structures and mechanisms

of pressure on international partners. From the long-term perspective, the diaspora must consider not only the departure of Lukashenko but also a broader process of transformation of state institutions by influencing a change in the political and symbolic culture of the country (instilling democratic values, pluralism, political rights of citizens, and the principles of a civil society).

In the authors' opinion, the key factors determining the success of the Belarusian democratization process are the unity of the opposition, political and civil activity of the younger generations, free access for the society to reliable sources of information, broad social support (including the most numerous social groups: workers) for democratic changes, and genuine support, both political and economic, of other democratic countries.

The recent attack by Russia against Ukraine has also clearly shown how crucial Russia's policy is for the changes in Belarus. Lukashenko's decision to become Putin's ally in the war against Ukraine was a political blow and a setback for the country's legitimacy and adherence to the most basic international norms, not only for Belarus but also for Belarusians in exile. The leaders of the Belarusian diaspora are now in a very difficult situation since the world's attention has been focused primarily on the attack on Ukraine, with the Belarusian authorities perceived as aggressors and the country sanctioned on an equal footing with Russia. Belarusian leaders in exile will have to face not only an entirely new geopolitical reality in the region but also the long-term political, economic, and social consequences of Belarus's support for Moscow in the war in Ukraine. We anticipate that the democratic opposition's program of action for the democratization of Belarus must evolve and consider the new geopolitical realities. Nevertheless, the questions related to the development of political relations between the Belarusian diaspora and Ukraine, the perspectives of recognition of the Belarusian opposition government by the Ukrainian authorities, and a readiness to elaborate common strategies against Lukashenko and Putin regimes, all suggest the need for further research.

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