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‘All the different routes we walk and the knowledge they can’t take away from us.’ Participation, transformation, and revolution in Belarus 2020

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Abstract

The falsification of the results of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus produced a movement of peaceful civil disobedience and resistance. Civil activism furthered radical change embracing broad democratic participation and created new political subjects. Biographical interviews conducted with Aliaksandra, a young Belarusian adult, look at the learning situation of the individual and open a space in which the search for individual meaning-making in times of biographical transition can be heard. The interviews showcase interactions in time and space between an individual and her wider out-of-frame interactions, and on the effects of social and political conflict and crisis on her biographical narrative. The concept of ‘biographicity’ is employed to describe the dynamics of ongoing biographical learning, and Raymond Williams’ understanding of the processes of social transformation provides the theoretical backdrop of the transformation of lived lives in this paper.

Keywords: Belarus 2020, biographical narrative, biographical resources and biographicity, transgression and agency

A landlocked revolution

> ‘The most difficult thing to get hold of […] is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the way in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living’ (Williams, 1965, p. 63).

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> ‘Die Mühen der Gebirge haben wir hinter uns, vor uns liegen die Mühen der Ebenen’ [The efforts of the mountains are behind us, the efforts of the plains lie ahead] (Brecht, 1967, Vol. 10, p. 960; author’s own translation).

The landlocked Republic of Belarus, jammed between Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic states and the Russian Federation, briefly independent in 1918 and again 1991-1994, saw in 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, a summer of hope and mass self-organisation mobilising hundreds of thousands of people across that country (for a resumé of events before the 2020 revolution, see Marples, 2021). The then presidential incumbent of 26 years, Aliaksandr Lukashenka[1] (meanwhile 31 years in power) was defeated roundly at the polls by the ‘accidental candidate’[2] Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (Golos, 2020), but he claimed victory, nevertheless. The falsification of the results of the election produced a powerful groundswell of peaceful civil disobedience and resistance (see Deikalo, 2025). The movement of citizen protest unleashed, too, undreamt-of creative potential in all sections of society. Self-organisation, local mobilisation and grassroots solidarity dramatically challenged the brute force employed by repressive state organs and responded with forms of guerilla action – light-hearted and satirical, emotional, dramatic, and politically determined.[3] The growth of civil opposition led to a discovery of the possibility of re-reading the local, national and international world for millions of Belarusians. Civil activism in the streets, community action in the neighbourhood courtyards of high-rise estates across the country, and mutual help and organisation through social media furthered a search for radical change that embraced broad democratic participation, inclusivity and sustainability for a local, regional and transregional future in Europe. Street-wide action coupled with ever-maturer exploitation of social media (see Greene, 2022; Rudnik, 2023) furthered awareness, too, of Belarus’ place in, and contribution to, wider geo-political, constitutional-juridical and cultural-historical contexts. This led to a radically new interest in Belarusian language and culture, education and national identity (Bekus, 2021b; Bekus & Gabowitsch, 2021; Razor, 2020).

Estimates put the participation in street protests in 2020 at one in five of a population of 9 million (Astapenia, 2020). A plethora of initiatives arose – solidarity and aid for victims of violence, aid in all forms for prisoners and their families, human rights groups, cultural and sports solidarity initiatives, assistance for strikers, students, and ‘relocators’, help for volunteers and veterans of the Russia-Ukraine war, and assistance in arranging clandestine evacuation out of Belarus (BySol, 2025). In addition, countless telegram-chats based in local neighbourhood courtyards and the telegram canals and online newspapers like NEXTA (NEXTALive, 2021) and TUT.BY, renamed *zerkalo* (zerkalo, 2025; *zerkalo* means ‘mirror’ in Russian) in Polish exile after being closed down in 2021, flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the 2020 elections. These and many more initiatives functioned as the web sustaining a growing civil society and at the same time as a show of strength, working as a ‘horizontal watchdog’ over the Lukashenka regime (Shparaga, 2021, p. 156).

Every aspect of this peaceful citizens’ revolution was systematically and brutally suppressed, beginning from ‘at least May 2020’ and with increasing intensity from November 2020 (ICC, 2024). The balance is dramatic: thousands have passed through detention and prison to date, of whom 7,116 recognised as political sentences (Viasna96, 2025a); in July 2025 1,164 individuals were currently recognised by the human rights organisation Viasna96 as political prisoners (Viasna96, 2025b); NGOs, news media, independent trade unions, businesses, and artists were forced into exile abroad (see PEN-Belarus, 2025); approximately 500,000 citizens have left the country and have essentially been deprived of the basic right to return home; the education system from kindergarten

to university has been militarised; the constitution has been rewritten to make a repetition of 2020 impossible; the period since 2020 has seen a tightening of civil, economic and military ties with the Russian Federation (see GIEB, 2025; Muiznieks, 2025; Vustseu et al., 2024).

Collecting biographical narratives from a revolution gained and lost

Since October 2020 I have been engaged in what I choose to call a long biographical conversation involving interviews, self-recorded video and audio accounts, written mails and, to date, two face to face talks in her place of exile with one young Belarusian professional – Aliaksandra – who was heavily involved in the social protests of 2020 and who was subsequently forced to 'relocate' at the end of that year to Poland. In October 2020 I made contact with Aliaksandra in Minsk through another Belarusian, Mara (name altered), an old friend of hers, with whom I had been conducting a series of Zoom-interviews on her Covid-19 experiences in Frankfurt and Minsk. Aliaksandra volunteered to communicate with me, an individual outside Belarus vouched for by Mara, through voice-recorded accounts, following prompts and questions I put to her via email.

The distance-interview or distance narrative via Zoom or other applications that the COVID-19 lockdown had made necessary and which I used to interview a number of individuals around Europe, was in 2020 a new method for me. In Aliaksandra's case, given that we had never met and could not realistically meet at all, it came as a highly practical solution. It was not, however, without a mixture of trepidation and curiosity that I proposed these formats at the start. I saw these as a form of intimate distance-interview of an essentially auto/biographical narrative type (see Szenajch, 2021). Most speakers seemed to find the recordings reassuring, in that they could, of course, delete or not send, as they desired. The first audio narratives from most participants were brief, becoming longer as confidence grew. Aliaksandra's audio narratives were from the start usually around 60 minutes long. Joint video dialogues, via Zoom (and some WhatsApp) were later added to the repertoire of research methods, thus enriching the interview corpus even more through the addition of video interaction and a very real – and obviously important – sense of co-construction and co-narration. As a rule, I would communicate my reactions, thoughts or ulterior questions via email shortly after each audio or video contact (see Evans, 2022).

What the narratives can tell

Aliaksandra's narratives focus on her experiences of the 2020 movement for democracy in Belarus, her re-assumption of civil protest in Polish exile and her acceptance of the permanence of exile. Since February 2022 they have dealt with the problems created for all Belarusian activists by Belarusian state complicity in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, her involvement in volunteer work with Ukrainian children, and the everyday life of a foreigner in constant need of documenting her basic rights to stay and work and travel.

The biographical interviews – unstructured interactive interviews held online – and Aliaksandra's own spoken accounts span an arc from reflections about her learning trajectory to complex and potentially threatening moments of political, social, and emotional dislocation. What we hear are Aliaksandra's evolving discourses of learning, which Alheit sees as produced via the 'ability of individuals to put themselves in a reflective relationship to their own experience process, to perceive their own learning processes [and] enter into a discourse with others (and with oneself) about one's own experiences' (Alheit, 2022, p. 12).

The learning ‘work’ hearable in biographical narratives like Aliaksandra’s involve:

- multi-layered interactions in time and space between individual subjects, their wider out-of-frame interaction with their respective social worlds, and the effects of transition and crisis on biographical narratives (see Alheit, 2018)
- the changes imposed by crisis on narrators’ own and on others’ words, on their narrative resources, threatening the language hitherto used to describe themselves and the world, creating the need to ‘translate’ themselves (Butler, 2012; Wierzbicka, 2003)
- the relationships the narrators affirm or deny to formerly recognised groups or to recognised values or characteristics, identities or discourses, be they political, affective, linguistic (De Fina et al., 2006; Löw, 2001).

Research interview respondents like Aliaksandra provide insight in their narratives into the significance of critical change processes for their individual learning, and crucially for their learning with others. In so doing, I argue here, they can be heard building own discourses of learning, in which acceptance of, and resistance to, the dominant discourses of institutions and civil society are worked out in the interdiscursive layering of interaction with (a) the own told narrative, (b) with the researcher agenda and (c) in the all-important implicit dialogue with those significant others whose voices and narratives give expression to the complexity and transacted meanings of individual and group learning contexts. Aliaksandra brings to her talk in conversation with me (and implicitly with herself and others) a personal history, a family history, a history of learning and a history of life-choices, to name but a handful of the critical spaces and moments of time unfolding as she speaks.

Dramatic situations such as those facing Aliaksandra on the streets of Minsk in 2020 do not infallibly transform a person’s personal narrative. The life world, understood as the ‘unbefragte Boden aller Gegebenheiten [unquestioned foundation of everything]’ (Schutz & Luckmann, 1979, as cited in Habermas, 1987, p. 199), or again, the profoundly embodied ‘manière durable de se tenir, de parler, de marcher, et, par là, de sentir et de penser [lasting manner of behaving, speaking, of walking, and thus, of feeling and thinking]’ (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 117) of slowly acquired habitus exercises an enormous influence on personal learning – up to a point. Raymond Williams, considering the generations who emerged from the war years, years of incorporation in fixed roles and assigned duties and behaviours, pointed out the deep penetration of identification processes in the material lives of individuals; the rules of society, he concluded, ‘run very deep’. The environment the rules dictate, Williams argues, shapes us, but we can also change it (Williams, 1965). Challenging these lived rules in biographical interview talk – as Aliaksandra challenges deep-seated, lived rules of obedience, impotence and apathy - may be heard in the difficulty and uncertainty she has of verbalising the meaning of the routine ‘here’ and ‘now’ when the here and now fall apart in crisis (Alheit, 1983, 1992).

This paper will explore the possibility of identifying the crucial relationship between revolution and narration, and of investigating the disruption of the life story which takes place as individual learning biographies are swept along by larger social events. Necessarily fragile or hearably broken biographical narratives are examined for evidence of new knowledges, new political consciousness, and of attempts at new meaning-making. Aliaksandra’s narratives can help to see how in a crisis that brings about a collapse of the here-and-now, the ‘swirls and “whirlpools”‘ of altered social temporalities at work in revolutionary crisis, which in Alhadeff-Jones’ words ‘manifest the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social dynamics that (trans)form individuals and

collectives, day after day' (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021, p. 312) can be liberating, and can allow the emergence of ideas 'that in normal times would be considered unacceptable, but which under the impact of the disruption, take on their full meaning' (p. 314). Such a 'moment' of liberation and processual '*Krisis*' (p. 312) which can come together in the accelerated temporalities of social change, can offer the individual swept up by the 'flow' of things, Alhadeff-Jones suggests, the reflexive opportunity to emancipate themself from the currently hegemonic social order and actively re-discover and re-appropriate their everyday life and with it, new learning opportunities and knowledge (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). This special capability by which the individual integrates and (re)assembles wholly diverse areas of experience and lays the ground for 'creating new cultural and social structures of experience' (Alheit, 2022, p. 10) generates the 'individual logic', Alheit argues, of 'ongoing biographical learning' or 'biographicity' (p. 10). Biographicity, then, when we are looking at Aliaksandra's learning response to the turbulent experiences of social protest, refers to her way of finding access to what Alheit calls 'a unique productive resource for dealing with oneself and the world' (p. 14) and the 'logic' of biographical learning inevitably involves forms of resistance to external influences and threatening events.

The language of the narratives: A plurilingual option

I began interviewing young adults from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union over 20 years ago[4]. Economic difficulties, a lack of perspectives and the important expansion of academic mobility in the EU through joint degrees and increased commodification of university studies were clearly factors driving young members of the new middle classes to emigrate, and the new trajectories of the educational and personal biographies of this generation, working as I was at a university with high numbers of students from those countries, came to occupy my attention (Evans, 2012; Evans & Kurantowicz, 2009; see Woodward & Kohli, 2001). An interest in post-soviet biographies was logical as it dovetailed with my own original studies in the UK and Germany (Russian language and history, Soviet history, Czech, Polish) and my abiding interest in the language(s). Thus, when I turned my attention more to this group of young adults, my interest was focused on identity construction and in particular the role of language(s) in that process. This began with the biographies of young Ukrainians, as the cultural conflict around Russian or Ukrainian played itself out inside families and emerged in learning biographies (Evans & Kurantowicz, 2009). What in 2009 seemed for my interviewees still to be a matter of private choice – to speak or study in one language rather than another – had become by 2014-2015 in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution and the annexation of Crimea by Russia a matter of territory, national identity and civil war with correspondingly harrowing effects on the people and their stories (Evans, 2016). Then came 2020 in Belarus.

I originally proposed to Aliaksandra that she speak Russian to have a natural stream of talk, stemming as she does from a family of Russian speakers with traditional family links in the Russian Federation. Yet English was and had to be an option for a 26-year-old IT specialist with obvious intercultural competence, and, not surprisingly, excellent command of English. In the 11 recorded interviews and accounts to date (Autumn 2025), Aliaksandra has in fact woven an idiosyncratic pattern of language choice between English and Russian, as she moves between the two languages, evidently and declaredly seeking the language code most suited to the narrative work in hand. This is reflected in the interview extracts that I discuss further on. After the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, however, the always-present conflict between Russian and Belarusian has

again made itself more sharply felt (on this fundamental linguistic conflict, see Bekus, 2014a, 2014b). This linguistic disjuncture – present throughout Aliaksandra's talk – has not been resolved to date.[5]

I see it as a keystone of careful listening and cautious interview work that all analysis and discussion of language 'data' resulting from a context of spoken interaction (though this holds, too, for the written language) refers *at all times* to the language actually used in the interview interaction, for as Aneta Pavlenko persuasively argues:

> Settling on a single language in such studies signals an assumption that stories and interviews are simply descriptions of facts, whereas in reality the presentation of events may vary greatly with the language of the telling. The insistence on one language only also deprives bi- and multilingual speakers of an important linguistic resource with a range of semantic and affective functions, namely code-switching. (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 172)

In fact, the interaction is a *sensitive space* – not simply a collection of related facts – in which the linguistic repertoires or resources which people draw upon in constructing accounts in interactive encounters can unfold and an attempt at 'self-translation' for co-understanding can take place (Seale, 1998; Wierzbicka, 2003). For where there is a choice of language, or where – as so often the case – multilingual speakers encounter one another, the choice of the interview language(s) clearly has significant methodological and analytical consequences for the development of the interaction and will obviously determine too the way 'data' is presented (and what is understood to be 'data'), how transcripts are created and how extracts from these transcripts are used. The plurilingual conduct of the research relationship ought to help Aliaksandra in finding, and myself in perceiving, the linguistic detail which enriches and thickens the narrative description proper. Beyond that, the use of a prestigious language of communication (here English) can make it possible for us to establish complicity, to project and share power, 'translating' and othering ourselves (and each other) respectively, though it can be double-edged (Duszak, 2002; see also Fanon, 1952).

Jointly participating in what Auer calls 'linguistic acts of identity' (Auer, 2005, p. 404) is an immensely important resource in an uncertain relationship, a relationship marked by the critical differences between Aliaksandra and myself – age, gender, status, language, nationality. In interviews I conducted much earlier on with Egyptian teachers and academics I looked at how the (prestigious) foreign *lingua franca* can also be switched to when talking about forbidden, risqué or tabu subjects, permitting the speaker to 'translate' or 'other' themselves and move more freely in difficult spaces of discourse (Evans, 2004b, 2007). Such elements of interdiscursivity enrich the work of meaning-making that these learning biographies represent and a close analysis of what happens in the micro levels of talk help to follow how learning and change can be told.

A simple transcription

The transcription of the interview language is kept 'simple': that is, it remains almost entirely free of punctuation, no attempt being made to 'clean up' the language, leaving the *verbatim* transcript in Tom Wengraf's terms a 'version zero' (Wengraf, 2001, p. 213). Translations of what is said are provided (but *only* for simple convenience), and they are both parsimonious and consciously free of any claim to literary translation standards. Naturally, this is a methodological decision, and as Elinor Ochs pointed out decades ago (Ochs, 1979), the method of transcription opted for represents a first inescapable level of analysis of the spoken interaction of the interviews. Bourdieu, in the monumental *Misère du Monde* (Bourdieu, 1993) argues eloquently for a 'cleaning-up' of the interview

transcript[6] in the interest of the reader and what he calls a 'démocratisation de la posture herméneutique [democratization of the hermeneutic stance]' which, as he sees it, is habitually fixated on more edifying literary models than the 'récits ordinaires d'aventures ordinaires [ordinary stories of ordinary adventures]' of ordinary lives (p. 1421; for a contrasting view see Wengraf, 2001). On this point, I share Anna De Fina's approach, whose work on narrative research consistently provides sensitive analysis of, and respect for the original language of the interview and its presentation (De Fina, 2003; De Fina & Tseng, 2017). I employ a modified version of Conversation Analysis transcription symbols (Silverman, 2001; Wengraf, 2001) and a similar approach to the analysis of paralinguistic features in interview talk as that used by Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs in their impressive study of the narratives of the agoraphobia victim Meg (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Evans, 2008, 2013).

Thus, in the extracts presented here, where Aliaksandra chose to speak Russian, and where finer details of the Russian spoken discourse – prosody, hedging, etc. – are explicitly discussed, the original Russian is retained. The Russian verbatim 'version zero' (1), references to significant paralinguistic features (2), and the basic translation (3) are presented, in that order, in table form. When the paralinguistic features of the speech in Russian-language extracts are not examined, the basic English translations are presented alone for reasons of space and marked, for example, as 'Extract 4 (orig. Russ.)'. The date of the interview/audio recording/email communication is given in parentheses at the end of each extract. Some basic transcription signs regarding features of talk like hesitation, loudness, pausing, are also given underneath the extract where appropriate and helpful (for a fairly exhaustive presentation of the transcription and paralinguistic markup conventions I have used, see Evans, 2004a).

Biographical narratives of transgression and hope

The challenge to narrative resources that comes with disruption of everyday life expresses itself in bare questions: what has changed? How can I describe it? Can I *risk* describing it?[7] Uncertainty, fear, anger, pride, disgust and hate, even, may have assumed central roles in what was previously a more indifferently developing life story. The physical and emotional spaces in which life increasingly gets caught up are new (discovering the city differently through the marches), exhilarating (the slogans, the shouting, the solidarity) but also menacing and frightening (men in balaclavas, stun grenades, explosions, running, hiding, being chased). An everyday shareable and knowable world of family and work, bus stops and metro stations is invaded by the urban gulag archipelago of detention centres, KGB prisons and flea-ridden jails, ominous places whose names alone generate fear, but also sow resistance (Cimafiejeva, 2021). For the poet Julia Cimafiejeva, for Aliaksandra and many more, these threatening places become commonplace matters, the new routine (Lewis, 2021). For example, after the arrest and sentence to 10 days in the detention centre of a colleague of Aliaksandra's for distributing leaflets before the August 2020 election, Aliaksandra in this first extract says:

Extract 1 (orig. Engl.).

> Uhm yeah I mean it was a SHOCK? to me because (.) uhm AFTER? the elections I mean arrests are a kind of common thing and you kind of exPECTED it to happen but back then? uhm (.) it was uhm yeah a big shock to hear about some of your friends to be arrested (.) colleagues especially for a thing like this not even some protest or action just for putting leaflets on an information desk like (.) WHAT THE HELL? and uhm uhm yeah nowadays it's not like (hahahh) it's not some shock news anymore for example I've just heard an hour

> ago my boss from my previous place of work he was caught … and they are having trials today … it's kind of news you hear every week especially after Sundays. (05.10.2020)
>
> CAPITALS=emphasis, raised volume; ?=rising tone; (.)=hearable pause or break in flow

Elsewhere in her narratives, as here (WHAT THE HELL?) pride and satisfaction can be heard, mixed with derision for the state and its thugs, doubtless because Aliaksandra has, in fact, crossed the threshold from passive onlooker to active critic and has learnt a new habitus, that of the protester. She has crossed over into a different emotional and intellectual territory and in this radically new learning space she rehearses the voice to tell her story. Almost identical experiences can be found, for example, in the poems written in the first days of the revolution and cited by Simon Lewis (Lewis, 2021) or in the poet Julia Cimafiejewa's diary of the revolutionary autumn published subsequently in Berlin (Cimafiejeva, 2021). In these testimonies, too, the happy routine is thrown out of joint by the invasion of violence.

In the extract above, Aliaksandra passes, too, in the space of few words through a learning trajectory that reduces the passage of real time to a hazy 'back then' and fast-forwards to 'after the election'. Both expressions are signposts for – it is understood – wholly and radically diverse life-worlds. And along with time, embodied experience evolves in exponential fashion. Alheit (2018) points out in this regard that although the logic of 'the already formed biographical sense structures subsequent actions and interpretations of a subject' (p. 15), that is, biographical sense determines to some extent how someone will respond to experiences, biographical resources – *biographicity* – are not merely the sum of things learnt. The addition of street violence and repression are not simply addable to a life of routine tranquillity. At least, not without some drastic reassessment of self and relationships to things and people. Narratives of learning and their relationship to their own recent well-trodden paths and the increasingly problematic personal knowledge they are required to process and consume, are caught up, too, in a mesh of new and disruptive discourses, of power, of personal agency, as well as personal defeat. Aliaksandra's narratives, then, are under pressure to make (new) sense of the experiences they communicate.

Deep in the skin: From transgression to agency

Raymond Williams commented, as was already noted, on the depth of such experiences, pointing out the deep penetration of identification processes in the body language of individuals; the rules of society, he wrote, 'run very deep'. To quote him in full, he writes that such rules 'are often materialised, and in inheriting them as institutions we inherit a real environment, which shapes us but which we also change. We learn this environment in our bodies, and we are taught the conventions' (Williams, 1965, p. 137).

When those conventions are directly thrown into doubt, when they are flouted, the entire repertoire of socialised and embodied behaviours and practices may be also thrown into disorder. This may very well be liberating, emancipatory. Certainly, Aliaksandra's narratives bear witness to the emancipatory effects of the radical break the year 2020 brought. Yet, coming against the backdrop of unquestioned and accepted routines and the 'everyday phenomena of low amplitude' that may be said to 'constitute the banality of everyday life' (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021, p. 317) it is likely to be unsettling or menacing. The new fluidity of the conflict erupting in society is reflected in conflict that Aliaksandra experiences in her own person. Civil obedience, running beneath the skin, so to speak, is confronted by civil disobedience. She refers to such an ambiguous moment, a very

obvious example of disruption of the normal and transgression of embodied routine, in her account of what it means to walk, not as one 'should', on the pavement, but in the midst of a protest march along the middle of the road.

This passage in Russian, as already indicated, is presented in table form, with analytical remarks to paralinguistic features in the central column. Line numbers have been added here for convenience.

Extract 2.

1	мы **выходим** и **идем** маршем	*Repetition: agentic verbs of*	we go out and we go on the
2	по **проезжей части** это тоже	*going (out) проезжей части/on*	march in the road that's also a
3	очень странное чувство	*the road*	very strange feeling because
4	потому что мы никогда раньше		before we never just walked out
5	не гуляли просто **по проезжей**	*проезжей части/on the road*	in the road right out in the road
6	**части** особенно когда дороги		especially if the road wasn't
7	не перекрыты И в начале		closed off and at the beginning
8	первый раз когда мы		the first time when we went out
9	**выходили** на даже там не	*Agency of going out (for the*	and the road wasn't even closed
10	было перекрыто движение	*first time)*	off to traffic I felt a kind of fear
11	чувствую себя **какой-то страх**	*Hedging: какой-то страх /*	that it was forbidden like I would
12	что это **запрещено** наверное	*some kind of fear*	a role might be played by the fact
13	буду может играть роль что	*Repetition of запрещено / for-*	that for more than 20 years we
14	больше 20 лет мы жили в	*bidden*	live within such strict limitations
15	таких строгих рамках что это	*Repetitive triplet of negatives:*	that it wasn't possible to do
16	**нельзя делать всё запрещено**	*←нельзя делать, всё*	anything like that everything was
17	**за всё последовать наказание**	*запрещено / not allowed,*	forbidden everything was
	(16.10.20)	*forbidden, punishment follows*	followed by some kind of
			punishment. (16.10.20)

The magic she evidently felt doing this can perhaps be gauged by the studied repetition of key terms, emphasising in their turn the movement of her narrative. An overall frame is anchored in the semantic fields of agentic verbs of movement (идем/we walk, гуляли/we walked along, выходили/went out), expressions of space and place (по проезжей части/on the road, перекрыто/blocked off, жили в таких строгих рамках/lived in strict limitations), notions of loss of agency in the face of prohibition and punishment (запрещено/forbidden, нельзя делать/not allowed, наказание/punishment). The strange feeling that becomes some kind of fear (first странное чувство/ then страх) at breaking the rules for the first time is framed by the sober details of routinely marching along the roads and this initially cautious narrative is weighted down by circumstantial repetition (twice repeated по проезжей части / on the tarmac; twice the description дороги не перекрыты / the roads weren't closed off and не было перекрыто / it wasn't closed off). Then we hear the subsequent jump from the collective мы / we (three times, lines 1, 4 and 8) to the attempted first-person account чувствую себя/I feel, буду/I'll … (lines 11 and 13) which is replaced immediately by an impersonal hypothetical rationalisation (это запрещено наверное буду может играть роль/it was forbidden like I will … a role might be played) which can presumably be heard as a defensive move, as if the fear described might be deemed trivial or banal. After decades of living in a straitjacket, she recites a trinity of repression as justification of her fear by employing a particular form of repetition to create meaning 'by the recurrence and recontextualisation of words and phrases in discourse' (Tannen, 2007, p. 9). In fact, Aliaksandra is using what Tannen (2007) describes as a 'triplet' (p. 69), in this case a series of three semantic re-phrasings: nothing was allowed / everything was forbidden / punishment always follows.

Transgression and punishment

Transgression, Aliaksandra tells us, was always followed by punishment. To make her point, she employs a fascinating piece of juxtaposition in a seamless transition from (i) an account of extreme insecurity and physical fear of police violence to (ii) her feelings as a child in school trying desperately not to be noticed by the teacher. The contrast is surprising and unexpected, and the language use is extremely economical.

Extract 3.

ну это было достаточно **страшно**-то сейчас достаточно привычная картина после того как 2 месяца мы видим и более **страшные** вещи и картины как людей **сбивают** можно тогда никого не **сбивали** были жёсткие столкновения **были была были было** такое что **били** но не в тех масштабах и не так агрессивно то всё было и конечно на меня это произвело очень большое впечатление и **я действительно никогда в жизни не чувствовал себя настолько вот не в безопасности в своей стране в центре города** не то что даже просто **страшно я просто не могла никуда идти** и тот момент когда не проходили у меня я не могла даже поднять глаза потому что мне было **страшно** встретиться взглядом это что-то из разряда **как в школе когда ищут кого вызвать к доске ты боишься поднять взгляд чтобы учитель не выбрал тебя** ты **пытаешься так быть незаметным** чтобы чтобы они тебя не заметили (05.10.2020)	*Repeated references to fear* ***frightening, terrible, cruel*** *Repetition of beating, beat, hit* ***сбивают сбивали жёсткие*** *столкновения* ***били*** *Shift to generalisation* ***были была были было*** _____ *Start of personal narrative* *Acute insecurity in hitherto safe life spaces – loss of agency* ***в своей стране в центре города*** *Sense of being trapped and surrounded by danger* *Juxtaposition police lines/school as personal narrative focuses on psycho-emotional state* ***пытаешься так быть незаметным*** *Trying to not be noticed/that they don't see you* *Loss of agency*	well that was quite **frightening** that now quite usual picture after all that we have seen in 2 months and more **terrible** things and pictures like them **beating** people possibly then they didn't **beat** anyone these were rough fights **they were it was they were it was** like they **beat** people before but not to the same extent and not so aggressively that was all and of course that made a really big impression on me and **I had really never in my life felt so unsafe in my own country in the centre of the city** not so it was simply **terrifying** I simply **couldn't go anywhere** and in that moment they were round me and I couldn't even raise my eyes just couldn't because **I was so afraid to meet their gaze it was something out of the ordinary like in school when writing they call someone to the blackboard you are scared to raise your eyes in case the teacher picks you** you try your hardest **to not be noticed** so that so that they don't notice you. (05.10.2020)

The core of the passage is a pattern of fear and violence: страшно and страшные/frightening, 4 times; сбивают, сбивали, били/beating, beat, hit. Harmless adverbial quantifiers and comparatives are used in an expressively repetitive, disruptive fashion: было достаточно страшно/it was *quite* frightening (*enough*); более страшные вещи/*more* frightening things; достаточно привычная картина/a *quite* usual picture, более страшные … картины/*more* frightening pictures. The passage passes from 'we' to 'I/me' to generalised 'you' as it pans in from the shared experience to the immediate freezing effect it had on Aliaksandra herself and then passes interestingly into a reserved and neutral general 'you' when Aliaksandra in fact focuses in on well-known yet certainly here intensely personal embodied memories of her childhood and teens. Aliaksandra's account appears to be torn here between her 'new' agency and transgression on the one

hand, and the embodied experience of women protesters faced with the hardened heteropatriarchal menace represented by the state police apparatus during the autumn of protest, on the other. Her experience, in its anguished ambiguity can arguably serve nevertheless as evidence of how 'female voices and actions serve as testimonies of their agency functioning within structures of subordination', as suggested by Natallia Paulovich in her questioning of the feminist character of much of the women's protests so prominent in the Belarusian autumn (Paulovich, 2021). Aliaksandra's transgression and fear of punishment, having been thrust into contestation while presumably still living within normative gender roles, seem to show that 'the fact of being subjected to established gendered norms does not eliminate the possibility of transgressing them' (Paulovich, 2021, p. 44). In addition, here again, Aliaksandra's narrative weaves a pattern of images in time and space. Her first remarks referring to pictures of beatings may refer back to the bloody days immediately after the stolen elections, images that went around the world (belarusinfocus, 2022)[8], images produced over days and weeks, in the capital Minsk and the regional towns; the whole country is evoked in the same breath as the city centre; we see her in a protest in the street close to the police lines, her head down, her eyes averted, afraid, and we see her through this as a child or teenager in her school, in the classroom, afraid of the teacher's gaze, years before, perhaps lived and relived many times, revisited and relived in the same moment now.

The knowledge of the people, the knowledge of the regime

Speaking of the transition from an emotional to a more distanced, rational, view of lived experience (historically connected with the social transition from country to town or the passing of urban working-class communities), Raymond Williams comes close to expressing what the biographical narrative can produce:

> For what is at issue in all these cases, is a growth and alteration of consciousness: a history repeated in many lives and many places which is fundamentally an alteration of perception and relationship. What was once close, absorbing, accepted, familiar, internally experienced becomes separate, distinguishable, critical, changing, externally observed. (Williams, 2016, p. 427)

This alteration of perception – a level of learning which generates the ability to distance oneself from surrounding events and question what has happened, can be heard, too, in Aliaksandra's relation to the city of Minsk. She tells an emotionally disarming story of how the political movement leads her to discover her city (see also Cimafiejeva, 2021). And the measure of the change in perception that her gaze and her voice are undergoing can be judged by the way she contrasts her own learning path to the (obviously less comforting) way the regime also learns:

Extract 4 (orig. Russ.).

> I think these are such warm and nice feelings which which mustn't be surrendered to the security forces' operations still everything that we revealed in this way how we got to know our city that will stay with us no way it can be taken away from us and through this knowledge understanding we experience the link each with the other with other people who go out to meetings who also go to the courtyard concerts and the tea parties yes I think the way that how it works and all the different routes we walk along that's also a good way of getting to know the city some central places but also it's interesting in itself and at the same time I think about how the military and the militia and the OMON also study the city but not in the same sense as we do experience (.) two weeks after when first of all all the time

> our column couldn't gather to a crowd (###) and I they continually broke us up became obvious that in the same way we kept on gathering together at the Stela[9] or on the way to the Stela the militia and the OMON also were working out how to block the street the paths there were working out how to react as quickly as possible. (16.10.2020)

This analytical stance voiced in these sections of her narratives is surprising proof of the acquisition of new 'expert knowledge'. The massively concentrated experience gained in only a few weeks after the falsified August 2020 elections is a hothouse for accelerated learning. Hundreds of thousands learn to see the political topography of their cities and their country from a radically new angle (Bekus, 2021a). In this sense, Aliaksandra's fundamental transgression – leaving the staid view from the pavement and occupying instead the endlessly wide triumphal boulevards of Minsk and challenging the phalanxes of 'cosmonauts' (as the heavily armoured riot police were baptised) to take them back again, – represents one piece of the mosaic her new knowledge is made up of.

Aliaksandra learns to see with cool accuracy the different forms of knowledge – the knowledge of the people and the knowledge of the regime:

Extract 5 (orig. Russ.).

> I think for them it was also all very new the way we walk and enjoy our walk they have to think how to stop us so I think they were good ideas to change the meeting place and our direction. (16.10.2020)[10]

Accommodation and translation – coming to terms with and investing the human and non-human environment with new meaning – are steps on the way from simple transgression to agency. The accommodation to new forms of experience can engender new forms of knowledge that in turn transform the relationship to lived experience. Returning to Raymond Williams' words quoted above, he stresses that the former memory – in Aliaksandra's case the monolithic Minsk reproducing Soviet imaginaries (Bekus, 2017, 2021a) that cedes to the newly discovered city streets of the people – is less important perhaps than 'the perception and affirmation of a world in which one … can be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life' in which the reclaiming of the city streets and the solidarity experienced in the marches, following Williams' idea, are experiences of 'directness, mutuality, sharing …' (Williams, 2016, pp. 428-429). For Aliaksandra this means deriving a part of the necessary biographical resources from lived experience as a child and teenager and from new resources thrown up spontaneously and unexpectedly in the succession of the mass protests.

Radical otherness and hope

Many radically 'new' things 'after the election' are accepted as routine. Arrest, the conditions in the detention centres, the prospects of mistreatment or worse. The undercurrent of anxiety and fear resurfaces frequently, and very naturally, at different and repeated points in her narratives. It is one thing, she says, to know a lot about the police from the social media. It is quite another to come face to face with them:

Extract 6 (orig. Russ.).

> But it alone that first experience was frighteningly scary because I had looked a lot in the social media for information but when you come up against this in reality in real life it's all obviously completely different and obviously it causes completely different emotions and

> after that it stayed with me somehow for a while and such fear in part faced with such people in black in balaclavas with covered faces in uniform. (05.10.2020)

The new 'expert knowledge' referred to already that Aliaksandra can be thought to have acquired is a radical sense of otherness arising in reaction to the turn from initial hope in the phase 'before' to the menace of the political phase 'after' the elections in August 2020. This active alterity is frame-changing, making explicit new perspectives of meaning (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021), aiding Aliaksandra's openness to new discourses of action, protest, of resistance. In a very concrete, hearable sense, it makes it possible (and necessary) for Aliaksandra to develop a narrative discourse that can move on, avoiding entrapment in the 'failure' of the protests. This new discourse, hopeful and determined rather than exhilarated, transforms and transcends the dreary ontologies of violence offered by the regime in Minsk. On the 16th of October 2020, Aliaksandra expresses the difficult union of possibility and possible failure thus:

Extract 7.

> yeah but altogether the past two months were like emotional swings? because you feel the good things and you feel something good is going to change there is no way back we can't go back where we are now but then you see how people are attacked and the interviews of how people are treated (.) and that no-one is punished (.) for this and it brings you down … and you kind of live in these two states when you feel very inspirational then you feel upset and brought down. (16.10.20)

The last days of Belarus

The tone of her narrative darkens subsequently even more as the situation on the ground becomes threatening and once again breaks with routines. Mid-November 2020 saw the death of the young activist Raman Bandarenka (hecksinductionhour, 2020). He lived in the flats around the iconic Square of Changes, a normally drab courtyard between the blocks of flats on Chervyakov St. in Minsk which became a hub of the courtyard revolution (see Shparaga, 2021), hosting tea parties and lectures, dance and concerts, and waging daily guerilla warfare with the security forces (Deutsche_Welle, 2022; Novaya_Gazeta, 2020). There, as Aliaksandra relates with a mixture of irony and bitterness, a war is being waged to paint, and paint over, murals of protest. Every day the municipal workers would arrive and paint over the murals. Every night they would be restored and embellished further. Every evening the people of the surrounding flats gathered to drink tea and eat cake, sing songs, discuss and watch power-point presentations about democracy and protest. Bandarenka famously 'went out' to guard the courtyard's red and white coloured ribbons from the frequent destructive visits of plain-clothes men, the 'tikhari' or 'creepers' (Walker, 2020). He went out and never returned. Aliaksandra wrote to me:

Extract 8.

> I was stressed the whole day crying because of Roman[11], who died in the evening. People are shocked and very angry and there will be a reaction. I also read an article about a teen who is accused of throwing a Molotov at police and he is being kept in a detention centre for 3 months, he is physically and psychologically abused. The whole day was very tense, I was hoping that Roman would survive, it's very sad and tragic. There's going to be some commemorative actions tomorrow all over the city. (e-mail 12.11.2020)

After returning home again from a march, Aliaksandra has this to say after Bandarenka's death:

Extract 9.

> For the past three weeks it felt like going to meetings is like voluntarily going to slaughter. People start arguing among themselves in chats, others are afraid to go anywhere at all. There are various conflicts and points of view at different levels, I'll keep them in mind to tell you about it. (15.11.2020)

In the next days, the police and OMON forces effectively take control of the streets and begin their new strategy of total repression.

A new world

If we suppose that social learning, learning in movements – also unconsciously or reluctantly – learning in new, unheard of, frightening, challenging forms of social interaction can work to strengthen, as José Caride, Rita Gridaílle and Laura Crespo argue, 'the social fabric of the community and the internal resources of the territory, as well as improving and strengthening the capacities of people who live there', to then enable 'processes of social inclusion and cohesion, as well as of democratic culture to unfold' (Caride et al., 2022, p. 230), then the significance of the suppression of the Belarusian revolution for the learning experiences of Aliaksandra and her thousands of fellow demonstrators in 'one big sea'[12] is obvious.

The translation of the unacceptable or previously unimaginable violence unleashed after 9 August 2020 into a biographical resource – if not of hope, then at least in a form capable of generating a narrative of determination and stoic resistance without falling victim to cynicism and apathy – is achieved in the polyphonic crescendi of Aliaksandra's buoyant, exhilarating narratives that raise her up every time the street battles and police 'safari hunts' chasing protesters threaten to pull her down. On the 16th of October 2020 she told the following, framed and interwoven with insistent incidents of fear and violence, but the language fights back and then soars again. I have divided the following into four separate extracts for convenience only, and I have attached to each an emblematic title.

Extract 10. THIS IS OUR CITY!

люди обычно кричают на митингах (**ESp**) это наш город и поначалу это было просто одна из речовок что-то чтобы люди могли кричать и чувствовать вместе но вот спустя 2 месяца в нём **как-будто открылся как будто начинаешь** понимать его настоящий смысл того что стоит за этими словами и ощущения в это время **как будто мы все находимся** на каком-то огромном празднике (16.10.20)	*Embedded speech transports the protesters' voices claiming possession of city* *Repetition and hedged shift to direct employment of inclusive 'you'* *Repetition of hedge* *Shift to agentic 'we'*	people usually shout at the meetings (**ESp**) this is our city and at the beginning it was simply one of the chants just something so that people could shout and feel together but after two months **like something opened up like you begin** to understand the real sense of it with these words and the feelings **it was like we were at that time all at some great holiday.** (16.10.2020)

(ESp) = embedded speech –- others' talk, own other talk, interior talk

This is a highly agentic piece of talk. Aliaksandra is here putting her interpretive stamp on a vast and for her highly significant experience. The generalisation of the first half is explained as belonging to 'before'. After two months, she states, a sudden discovery of the 'real sense' of the words 'this is our city' was disclosed. The drama of this epistemic 'leap' is condensed down to an intimate revelation: 'как будто начинаешь понимать/like you begin to understand'. Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs would say that in these words we hear 'a dialogue with herself … happening here and now', and further, that 'we are in the experience … privy to her private thoughts' (Capps & Ochs, 1995, pp. 58-59). We are, of course, not really in her head. She has, however, brought the remembered experience through strongly affective foreshortening close enough to us, so that we can, as it were, be there with her. And we can almost share the sense of new awareness she has constructed. In fact, she seems to make us want to, and possibly we do, share.

Extract 11. A FESTIVAL OF SMILING FACES (orig. Russ.).

> of course the last two the last two Sundays were more rough but before that specially in the summer when we walked in **giant crowds** and around you were **thousands of people** all of them were happy with **smiles** on their faces it seemed **it was just some kind of huge festival** all these really beautiful dresses with placards with flowers everyone greets the others with **smiles** and even when we went up to the cordons where the OMON the militia the security forces were standing **aach** it seemed some way strange that that had to be here in the middle of such a joyful atmosphere. (16.10.2020)

The affective stacking of degrees of hyperbole (giant, huge, thousands, really beautiful, everyone) combined with the agentic shift from rough to euphoric (happy, smiles, festival, beautiful dresses, joyful) culminates in a first example of a kind of dreamy prosodic exhilarated state (**aach**) that we hear again in the next extract.

Extract 12. THOUSANDS WENT OUT!

также когда после событий 9ого 11ого числа когда происходили самые жёсткие спички задержания избивания людей с 12ого числа начались акции женщин цепей солидарности с белыми цветами вдоль дорог и я всю неделю ходила на них у себя в районе выходила **наверно тысячи людей** это довольно спокойный спальник где много пенсионеров много арендного жилья для людей из из силовых структур но при этом даже в нашем небольшом районе где низкоэтажные дома не такая плотная как в других новых микрорайонах даже при этом вышло **тысячи людей** и мы стояли до до ночи люди проезжая бибикали **сигналили**	*Precise historic time frame* *Actions of women, chains of solidarity, white flowers* *Agentic first person and personal space of belonging* *Affective emphasis of size of march* *Contrast between numbers of demonstrators and the 'sleepy', elderly, police dormitory district* *Use of diminutives and negative comparison as contrast with more densely populated areas of protest* *Repetition: numbers of protesters* *affective emphasis via repetition*	also when after the events of the 9th 11th August when the most violent peaks of arrests of beatings of people happened the actions of the women's solidarity chains began with white flowers along the roads and the whole week I went on them in my district I went out **really thousands of people** and it's a pretty sleepy area there are lots of pensioners lots of council flats for people from the the security forces but even so even in our small district there are no high-rise flats it's not so heavily populated as in other new districts and even so thousands of people went out and we were standing till late and people passing sounded their horns **the cars were signallings and these signals** when people support

машины и **вот эти сигналы** когда люди поддерживают тебя показывают что они заодно с тобой **аах**	*Prosodic indexicality*	you they are showing that they agree with you **aach.**

Considering briefly this extract in Russian, it is easy to hear Aliaksandra's discomfort that she lives in a district of Minsk more or less designated for families of the security forces, military, militia, and that routine political work there was risky. Here, however, her pride and happy wonder are easily hearable when she repeats, almost savouring it, тысячи людей/thousands of people and the cars: сигналили машины и вот эти сигналы/the cars signalled and these signals. The language slows down through these repetitions and becomes here a dreamy drawl of prosodic indexicality[13] finishing with a sighing aax/aach, and the relationship has moved from 'I' to 'people' (and the people are arrested and beaten, other people are pensioners, other people still are security forces people) and finally she addresses 'you': the universal protester, you the narrator, and you – the hearer and reader of these words. The perspective shifts persuasively from the agentive inner voice looking outwards, the larger picture puts analytical distance as in a film or an aerial view from a drone with different actors and different actions, and then the image ('you') becomes simultaneously a snapshot of an epistemic moment of clarity ('they are supporting you') and the eyes of the speaker are on you as she asserts her interpretation of the event and her language realises the practice of 'doing' meaning.

Coming now to the final extract of this narrative, we have a condensed tapestry of the most emblematic phenomena of the Belarusian summer of 2020: the solidarity chains, helpers and volunteers, supply chains and transports for the masses of people, the rubbish collectors[14], the flowers, the women protesters. Almost dreamlike again, Aliaksandra comments that it was so 'unusual', so 'strange'. The second half of the extract is sounded in with a time-shift 'сейчас'/now, and epistemic verbs beat out the rhythm: 'мы не знали … не знали'/we didn't know … didn't know and are caught up again with the strong move to centre stage of Aliaksandra's 'I' and her solemn recognition of her pride in her country with an agentic-affective I feel (experience in me)/ 'я испытываю.' She has painted a broad canvas and then proffered an unambiguous example of what we can call open theorising, for she suggests an interpretation of the vast experience she has witnessed. On this terrain she finds the confidence, and the sense of drama, to state her newly found pride for Belarusians, their country, their path.

In the central column, I draw attention again to the artful use of repetitive, 'triplets' (Tannen, 2007, pp. 69-71): three-layered lists giving emphasis to moments of agency, community, and belonging.

Extract 13. SUCH BEAUTIFUL GOOD STRONG PEOPLE!

и когда мы стояли в цепях у себя в микрорайоне тоже при-приходили мужчины с охапками цветов раздавали женщинам которые стояли в этих цепях приходили **волонтёры** которые приносили **кофечай какие-то печенье конфеты** чтобы подкрепиться ходили люди с пакетами **собирали мусор** и это было **так непривычно так странно** и сейчас тоже	*Emphasis of agentic first person and personal space and belonging* *Triplet 1: men came/ volunteers came/people came* *Objective description, employment of lists of things and people and actions* *Triplet 2: coffee-tea/biscuits/sweets*	and when we stood arms linked round my way in the local district men also arri- came with armfuls of flowers they distributed <u>them</u> to the women who were standing linked together in these chains **volunteers** came who brought **coffee tea different biscuits** and **sweets** to keep up their strength people went around with sacks **gathered the rubbish** and that

один из слоганов люди используют цитаты из песни ESp **мы не знали друг друга до этого лета не знали что вокруг столько прекрасных добрых сильных людей** теперь мы все поддерживаем друг друга сейчас **я испытываю очень большую гордость за беларусов за нашу нацию за этот путь** который мы идём (16.10.2020)	*Employment of discovered agentic 'we'* *Assertion of affective 'I'* *Triplet 3: pride in Belarusians/for the nation/for this path*	was **so unusual and so strange** and now also one of the slogans people use quotes from a song ESp **we didn't know each other before this summer we didn't know that around us were such beautiful good strong people** now we all support each other now **I feel a very great pride in Belarusians for our nation for this path** we are walking together. (16.10.2020)

ESp=embedded speech, others' talk

Last words for Aliaksandra

The notions of 'self-translation' or radical otherness already referred to earlier on to indicate how Aliaksandra effectively 'steps out' (is indeed forced to do so) of her previous biographical frames, underlines that the foundation of biographical knowledge construction is in the relational nature of biographical narratives embedded in social learning environments. I argue that in life history accounts, people use language to recreate *lived spaces*. When someone does this, she is performing what Löw calls 'synthesis' in order to establish the space/time in question as existing in a relation of tension or opposition to her own present-time location as she perceives/claims that to be (Löw, 2001). Such an action of *synthesis*, which connects, includes or excludes people and things through acts of understanding, memory and imagination, constitutes the spaces and times inhabited by, and accessible to, the subject and others. Aliaksandra is doing just that, and the lived spaces she recreates are all in transition and renewal or redefinition. Learning is taking place in this moment of 'disjuncture', as Peter Jarvis called it. He writes that 'when individuals can no longer take their world for granted – a state that I have called disjuncture – there is a need to learn. Disjuncture may be defined as the gap between individuals' biography and perception of their present experience' (Jarvis, 2006, p. 216). Nelly Bekus in fact suggests that there was a 'sudden shift from subject to protagonist, when Belarusian society declared that it has the power to define its own future' (Bekus, 2021b, p. 3/6). The feminist philosopher Olga Shparaga argues similarly that Belarusian civil society overcame itself to become a political subject, experiencing 2020 as their political awakening (Shparaga, 2021).

To finish, and to return to Raymond Williams' cautious estimation of the long-term workings of social revolution with which I opened this paper, we can perhaps see in the shift Aliaksandra makes, from subject to protagonist, the 'ratifying sense of movement, and the necessary sense of direction. The nature of the process indicates a perhaps unusual revolutionary activity: open discussion, extending relationships, the practical shaping of institutions' (Williams, 1965, p. 383).

All of that took place. The open discussion has shifted almost five years later to spaces outside Belarus, but it is carried forward (for example, OST, 2025; see also Red Paper, 2025). The relationships had to be rebuilt or built anew in the diaspora, while existing relationships were cut off and rendered dangerous. The shaping of institutions has been refined and elaborated on the international political stage and no longer only at back kitchen tables. The short autumn of revolution has turned into the marathon, slow,

studded with sacrifice and frustration, that Aliaksandra began to see as the levels of repression in November 2020 intensified and which she took with her when she left Belarus behind.

On the 10th of June 2022 Aliaksandra sent this e-mail message from a brief but very risky visit back in Belarus:

> As for my feelings they are very mixed. I am reflecting a lot about things here. I feel that everything is not right.... my memories of the avenue we went through today were about crowds of people and police and other things. And now it's all peaceful as if nothing happened. It's like a scene from a movie or a game where the main character wakes up in some artificially created reality or is put to sleep to see good events and happy life instead of real events. So many emotions and thoughts.

Notes

1 All proper names are given in their Belarusian version.

2 Tsikhanouskaya at the time of writing routinely refers to herself in these terms. 2024 a documentary film of the same name about her was premiered (Zerkalo.by, 2024).

3 An example of the creativity may be seen in the coining of ironic and self-ironic names for the protagonists of the ongoing struggle. See for the 2020 vocabulary of protest Perova (2020). For a fuller discussion of 'protest imaginaries', see Bekus (2021a).

4 Interviewees were from Poland, Bulgaria, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, Latvia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia.

5 During our most recent meeting, in June 2025, I asked Aliaksandra about her current use of Belarusian. She told me that she felt increasingly attached to using the *bielaruskaja mova* with chosen individuals and that reading in Belarusian has become more natural, though overshadowed by her urgent need to earn official qualifications in Polish in order to fulfil residence and work requirements in Poland.

6 'Ainsi, transcrire, c'est nécessairement écrire, au sens de réécrire ['Thus, to transcribe is of necessity to write, meaning to re-write'] (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 1417).

7 After 2021 the collection of photographs of 2020 protesters by the security forces for the purposes of facial recognition and arrest on re-entry in Belarus became the norm. Describing the protests, posting messages, likes, re-posts became enough to warrant year-long jails sentences.

8 The original 2021 version of this frightening report of state violence still showed the un-pixelated faces of the victims, as it could not then be foreseen that facial recognition software would be employed year after year in order to continue the repression of the 2020 protests. Significantly, the young woman Maria Zaitseva, whose bloody face featured on the cover, died fighting for Ukraine in January 2025 (RFE, 2025).

9 Minsk Hero City Obelisk is a 45 meters tall monument in the shape of an obelisk located on Victors Avenue in Minsk, Belarus. The Obelisk is dedicated to the fact that Minsk was declared a Hero City on 26 June 1974 for its people's bravery during the Nazi occupation that lasted for 1,100 days. (Wikipedia, 2025).

10 Aliaksandra's growing intuitive awareness of the tactics of the revolution is echoed by Bekus (2021a) who notes the reappropriation and re-interpretation by the protesters of the historical imaginary of Belarusian partisan warfare during World War II.

11 Note her use in November 2020 of the Russian version of his name.

12 This is how Aliaksandra described the feeling of being in the giant protest marches in 2020 (personal video message sent to the author, 21.02.2021).

13 Anna De Fina describes the prosodic force of indexicality in narrative as 'the ability of linguistic elements (for example single sounds, words, and combinations of resources such as stylistic repertoires) to evoke particular associations with identities such as groups … cultural attributions, social behaviour, and values' (De Fina, 2003, p. 385).

14 The symbolism of the 'inherently orderly character of Belarusians' in the popular protests is pointed out by Bekus (2021a, p. 6 n.10).

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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