

BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

**Claiming public space in totalitarian Minsk
Yard Revolution**

BACHELOR THESIS

Anna Vasilenka

Bratislava, 2022

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare, that this bachelor thesis is the work of my own and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. All literature used is attributed and cited in references.

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Abstract

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In light of increasing political repressions in Belarus, the public space ought to be recognized as a distinct political gesture and tool for political change. The distribution of power within urban spaces is a crucial strategy for demonstrators to claim an alternative political future and express themselves in the city. This thesis proposes, drawing on Lefebvre's theory of right to the city, that it was a very new phenomenon for Belarusian society to claim, and then to appropriate public spaces in the city. The shift of political power in Belarus after the presidential election of 2020 changed the urban environment in the city by moving protests from the official public spaces in the city to the neighborhoods. The purpose of my thesis is to identify the main changes in spatial order in Minsk during the wave of protests, and to find out how residents of Minsk finally claimed their right to city.

Abstrakt

Autorka: Anna Vasilenka

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Vo svetle narastajúcich politických represíí v Bielorusku by mal byť verejný priestor uznaný ako výrazné politické gesto a nástroj politickej zmeny. Rozdelenie moci v rámci mestských priestorov je kľúčovou stratégiou pre demonštrantov, aby si nárokovali alternatívnu politickú budúcnosť a vyjadrili sa v meste. Táto práca navrhuje, vychádzajúc z Lefebvrovej teórie práva na mesto, že išlo o úplne nový fenomén, ktorý si bieloruská spoločnosť nárokovala a následne si privlastňovala verejné priestranstvá v meste. Posun politickej moci v Bielorusku po prezidentských voľbách v roku 2020 zmenil mestské prostredie v meste presunom protestov z oficiálnych verejných priestorov v meste do štvrtí. Cieľom mojej diplomovej práce je identifikovať hlavné zmeny priestorového poriadku v Minsku počas vlny protestov a zistiť, ako si obyvatelia Minska nakoniec nárokovali svoje právo na mesto.

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In solidarity with 1,170 political prisoners in Belarus, as of January 31, 2022.

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Introduction

The latest wave of street protests in Belarus after the presidential elections of 2020, new aspects of grassroots politics, and the difficulty in assessing the consequences of public protests inspired me to write about my city's public space. People have emerged in places, where they were not allowed, placing urban space on the political agenda. The shift of political power in Belarus after the presidential election of 2020 changed the urban environment in the city. It moved protests from the official public spaces in the city to the neighbourhoods, which influenced the protest strategy. Public space in Belarus before August 2020 was very similar to what has been described in the book by Goldfarb about Soviet Poland, when discussions were living around the kitchen table. Only after it appear in the city, in 'real' public space. Fraud elections, police brutality, mass tortures in detention centers that were denied by authorities, pushed people out of their private lives. From apartments and kitchen discussions to the street to protest, leading people to realize their right to the city and claim the city by protests. First in the city in official places, and later in the neighborhoods and yards.

The aim of my research is to identify the main changes in spatial order in Minsk during the wave of protests, and to find out how residents of Minsk claimed their right to the city. In order to achieve my research goal, I will do several steps:

1. Explain the concept of public space in general and how soviet public space is different
2. Explain spatial practices in Minsk before the revolution
3. Politics of small things and collective political action can make a great difference, to restructure the political power in Minsk
4. Identify how islands of freedom come from collective political action, creating new spatial practices in the city and giving people 'right to the city'

In order to understand the logic of this text, there are some concepts that need to be defined right away, as I will refer to them often in my thesis.

Public space defined as “space that is not controlled by private individuals or organizations, and hence is open to the general public” (Madanipour 1996, 144), others say it is “an arena for the public representation of conflicts, political struggles, and acute social contradictions” (Zhel'nina, 2014). Public sphere is abstract realm where ideas are formed (Habermas, 2004). *Right to the city* refers to their right to engage in decision-making regarding its future, to transform their own living environments (Zhel'nina, 2014). *Collective political action* is defined as a human's exercise of their freedom, which is the combination of "I will" and "I can" (Arendt 1998, as cited in Lee, 2009). *Islands of freedom* are new places, where people can maintain freedom in a totalitarian state. *Politics of small things* is a simulated political power of individuals, who are usually considered helpless, that become a critical progressive political form, unacknowledged but affecting the reality (Goldfarb, 2006). *Spatial practices* are “*The spatial practice of a society secretes that space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space*” (Lefebvre, 1991).

The Belarusian protest, which has lasted months, has its own effects on the social lives of the inhabitants, the ordinary social order, and people's perceptions of the city. Our study is an attempt to document the changes that have occurred in the structure of urban space throughout the recent revolution.

Methodology

“A case study is an in-depth study of one person, group, or event. In a case study, nearly every aspect of the subject's life and history is analyzed to seek patterns and causes of behavior. Case studies can be used in a variety of fields including psychology, medicine, education, anthropology, political science, and social work” (Cherry, 2021). My thesis is a case study of emancipation of Belarus and Minsk space appropriation. It is important to mention, than in comparison to other years, Minsk was not the only city, where the opposition went to the streets. Minsk is also not the only city, where people were marching in the yards, as well as it is not the only city, where people reclaimed their space in the city. Nevertheless, I focus only on Minsk for several reasons:

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1. Minsk is the capital of Belarus, and because of the centralized government, most of the political actions happen in the capital.
2. It is my home city; therefore, I am most familiar with its streets, squares, and protests happening
3. During the revolution following the presidential election, most of new places of significance, that I mention in my thesis, evolved in Minsk.

There are very little scholar's works written on Minsk, therefore I was using the example of Saint Petersburg and Moscow to explain main concepts and shifts of public space in post-soviet cities. To my surprise, I have found too many similarities. As I was not physically in Belarus, and for safety reasons, I decided to not conduct any interviews with the residents of Minsk. Instead, I used online media articles to collect thought and views on their experience in Minsk during the revolution. Moreover, much knowledge I received from my mom, who was an active participant in yards activities. With that, I was able to analyse how Minsk residents were able to claim their right to the city back, even for a little while.

Chapter 1: Public Space

I would break down the meaning of "public city space," or simply "public space". In order to comprehend what "public" means, one must be able to identify the target audience that offers this exposure. The difficulty in comprehending public places has to do with inaccurate identification of the target audiences, with which the designer, social designer, architects, or economist–designer works. The purpose of public space is always "for whom" and only after "for what". In Minsk, as well as in many other Belarusian cities, a lot of big squares and spaces remained from the Soviet era. They were supposed to be public spaces for people, but were left empty or as traffic intersections. It was forgotten for whom and for what these squares were made, they were so carried away with the general plan and general concept of the spatial organization of the city. This issue is applicable to all post–war cities – they entirely forgot about the magnitude of a person, and even more so groups of people, in this space. The squares were primarily constructed as parade grounds and for revolutionary–style ceremonial assemblies.

A public space is a place where people get stuck for a while and come back again and again to be there, to do something, perhaps, to sit down or meet someone and chat. For example, European squares are mainly associated with the economy of food and shopping: cafes, bookstores, fairs or flea markets. Not every public activity is associated with comfort. A person is rarely comfortable in public, most often he is comfortable in private. It is worth understanding the concept of "comfort of a city dweller in a public space". After all, comfort for a person with disabilities, and a teenager on a skateboard, or for a married couple, and an elderly person, is very different. Ideally, public space would serve all at once, according to their abilities. For scholars, the concept 'public place' refers to a publicly accessible open space that is not restricted by social or physical boundaries (Zhel'nina, 2014; see also Lee, 2009). Scholars frequently regard public space as an important component of the urban environment, where strangers can engage and anonymous interactions between city people might occur. City life, as Lyn Lofland puts it, was made feasible by an 'ordering' of the urban inhabitants in terms of appearance and physical placement, "such that those within the city could learn a great

deal about one another simply by looking” (Lofland, 1973). As a result, metropolitan public places serve as arenas for strangers to study and classify one another through visual communication. J. Jacobs and W.H. Whyte's works have formed the declaration of the importance of public space for the quality of urban life, the fundamental necessity for a humanistic urban environment in which urban inhabitants' contact is fostered and supported, providing them with a diversified social experience (Jacobs, 1961 & Whyte, 1998).

Public space is a multifaceted term that has been defined from many academic approaches. Orum and Neal define public space in one of the widest and most inclusive ways possible “all areas that are open and accessible to all members of the public in a society, in principle, though not necessarily in practice” (as cited in Neugebauer & Rekhviashvili, 2015). According to Zukin, its features are "proximity, diversity, and accessibility" (Zukin, 1995, p. 262). Scholars from a variety of fields have examined public space, because this social space was threatened powerful private interests, a number of public debated has happened over the time.

The loss or gain of public space is assessed differently depending on how public space politics are interpreted, people, behaviors, and institutions affect how public space is defined, as well as how it is utilized (Goheen, 1998). Scholars emphasize the importance of everyday practices of acceptable and legitimate behaviour in public space. Recognizing the difference of players and behaviour is essential in public space. The essence of public space is its accessibility to all residents and visitors to the city without distinction. Urbanist Lee Pugalis (2009) points out that urban public space is also an important identifying element and its quality is also of economic importance. Pugalis (2009) thus points out that the city's public space is the most visible aspect of the city's economic health, cultural openness and public life. According to the author, urban space is thus a social link in which individuals learn the importance of coexistence and citizenship itself (Pugalis, 2009).

For Lofland (1998) and Whyte (2012), the understanding of public space praises diversity, inclusion, and urban experience. In this sense, public space serves as a method of displaying social variety as well as a tool for city people to learn about and embrace this difference. The second interpretation is more clear in its relationship to the notion

of right to the city: it sees public space as an arena for the public manifestation of disputes, political fights, and severe social tensions. Marcuse provides a political and contestable notion of public space, and mentions, that the “best use of public space is illegal, and necessarily so” (Marcuse 2013, as mentioned in Zhelnina, 2014).

Public space is not only a physical matter, the "form" in which the city is created, but also has its content side – the inhabitants. Petr Kratochvíl points out that public space is connected to two levels: "... to a physically defined shape and to the life that fills it ..." (Kratochvíl, 2012). In the development of public space, it is always possible to observe dependence on the socio-political conditions by which its functions and perceptions were influenced and limited. The character of these spaces does not arise without the context of the given time and its respect for past times and ideas about future times. In the 20th century, public space became a place of social struggles of tradition and modernity, the advent of postmodernism forms a transformation of the perception of public space, which is considered a significant element in creating the identity of the postmodern city as such.

Minsk is not the only city and place that was affected by the political change. For years, many places all around the world have their own official and unofficial places, islands of freedom, and constituted political centers by the government. Adam Ramadan explains the theory of the camp at Tahrir Square, that was a zone of freedom, resistance, and emancipation, beyond the power of the state and beyond the usual political order, where more progressive politics might be developed and realized. He proposed to recognize political camp as a distinctly political act and tool for political change (Ramadan, 2013).

Occupation of urban space, as well as disruption of regular political order inside such locations, was also examined in Lee (2009) paper observing the importance of Tiananmen Square and how it became so significant to people. The author contends that the alteration of Beijing's spatial order enabled the creation of new modalities of collective political activity in republican Beijing. Moreover, a variety of people's actions resulted in the creation of political public places. Yiftachel (2009) research highlights the importance of the urban regime – institutionalized logic of power in the city. Overall, the relation of the common (public) space to the government and politics

is crucial, and unfortunately, politics decide what public space is seen as “legal” and “illegal”. Borrowing from Arendt's definition of public space and people's political activity, people's political action was crucial in breaking through official control and opening up political public places.

Post–soviet Public Space

Due to political control and surveillance, public space in Soviet Union was very limited. It turned the ideal “everyone’s space” into “no–one’s space” (Zhel'nina, 2013). Rational principles of economic planning had a significant impact on the spatial organization of most Soviet cities, which manifested itself in such typical features as spatial equality in the distribution of units of public consumption, and possible time reduction required to go from home to work, and zoning the use of territories (Lebedeva, 2017). The central part of the city, was called "public space" or "community center", which emphasized the important role of collectivism in the life of a socialist city. The community center performed an important political and ideological function, being a clear illustration of communist ideas and values (Lebedeva, 2017).

The Soviet concept of public space was included into several Soviet–era planning concepts. By definition, all urban space was public, in the sense that it belonged to the state (Zhel'nina, 2014). In key public places and any urban areas, however, only sanctioned activities were authorized and tolerated. The official name of "common space" did not match to the real functionality and usage of most of these spaces: key squares and streets were designated for state–initiated and orchestrated protests and rallies. According to this notion, a "public area" was intended to be a location for communal acts coordinated by authorities. In Soviet era, in every soviet city, from the biggest to the smallest, uncontrolled gathering in public spaces was not welcomed. Moreover, any social interactions between city residents was intentionally pushed back into the private life, such as kitchens or yards (Zhel'nina 2011). Jeffrey Goldfarb also wrote about kitchen social interactions and discussions, emphasizing its importance: “Parents decided how their viewpoints and memories, outside official script, would be taught around the kitchen table. Around the same tables, discussions among friends would be more or less cautious...the result from one country to another and from one period to another varied considerably” (Goldfarb, 2006). Hannah Arendt later would

argue, that political will of people will push everyone out of their private life (from kitchens) back to the street (Arendt, 1998).

But Minsk, unlike many communist or post–soviet cities, like Warsaw or Budapest, has not experienced the process of democratisation after the fall of the Soviet Union, nor integrated into capitalist society like those cities have (Barykina, 2008). And, because of the authoritarian government and soviet–like president, Minsk, among other cities in Belarus, did not experience the decrease of state control and surveillance. Minsk did not have new opportunities for civic participation, nor changed people’s perception of urban space. Due to the country's relative political and economic isolation, Minsk was dramatically reshaped, has grown in ways unique from other Eastern European cities (Barykina, 2008).

In the last years of the Soviet Union, the social transformations, such as ideological and political reforms moved fast into the economic sphere of life. Private commerce shortly changed the structure of social interactions, as well as urban life and public spaces (Aksenov, 2010, p. 331). The private commerce, real estate, and many independent firms were claiming their own public space in the city, which created fundamentally new, competitive environment (Aksenov, 2010, p. 332). Nevertheless, the public space in Belarus, despite global changing environment and shifts in post–soviet countries, was still under control of the government, especially since Lukashenko came to power in 1994. Therefore, the applications of public space and the public sphere to Belarus must be contextualized. Few studies dealing with urban accessibility issues in post–soviet cities are more social in character. Most of the studies are done about Moscow and Petersburg, but not Minsk. Despite the fact Minsk is not in Russian urban space, it was closely connected to it during the Soviet Union and the main city–building concepts are similar. Therefore, I based my analysis on what I have learned from scholars studying public urban space in Moscow and Petersburg.

As mentioned earlier, there is also almost no tradition of appreciating the value of public space in post–soviet countries. It leads to a negative reaction among citizens to spontaneously emerging public places, as well as a lack of willingness on the part of authorities to "thin" dense historic buildings by creating public spaces on the site of derelict buildings (Aksenov, 2012, p.333). The urban city transformations such as the

process of mass yard closure, as a way to reorganize pedestrian areas, are also documented as a process or reorganizing the city by authorities. Anna Zhelnina (2014) argues that some authorities in Russian cities interpret the emergence of citizens in public spaces as a challenge and even a problem. In Russia, for Zhelnina (2014) public space cannot be privately held, yet it has been taken by municipal governments. She contends that in democratic regimes, diverse activist groups can seize or share places. Citizens' attempts to use public space are seen as challenges by local governments because it is not privately owned.

The idea, as well as the practice of restricted and 'forbidden' public space in Minsk, in Russian cities, as well as in Minsk was inherited from 'nomenklatura' time of socialism (Aksenov, 2010). At the same, time, because of the globalization processes in the world, such as private property in Russia and desire to live in mire Western cities (at least, that's the case for Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Minsk), the cities also develop according to western scenario. For Minsk, it means that some parts of the city are privatized and liberated from state control (these are spaces far away from the city center). For other parts, such as main squares and avenues, the public space is still owed, controlled, and monitored by the government.

Chapter 2: Public Space in Totalitarian Minsk

Public space has never been seen as an important variable to understand why protests can not succeed in some countries. Minsk does not only have Soviet identity heirated in people, but in buildings, squares and streets as well. In this chapter, I will refer to Arve Hansen's research (2017), that explained social and political elements of many public spaces in Minsk, including to main one used for protests: Nezalezhnastsi and Kastruchnitskaya (Oktiabrski) squares.

The tight distinction between public and private, according to Anna Zhelnina (2014), might help explain why "post-socialist protestors have been so fascinated with taking over symbolically weighted core parts of their cities". These areas, connected with state power, must be occupied in order to recover political authority for citizens (Zhelnina, 2014). Open urban space of public life must be filled with alternative meanings and practices of civic participation in political life: both street demonstrations and direct modification of public space serve this purpose. It is no secret that open urban areas in European and North American cities are frequently regulated and maintained by governmental entities or, in some circumstances, private proprietors.

Minsk is a city almost entirely built in the second half of the twentieth century as one large project with its own unique features of the urban environment, meeting the needs of Soviet reality and distinguishing it from its western neighbors. The scale of urban spaces, a clear functional-spatial division of the territory, the splendor and cleanliness of the streets – all this fit exceptionally well with the image of a city that had risen from the ashes of war. However, if earlier Minsk was suitable for its residents, now it became physically and morally old for citizens (Ilyashevich, 2018). I personally experienced avoiding the main square in the city, as it is a big empty gray square with the palace of Republic in the middle, which reminds me more of a sarkofag, rather than the place to hold national events.

Nevertheless, those main squares and avenues of Minsk always served as a place of massive gatherings to protest the long-lasting regime of Lukashenko. As in every city, main squares serve best for such kinds of events, as it requires a lot of space for

everyone. Unfortunately for Minsk, those public spaces were specifically designed unattractive for the public to avoid mass gatherings and give people the feeling of insecurity. During Lukashenko's presidency, old established Soviet places became even more authoritarian and less people-friendly. Those places are now flourishing the great authoritarian achievements of the president and emphasize the importance of the Soviet Union in the past.

Arve Hansen (2017) in his research on public spaces in the Soviet city argues that Minsk is a difficult city to protest because it reflects Lukashenko and his achievements, as well as a propagandist and official view of the history. Also two main squares (Kastrychnitskaya and Nezalezhnasti) are places most people tend to avoid in daily life, which makes the protests almost invisible for residents of Minsk. Last but not least, those the squares offer protesters little shelter or protection, it's hard to interact with each other, and they're easily monitored from the outside. The city is distinguished by large avenues, Stalinist architectural design, prominent red stars and Soviet slogans, massive squares and monuments to the victory of 1945 (Hansen, 2017). There are many explanations why Minsk was infused with such a Soviet identity, but the Great Patriotic War, which reduced the town to rubble, is perhaps the most important, "this helped the Soviet architects to rebuild Minsk as an example of what the socialist experiment could achieve" (Bohn 2013, as cited in Hansen, 2017). Besides the historic celebration of the heroes of Communism, the war became a major theme for the public spaces of Minsk.

Lukashnkian architecture follows the Soviet tradition of expressing the country's leadership success and wealth (Hansen, 2017). The Palace of the Republic has remained incomplete in Kastrychnitskaya since 1984, when the building was halted due to financial issues. After 17 years as a construction site, the structure was finished in 2001, and the square reopened. These construction projects are similar to the massive Soviet-brutalist style. Most big protests Minsk experienced in 2006 and 2010 were held on two main big squares in Minsk: Nezalezhnasti and Kastrychnitskaya (Oktyabrski) squares.

Kastrychnitskaya Square

Kastrychnitskaya is located in the very city center of Minsk. It located in its 'geographically' measured center. The square is also located along the main avenue and

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stands on the cross point of two subway lines in Minsk. The Palace of the Republic, where officially approved concerts and receptions by international delegations are held, is the centerpiece of the square. Lukashenko has also been inaugurated there for four times since 2001. Because of its severe yet simple appearance – suggestive of a big coffin – the city's residents refer to it as the giant sarcophagus. (Hansen, 2017).

Image 1: The Palace of the Republic



Note¹: Borisevich, V. (2012). [The Palace of the Republic]. Onliner.

<https://realt.onliner.by/2012/10/17/central>

Kastrychnitskaya Square is an extremely hostile cement space in front of a massive structure known as the Palace of the Republic (Barykina, 2008). The Palace symbolically represents the never-ending power of Lukashenko's presidency, as well as authoritarian state control. The Palace, is also a tool to make state power absolute. It represents desire of Lukashenko "to envision himself in the residence forever by symbolically securing eternity for himself in the mausoleum" (Barykina, 2008). The measures of the Palace, as well measures of the empty space in front of it gives the feeling of insecurity. When a person needs to go from point A to point B through this square, they would unintentionally go around in order to avoid being exposed at the square in front of the Palace of the Republic.

¹ Photo published with author's permission

The square is usually simply called 'Ploshcha', by this, the protestors chose a Belarusian word to distance themselves from the largely Russophone leadership by choosing a word that means 'peace' or 'justice' in Russian. Despite these attempts to seize space and transform the square into a popular revolt against Russia, it did not turn out to be like the 2004 Ukrainian Maidan, and the protests ended with massive arrests. 1500 people lost their jobs and 1200 were sent to jail, and 500 students were expelled from their universities (Hansen, 2017). In contemporary Minsk, city space not only participates in power and ownership performances, but also acts as nostalgic memories of ongoing struggles. It is a combined space consisting of techniques for urban planning, official discourses, individual routine activities and personal ways to connect to and use urban spaces (Barykina).

Nezalezhnasti Square

Nezalezhnasti (russian: Independence Square) is the symbolic name of the square is one draw for the opposition. In 1991 the square's name was changed from "Lenin square", but there is still a 7-meter-tall statue standing in front of the House of Government. More than anything else, people see the square as a perpetual fight for freedom from Lenin. Even as a venue for political demonstrations, the square has lost much of its luster when Lukashenko deposed the national assembly of political authority (Hansen, 2017).

Image 2: Statue of Lenin in Independence Square



Ristomanx. (2017). *Statue of Lenin in Independence Square* [Photograph].
<https://www.tripadvisor.in/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g294448-i275830572-Minsk.html>

The two main squares of protest in Minsk, Kastychnitskaya and Nezalezhnasti, are linked by the residents of the city to the success of Lukashënka and to the failed protests. In summary, the perceived elements of Minsk seek to strengthen the official version of history and the Belarusian identity of the authorities. Lukashënka and the Soviet past represent the vast majority of the principal features of the city. Be it the architecture; the reputation as a clean city; or the many monuments to people and events ideologically "correct".

What places are acceptable for a political mass demonstration is decided by the significance of being seen by the political authorities. There is a symbolic value in occupying a space close to where political decisions are made. This helps demonstrators to express that public space in Minsk also belongs to them. That is true that in the country with controlled media and abused power like Lukashenko, the only desire of people is to be closer to the physical buildings of power – the Administration, the Parliament. People only want to show the state apparatus that opposition exists and to engage as many people as possible. Barykina pointed out, that for the Belarusian authoritarian regime, it is crucial to maintain the soviet urban strategy (Barykina, 2008).

For many opposition protests, the city center becomes inaccessible for pedestrians, the streets are blocked and transport is forbidden to pass or completely stopped. Often, the opposition was denied the right to protest in the city center (Svoboda, 2007).

After the presidential elections in August 2020, massive protests took place in the city center, protesting against the fraud elections and another consecutive term of Lukashenko. People continued gathering on Sundays protests against Lukashenko in the city center, but more and more people started to be brutally beaten and detained. That's when Belarusians created a new tactic of massive gatherings to oppose the regime – gathering in their local neighborhoods, also known as “Yard Revolution”.

Unclaimed Space before Summer 2020

Apart from physical complications in using space in Minsk, there are deep Soviet connotations implemented in people's views of the city. Zhelnina (2014) in her work on urban public space in Russia writes about the difference of interpretation of Petersburg by different groups of citizens. “The old official concept of open urban space sees it as a “postcard” that should feature not the living city and its people, but of–ficial and “picturesque” views” (Zhelnina, 2014). One sees the space in the city as ‘european’ that means to actively communicate and use the space for individual expression. The other one sees as a decoration as a symbolic landscape, the embodiment of glory and power of the state. The Soviet concept of the public place ruled out the mix of public and private, permitting no expressions of individuality (Zhelnina, 2014). A “public place,” was meant to be a place for collective actions made by authorities (Engel 2006: 167).

For many citizens of Minsk, the open public space is an architectural heritage, representation of culture and history. In Soviet tradition, there is a huge gap between public and private space, a city is seen not as a place to live. For Anna Zhelnina (2014), the phenomenon of strict division of life in Soviet cities into public and private has been analyzed by historians and anthropologists. Finn Sivert Nielsen, a Norwegian anthropologist, proved that main avenues, which represented civilization, were well maintained and arranged, but the dvor (yard) was the place where people lived and interacted, was forgotten. However, the yard, although a non–private venue for

interaction (residential building yards were not secured back then), was not a totally open space; rather, it was a place hidden from the outsider, an "ungoverned territory" (Nielsen, 2004). As a result, the basic separation of life into private and public spilled over into the city, whose open areas could not operate as public spaces where meaningful interactions among strangers and variety could occur (Zhelkina, 2014).

For Ilona Ilyashevich, Minsk does not suit its residents anymore. It is becoming physically and morally outdated (Ilyashevich, 2018). Ilyashevich thinks, that despite some post-Soviet imprints that differentiate us from our western neighbors, Minsk is still changing, and their demand for a high-quality urban environment is gradually beginning to form in accordance with global trends, while the city as a whole is reacting and adapting to these changes very slowly. The majority of the time, urban space is not radically transformed, but only undergoes cosmetic repairs, which do not make it more suitable for a modern city dweller: the appearance changes, but not the logic of the processes taking place within, and the method of creating urban space does not change (Ilyashevich, 2018).

Chapter 3: Political Action

Peaceful protests, grassroots campaigns, and many others are considered to be collective political action. Any form of organized group effort to address some groups of inequality can be considered as collective action. The struggle for women's rights or labor unions are great example of a group of people who are subject of inequality, to unite and fight for the rights. Mancur Olson mentioned in his book *The Logic of Political Action* how labor unions can be a driving force and big change in the society (Mahajan, 2020). In my case, it was the whole Belarusian society that couldn't live another 5 years under the Lukashenko regime. In order to secure his chances to not fraud elections again, and to promote oppositional candidates, many people in Belarus, and especially in Minsk united to develop apps, sign the petitions, support candidates. Later, they were the moving force of marches in the city center, solidarity chains, strikes, and yard gatherings. I will talk about a few those political actions.

The first few clashes with the police, marches and demonstrations were happening in the 'logical' political center, in the space where protests were happening before. Since the first week after the presidential elections, large mass marches in the center of Minsk took place almost every day. From mid-August (August 16, 2020), united mass marches in the central districts of the city began to take place on Sundays (August 16 – "March of Freedom", 23 August – "March of New Belarus", 30 August – "March of Peace and Independence", 6 September – "March of Unity", September 13 – "March of Heroes", September 20 – "March of Justice", September 27 – "March of 97%", October 4 – "March for the Liberation of Political Prisoners", October 11 – "March of Pride" October – "Partisan march", October 25 – march of the "People's Ultimatum").

In article by Goldfarb (2006) "Politics of small things, left and right states" the author mentions: "If the participants in a situation define something as real, it is real in its consequences. The simulation of social reality very much makes reality, and this making is a form of political power. In our recent past this power of simulation, available to those who are usually considered powerless, has become a crucial progressive political form, not well recognized, but shaping our world nonetheless"

(Goldfarb, 2006). In Belarus, as in many authoritarian governments, people do not have a political power over many aspects in the country. In Belarusian case, not even the control over the elections and its results for 26 years, until August elections of 2020. For the purpose of transparency and control over the presidential elections, Belarusian programmers developed an app/platform called ‘Voices’. This app proved the electoral fraud and later expanded its functions to allow counting the number of people going out to peaceful protest. In addition to this, the platform interacts with the Coordination Council² to obtain the opinion of Belarusians on the decisions made by the Council.

Yard Protest

For months, the violence of the police has been concentrated mainly in the city center, where the protest started in August. By November 2020, several media estimated that more than 30,000 people were arrested since demonstrations started. Project “23.34”³ surveyed over 3,200 detention cases in the independent monitoring initiative, and one third of the respondents had been physically assaulted, most of them under the age of 30 years. In addition, 144 inmates remain in jail. Therefore, many of the demonstrations have shifted to local communities to transcend this trauma and still oppose state brutality (Plotska, 2020). Since mid–September, it has been impossible for demonstrators to gather in a large group in the center since the main roads were closed. In order to continue to protest and not be brutally arrested by police, residents of Minsk and other cities in Belarus decided to gather in their own yards with neighbors and walk around the local neighborhood. Knowing the area gives people the feeling of protection, in case of a riot there is a place nearby to run to – your own house. Those small local gatherings transformed to something more than gathering, but shaped their own super local identities

² The Coordinating Council is the single representative body of the Belarusian society. It is created on the initiative of Svetlana Tikhonovskaya with the aim of organizing the process of overcoming the political crisis and ensuring harmony in society.

³ 23.34 is a joint project of Viktor Babariko’s headquarters, the Coordinating Council, the human rights center “Viasna”, the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, the “Voice” platform and “Honest People”.

This became one of the beginning places for connecting and unifying neighbors, as our respondents also indicated. Plotska (2020) noticed that by organizing intermittent and decentralized acts of civic resistance, demonstrators are reclaiming urban space. Some are organized over the Dze.chat website, an interactive map showing local Telegram channels, the most popular messenger service in Belarus. The project, inspired by urban blogger Anton Matolka⁴, rapidly became an invaluable tool for local community self-organization. It was a natural continuation of the protest marches in the yards, which Belarusian society has never experienced before.

District marches were an important form of protest as well. Area marches involved assembling protesters from the district, forming a column, and walking around the district without moving to the city center. District marches began in autumn, with Sunday mass marches in the center. Later, Sunday marches became less in number, but district marches, on the other hand, drew an increasing number of neighbors. For Arendt, action comes before public space. Although Arendt recognizes that a totalitarian regime might jeopardize public space, she believes that individuals can work together to save public areas as modest hidden islands of freedom. Arendt's public space is a powerful vision because it is created by human effort rather than being a given reality subject to governmental control (Lee, 2009), as in the Habermasian idea of public space. In Metlitskaya (2021) interviews respondents shared their new emotions towards yard gathering: "And now everything has shifted to the districts." And I don't leave the house on Sunday. "I'm attempting to capture the demonstration in my area," one respondent adds⁵. The prevalence of neighborhood marches influenced Minsk citizens' frequent location at the period. To "catch a demonstration in your neighborhood," that is, to join a group of demonstrators, you must be "in your neighborhood" – that is, at home, in your yard, or in the yard of a neighbor.

Cafes, metro stations, and parks in their neighborhood have become a new "center" for some residents. The interviewer (Metlitskaya, 2021) illustrates a similar movement in

⁴ Anton Motolko is a Belarusian photographer, blogger, civil activist. Founder of the online project to help solve urban problems MotolkoHelp.

⁵ Interviews used with author's permission

concentration from the city core to the district center: "And now my center of attention has abruptly changed to Kamennaya Gorka – the nearest subway to my house – since here is the closest area to my house where you may go to study." True, it's still a half-hour walk, but that's OK in my neighborhood. I've never felt such piety and delight in respect to this Minsk neighborhood. However, the epidemic and protests have rebuilt my perspective that I cannot continually travel to the city center since it is unsafe for both reasons". Matthias Lecoq (2020) talk about residents of cities, who produce meaning through their daily use of urban spaces in two ways. The first relates to everyday practices, while the second is the relationship between space and human activity. These uses produce a certain type of neighbourhood, atmosphere (Lecoq, 2020).

The protests spread around the city in the neighborhood and yards. It happened from the collective political action that pushed people from their homes to the city center first, and after from the city center to more safe space, their own yards. "Courage" and their desire to "appear" in public motivate people (Arendt, 1998, p.186). One's own life and survival can only be guaranteed in the private realm, anyone who enters politics must first be ready to sacrifice their life (Lee, 2009). People are motivated to leave their homes and risk their lives because they want to "appear" (Arendt, 1998, pp. 36–37). During the demonstrations, Minsk yards gained full-fledged "right to the city," allowing inhabitants to recognize their own need for space. Communication among neighbors and the development of good-neighborly customs in Minsk yards also became a new kind of recreation. Attending or sponsoring cultural and local events in the courtyard, chatting with neighbors, and fundraising were obviously not substituted for other leisure activities of the inhabitants. Tea parties, drawing lessons for children, graffiti is not political activity, but in the context of the Belarusian revolution, these are the actions that united people and made changes in the city. Never before, Minsk residents felt like they 'own' or 'belong' to the place they live.

It is especially important to find out how many people express disagreement with the regime through street demonstrations – with such a decentralized format or yard and neighborhood marches. If you are participating in street protests this upcoming weekend, be sure to tell us. A form of protest can be a courtyard gathering, participation in a district march, or marching in the city. The new special project of "Voices" – # I

am walking, counts the Belarusians who come out to protests, defend freedom, and new fair elections, to show the whole world a real picture of the struggle for justice. Counts everyone: who walks legally in Minsk and large cities, who walks in remote corners of Belarus in support of the protesters, who objectively cannot walk, but also against lawlessness.

Chains of Solidarity

On August 12, 2020, many mothers and sisters of the detainees gathered in human solidarity chains along the road in solidarity, there was no other way how to express the feeling of injustice and reach the authorities. One of the messages of the women's protests is the slogan "If he hits, it means he will be thrown into jail", which brings to light the harsh detentions and torture of people in Akrestino (local detention center) during those three August nights. "Abused society" is rather manifested from women, who have always been the weaker sex in society and who are more likely to be subjected to violence than men. Lukashenko holds Belarus, a woman, with his blue hands. There are so many photos and videos of evidence of how Belarusian women protected men from riot police, shielding them with their bodies.

In addition to the fact that women are considered the weaker sex, it is also said that in the early days of the protests, more men were detained and beaten than women. According to Mediazona (2020), there were 1373 cases of injuries –1316 men and 57 women. The first women's marches on August 12, 13, 14 were held almost without the invasion of the riot police. This testifies to the fact that the president did not regard women as wealthy and independent subjects of society. The political structure in Belarus began to change a month before the elections: the leadership of one man who holds the country in his strong hands passed to three women who entered this struggle out of love for their husbands and respect for their country.

Not only women, as a subject, were not perceived by the state, but also grandparents, disabled people, students and schoolchildren. However, it is the women's marches and the strength with which the mothers, sisters, wives and girls of the detained men who go went out, that have such incredible energy. Of course, it doesn't matter if you are a woman or a man, nobody deserves a baton from a riot policeman. At some basic level,

a policeman doesn't want to hurt a woman as much as man, although they do not stop the violence in general. I suppose everything comes from the same beliefs that women are a priori the weaker sex. Yes, women are beaten less, but they have it just as bad as the men. When a man disappears from the street or his workplace, then it is the task of his mother, wife, girlfriend or daughter to find him in one of the prisons, to find out about his condition and charges, to find lawyers, to transfer the necessary things to prison, to live with it, as well to keep going to work and raising the kids. There are no unimportant problems.

It is believed that the women's protests stopped radicalization (killings and violence against men in prisons in the first days of the post-election protests). On one hand, we do not know if the events would have developed differently and perhaps the authorities would have come to their senses after the publicity of all these events. On the other hand, women's marches (especially those in the early days) greatly changed the very format of the protest. Instead of late at night and the city center, where men usually gathered and immediately came into contact with trained riot police and machine guns, women began to go out in the bright part of the day with flowers in various districts and just stood in human chains, waving their hands to passing cars.

I myself was in one of the first women's chains in Minsk. I remember how I was very much afraid that a prisoner van would come and we would all be beaten up and put in jail. I saw the same fear in the eyes of other girls and how they were afraid to lift flowers up. At the same time, the passing men smiled and supported us, some voluntarily brought us food and water, and others bought white flowers (white as a sign of purity, transparency and solidarity). A month before the elections, our national leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya proposed to wear white ribbons on our arm to make it clear to all people that we are together in this struggle.

Telegram Chats

Another example of collective political actions are ways of communications between protestors and neighbours in the city. District and yard chats have become one of the main means of communication between neighbors for organizing meetings (as well as for joint outings to district marches). Against the backdrop of increased protest activity,

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these chats enabled neighbors who had previously barely exchanged greetings to get to know each other and plan their actions, from attending a protest march to having tea together. The contestants' slogan was a lyric from the "Splin" group's song "We didn't know each other until this summer."

It is hard to say how many of these chats were created, since the authorities themselves claimed slaughter of thousands of such gatherings around the nation. The secret police coerced the participants to delete the discussions or entered them themselves, posting red–green flags and threats. Administrators were placed on the wanted list, were forced to escape the country, and were compelled to apologize in front of cameras. In the spring and summer of 2021, the pressure increased even more. Participation in such chats, according to the Investigative Committee of Belarus, is similar to extremist activity; the police believe that the main objective of these “formations” is “radical activities.” As a result, their management came to be construed as the formation of an extremist group, which is punishable by up to seven years in jail under Belarusian law.

According to some estimates, Telegram had 2.4 million users in August 2020 in Belarus, where its own independent media has been decimated and many international ones have been censored (the country's population is 9.3 million). Major media have been labeled radical. As a result, courtyard talks remained one of the remaining venues for people to exchange information and engage with one another.

Based on Arend't concept of collective political action, I can explain how much the public space in Minsk has changed since people started practicing different kind of activities in their yards. Tea parties, concerts, talks, master lessons for children and adults, film screenings, performances by independent theater groups, mural making, local holidays, and football matches were among the events that developed in the courtyard during the demonstrations. Often, activities in a certain courtyard began with the first teas: “Someone in some courtyard made a tea party, and we immediately realized that we can too. Someone brought tables, someone tea, someone biscuits. We found a closet in a nearby house where all this was stored. All this was quickly organized on the initiative. They immediately began to knit ribbons” (Metlitskaya, 2021).

Vaclav Havel, in his essay *Power of the Powerless*, also mentioned how to "live within the truth". According to Havel, a few things are required. The first step is to recognize the "hidden realm" within and between us that can never be nourished, satisfied, or perpetuated by an external system, ideology, or abstraction. This "sphere" represents a soul that must be filled with faith, truth, and beauty. Second, an awareness that the person is the foundation of society, and the essence of the individual is an inexhaustible dignity. Finally, the fortitude to protest to a regime's demeaning pseudo-reality in any way diminishes human dignity. To "live within the truth" means to empower oneself in the face of even the most repressive conditions. It is the power of the powerless.

New Belarusian Society

For 26 years, since Lukashenko came to power, the authorities have discredited the state symbols with which Belarus gained independence – the white–red–white flag. But now very many people began to consider it theirs. For exactly the reason that governmental officials are trying to destroy every symbol of an independent country a while back, manipulate the historical facts and make the city landscape look like a small Soviet paradise, people are now using the white–red–white colors wherever possible. Coloring the fences, putting flags on the windows, wearing the ribbons, wearing white–red–white clothes, drawing graffiti. Every local neighborhood even developed their own flag, symbolizing the most important elements and history of their area. Local identity is prominent in Belarus, a nation that has long been immersed in peasant culture and is proud of its regional differences (Plotska, 2020). All of these genuine and natural grassroots initiatives, together with the local Belarusian population, whose firm position and support have become an influential force in never–ending opposition, build a new Belarusian society. The process works as it should at all levels, from low and local to high and national, and even worldwide (Plotska, 2020).

After decades of tradition to gather only in the logical, but hostile political centers, people were still occupying the main streets and squares in the city. Every Sunday march from mid–August to mid–November was dedicated to a particular event, but still using the old spatial practices to occupy the space in the city. For personal safety following mass detention and extreme police brutality, people started to gather in their local neighborhood to continue protesting there. Familiar area and decentralized protest have

people an opportunity to explore their own yard, neighbors and endless possibilities to protest or just spend time with each other. The theory of politics of small things by Goldfarb, which is the appearance of “Voice” platform to control elections, and later its transformation to help people unite during the protest, finally gave a chance to make actual changes in politics. Earlier these were the chains of solidarity, with women standing in line with flowers in their hands, that decreased radicalization of the protest. Drawing on Arendt’s theory of collective political action, we can state that it was people’s desire and courage to change politics in the country and control it. By taking power away from the government and secret police, people created their own islands of freedom, places where everyone felt safe. Yard protest is a unique phenomenon made by regular citizens, that were partially united by local telegram chats, and later created their own places to gather and protest. New places of political significance appeared after months of neighbors’ activities and active protest in many places in the city

Chapter 4: New Places of Political Significance

Yard protests come in a variety of forms. Most of the time, people simply walk about the yards chanting slogans, and after half an hour, they fold up flags, conceal them under their coats, and go home. "People planned not just protests, but also concerts, fairs, flash mobs, and other activities". According to Elena Zholnerovich⁶, the actions were initially not protest-related, but rather uniting: "These were diverse tea parties, parties, activities for children, several concerts presented by Belarusian musicians, trips throughout the area" (Zholnerovich 2021, as cited in Kochemarova 2021).

According to Yegor Martinovich (as cited in Kochemarova, 2021), "people who went to protest in the yards hoped to be held less than those who marched in the center, and this was the case. The number of demonstrators varied greatly according to the day of the week. On weekdays, for example, only neighbors walk out, however on weekends, they "pay a visit" to neighbor yards or even different districts. It's tough to determine the number of people, but we notice that something happens someplace every day". According to him, the total number of people who attend such protests all across Minsk, although in different locations, may be counted in the thousands.

The protest became possible for everyone, and took a different form, for example those people who live in the outskirts and did not go to the rallies in the center had no idea what kind of people would come to them. "And then they lean out of the window and see that it is their neighbor Vasya⁷ protesting here with a flag. And this brings the protest closer to the people" (Kochemarova, 2021). Planned and organized yard gatherings and protests by ordinary citizens of Minsk, residents of many different neighborhoods in Minsk can be seen as a collective political action that Arendt was describing in her books. The disagreement with election results, lawful rule of Lukashenko, mass tortures in detention centers, mass arrests, and brutal behavior pushed people from their homes,

⁶ The name of the respondent is not real due to safety reasons

⁷ The name of the respondent is not real due to safety reasons

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out of their private lives to the streets to protest. By gathering in relatively small groups of neighbors, people created their own places of freedom in increasing totalitarian control of the state. One of those places is ‘Square of Niny Baginsky’ (the playground between two houses), dedicated to the most famous activist and Lukashenko’s regime opponent, who recently turned 75 years old, many call her “The grandmother of Belarusian revolution”.

Image 3: Square of Nina Baginsky



Note: Personal archive. (2020). [Square of Nina Baginsky].

Right to The City

The concept of the "right to the city" was developed by Henri Lefebvre, a French sociologist, and philosopher, in his book *The Right to the City (Le droit à la ville, 1968)*. The right to a city, according to Lefebvre, is the right of "citizens to actively construct and access urban space" (Lefebvre, p. 29) The basis of the concept of "right to the city" resides in people' want for access to urban areas and urban life, as well as their ability to meet this demand.

The right to the city, according to Lefebvre, is comprised of two major principles: the right to appropriation and the right to participate (Lefebvre, p. 32). According to Lefebvre, the right of appropriation is the right to enter and use urban spaces. According to Lefebvre in the same book, not only must current urban places be used in line with residents' right to appropriation, but future urban sites must be developed with this right in mind as well.

Lefebvre defines the right to participation as "the right to a direct voice," that is, the right to make crucial collective decisions about urban areas (Lefebvre, 1967, p. 32). Lefebvre envisions the fullest possible fulfillment of the citizen's right to the city, that is, its appropriation and participation, in this currently utopian idea. The gap in Lefebvre's notion might be characterized as a lack of actually established mechanisms for implementing the right to the city. Lefebvre can not demonstrate how a city's people can truly make a choice that affects a specific region, or how they can claim the need for access to a specific territory on the basis of "the right to appropriation." Despite its theoretical and practical limits, Lefebvre's thesis proves useful in the context of discussing new protest tactics in Minsk during the revolution. The "right to the city" refers not only to residents' right to occupy the city, but also to their right to participate in decision-making about its future, and to modify their own living environments. Most urban disputes may be understood as a fight for the right to the city, with various social groups attempting to influence decision-making through occupying public space. The link between the right to the city and public space is critical: the right to the city can only be claimed and manifested in the public space. The Minsk demonstrations of 2020 were successful in influencing their typical ways of engaging with the city and identifying the gaps and dark areas where the city stays hierarchical and alienated for residents.

Minsk Appropriation

Minsk protests of 2020 were able to influence their usual ways of interacting with the city and identify those spots, where the city remains hierarchical and alienated for the Minsk residents. One respondent, who stayed anonymous for safety reasons said, "You're walking through the city and don't understand why you can't change your path

and go around instead of straight ahead. It is open, there's simply a gate, no cars, it's free, and you may go there. Some of these points are not entirely obvious. I started paying more attention to places in the city that are comfortable... In general, Minsk is fairly open, with broad streets, yet you can see how a home, for example, might divide you from a vast number of people. Some constraints pique my interest more than others. Perhaps it's because I'm desperate to seize everything for myself and get rid of everything”.

This quote from a respondent illustrates a situation in which a participant in a march draws attention to city restrictions, to the inaccessibility of the city in some of its manifestations. This focus is an important indication of a paradigm shift in some city dwellers. The practice of marches allowed Minsk residents to see and realize the inaccessibility of the urban environment. Paying attention to the inaccessibility of the city can be called the first step in the work of appropriating urban spaces. To appropriate urban territories yourself, you must first see, recognize those places.

Marches, partisan public art, and courtyard events all aided in the "appropriation" of the city by Minsk people. One Minsk resident describes how walking marches affected their vision of Minsk avenues: "Minsk is a really monumental city, there are a lot of such towering buildings here, and you seem to be a visitor in it, despite the fact that this is your city". But there is a distinct impression that you are in command here, that you are the boss here, that you are at home. It was as if I had taken it for myself, and I felt... you know, when you go to a dancing class, you instantly sit on the floor, because it is yours, sweetheart, what holds you. It is the same in Minsk now; it felt great to go along the street. This gives you personal ownership of the city. And when you run, you learn a lot. Because you wrap in places where you would never wrap otherwise. You are hiding in areas you've never hidden before. And there are probably just a handful locations remaining that I haven't visited. Mostly pamphlets. And the brochures were seen as if they belonged to you. In general, I probably said something similar regarding the attitude toward the city. Concerning additional ties to the city".

In this story, the change in the perception of the city ‘as a stranger’ to the perception of the city ‘as mine’ is clearly traced, “I seem to have appropriated it for myself”, “But now there is a clear feeling that you are in charge here, you are the boss here, you are

at home”, say respondents in Metlitskaya (2021) interviews. The ability to walk freely on the streets avenues for our respondent turned out to be important in order to “appropriate the city” at that moment. It can be said that the practice of walking marches in the perception of some townspeople began to be the embodiment of the very "right to appropriation", which Lefebvre described.

Two of the respondents mentioned that the practice of walking marches also changed the perception of the size of the city. Minsk became not only closer to them, but also smaller: “Minsk has narrowed” (Metlitskaya, 2021), “Now walking from one metro station through two others is nonsense. The city shrank and became very homely. It’s as if you’re in an urban village and you know something about the neighbors who are nearby” (Metlitskaya, 2021)

One respondent also mentioned the participants of the march in the city center, who came there on foot from a remote area of Minsk, “That is, we came to the center on foot. New Borovaya⁸ came to the center on foot”. These stories provide information regarding walking behaviors during protests and the changing sense of city size. As a result of them, are vital proof of some Minsk residents transformation of their image of the city. Minsk's avenues, streets, sidewalks, and carriageways, which are walked by certain residents, have now gotten a bit closer to them. The practice of walking marches might be seen as the resident’s awareness of their "right to the city," or the right to reclaim urban space for themselves. The practice of marches, yard activities, and the application of good-neighborly behaviors allowed Minsk residents to begin "appropriating" the city territory.

Minsk Identity

The Minsk protest also became a catalyst for the emergence of new regional identities. By the term "district identity" in this context, we mean the presence of the residents of some districts of Minsk awareness of themselves as part of the district community.

⁸ Minsk district far away from the city center

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During the protests, residents of many districts of the city began to create symbolic images illustrating the names of the districts or the main locations of these places. These symbolic images were most often reflected in the format of the region's logos and flags. The discussion and implementation of flag concepts often took place within local chats and neighborhood meetings. This is how respondents in Metlitskaya (2021) research describes the process of creating a regional flag: “When no one had a flag yet, everyone who had design skills started making circles and logos. There was a long debate over how to write the name of the district in Belarusian. And at the same time, flags of other regions began to appear”.

This example of the collective creation of logos and flags is also an example of collective political action described by Arendt. "Ploshcha Peramen" ("Square of Changes" by the author), "Ploshcha Peramoztsa" ("Square of Victors" by the author), "Ploshcha Maryy Kalesnikavay" ("Square of Maria Kolesnikova" by the author) – these are the new names of Minsk yards, which became the central points of protest activity and bright centers of courtyard events. -An important part of the formation of the identity of Minsk yards is the creation of murals. The name "Ploshcha Peramen" arose at the time of the creation in the Minsk courtyard of a mural dedicated to DJs who played the song "Changes" on a public holiday as a sign of protest.

Image 4: Square of Changes



Note⁹: Belsat. (2020). *Square of Changes in Minsk*.

<https://belsat.eu/ru/news/ploshhad-peremen-prevratilas-v-memorial-bondarenko-fotoreportazh/>

Image 5: Square of Maria Kolesnikova



Note¹⁰: Tut.by. (2020). [Square of Maria Kolesnikova].

<https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=258909&lang=ru>

⁹ Photo published with author's permission

¹⁰ Photo from the media, which does not exist anymore

“Square of Maria Kolesnikova” also got its name after the creation in this yard of a mural placing Maria Kolesnikova, the leader of the protest movements in Belarus.

It is worth noting that the process of creating the name of a certain city location “from below”, that is, without supervision, coordination of authorities, can also be considered as an example of the use of the right of appropriation. If the place really belongs to a city dweller, then he has the right to call it as he wants, and not as the official authorities decide. If this place has its own separate name, then it is not just some someone's place, but it belongs to those who gave it this name.

The emergence of such place names and regional logos also makes the city closer to its residents. It is worth noting that the collective process of creating logos, flags and murals can be analyzed in the context of realizing the “right to participate”. It can be said that the emergence of new district yard identities among the residents of Minsk is also a work of the right to appropriate the city, an attempt to exercise the right to the city. The exercise of the right to appropriation in this context correlates with the practice of creating partisan street art – murals. The walls of the city's buildings, previously perceived by many residents as inaccessible for artistic practices, became accessible during the protest period. That is, some Minskians were able to appropriate the city for themselves a little more precisely through the creation of murals.

The right to participation, realized through the creation of new district and city identities through the creation of murals and flags, has made it possible to transform some Minsk yards into the very “lively” urban spaces – animated urban spaces. The right to appropriation, realized by residents of Minsk through the creation of murals and the practice of walking marches, allowed not only yards, but also streets and avenues of the city to exist for some time in the mode of a “lively” urban area.

It is important to note that the city itself is understood in a new way after the protests. More districts of the city fall on the mental map of Minsk residents. Not only the perception of the city, but also the ways of interaction between Minsk dwellers and the urban space have been transformed – being in a city now means being both in the center and “in the district”. New social practices transform the old urban environment. Lefebvre calls this never-ending process “writing a spatial code” - “not just a way of

reading and interpreting space, but rather a way of living in this space and also a way of producing it" (Lefebvre, 2015, pp. 47-48).

In 2020, people were finally able to choose places to gather, freedom to choose the name for this place, special symbols for every specific yard and neighborhood. The freedom to gather without fear of police and striking activism brought people closer to each other and contributed to their right to finally appropriate the city. Now, instead of gathering in front of Lenin on Nezalezhnasti square, people gather at the Square of Change, Square of Maria Kolesnikova and Square of Niny Baginsky, are now symbols of revolution and resistance to totalitarian regime of Lukashenko. The names that were given to each mentioned yard were chosen by residents, not by the government. People finally felt control over the territory, not that territory controls them.

Conclusion

The public space has never really existed in Soviet Belarus since 1945. Communist public space created in Minsk after was can be considered as false public space. The only aim of this space is to control and monitor citizen's life and prevent any social interactions. Before the summer of 2020, governmental officials limited the functionality of Minsk's public space and suppressed it. In Minsk, a new view and interpretation of urban space has emerged, including the appropriation of open spaces by city people who have begun to claim their right to them. The methods of appropriation vary, from hanging out in open places to arranging themed activities in yards, walks, and marches throughout the neighborhood.

Protests in local neighborhoods give people a chance to claim their own urban space in the city. For almost 30 years, the country was turned into an authoritarian paradise, praising Soviet leaders and flourishing great success of Lukashenko. Both main squares in Minsk were made intentionally badly for mass gatherings on purpose. Belarus is an autocratic country and there are many challenges facing the opposition, such as state-controlled media, a poor national identity and abusive state apparatus. Just two squares were broad enough to gather protestors, and to be close to the political center at the same time. These two squares, Kastychnitskaya and Nezalezhnastsi, present challenges to the opposition and reinforce the tactics used to remain in control by Lukashenko.

Between August and December of 2020, the opposition used new tactics – instead of an open protest in the main streets and squares, people started to revolt much more locally in the yards between the houses. It gave the residents of Minsk the flexibility, made the protest safer, and gave a chance to a better communication between the residents of the neighborhoods and even neighbors. Marches, courtyard activities, and mural making are the initial steps toward attaining the right to appropriation. With all that, residents of Minsk finally felt that they belong to their own city, in a way, they stood for the right to the city and its space.

Another achievement is, despite all the things and unsuccessful revolution to destroy Lukashenko's regime, the civil society emancipated itself. Lukashenko can crush it for four or five years, but new identities will never disappear. People of Minsk did acquire the right to the city. The activity of collectively creating district flags, paintings, courtyard names, and organizing courtyard events is viewed as a step toward exercising the right to participate. The recreational activities we have mentioned have, led to the formation of new identities for Minsk inhabitants related to their courtyard or neighborhood. The creation of these identities for the inhabitants of Minsk also contributed to their appropriation of the city.

The greatest product of the revolution is the emancipation of civil society. It was not a secret, that Belarus has the least developed civil society in Europe. Despite all scholar's predictions of civil society exclusively without the Lukashenko regime in power (Lenzi, 2002, p. 422), Belarusian civil society changed dramatically in 2020, as a result of their rapid growth and success. After Lukashenko declared himself the winner of the rigged August 2020 presidential election, apolitical engineers, fashion designers, and doctors joined a democratic movement to depose the disgraced president. Belarus's middle class created crowdsourcing platforms, marched, and showed up week after week. When Lukashenko's administration repressed protesters forcefully, civil society fought relentlessly to chronicle the state's atrocities and liberate political prisoners.

The protest caused a significant interpretation of urban space's role as a space for public life and served further to transform people's minds and perceptions of the city's space. As I am writing my thesis, a year after the creation of places, the governmental control and political repression escalated so much, that people were pushed back even from their own yards. Despite that, my work proved, that claiming public space is a new phenomenon for Belarusian society.

Resumé

Účel verejného priestoru vždy vychádza z otázky „pre koho“ a až sekundárne „na čo“. Verejný priestor je mnohostranný pojem, ktorý bol definovaný a spracovaný množstvom akademických prístupov. V Minsku, ako aj v mnohých iných bieloruských mestách, zostalo zo sovietskej éry množstvo veľkých námestí a priestranstiev. Mali to byť verejné priestranstvá pre ľudí, no zostali prázdne alebo slúžili skôr ako dopravné križovatky. Verejný priestor je definovaný aj ako priestor, ktorý je otvorený a prístupný ľuďom.

Verejné priestory v sovietskom období mali obmedzené využitie v dôsledku rozsiahlej politickej kontroly a permanentnému dohľadu. Sovietsky koncept verejného priestoru bol zahrnutý do niekoľkých plánovacích konceptov zo sovietskej éry. Podľa definície bol celý mestský priestor verejný v tom zmysle, že patril štátu. V sovietskych časoch, v každom sovietskom meste, od najväčšieho po najmenšie, neboli nekontrolované zhromaždenia na verejných priestranstvách vítané.

V post-sovietskych krajinách, ako je Bielorusko, takisto neexistuje tradícia oceňovania hodnoty verejného priestoru. Úrady interpretujú objavenie sa občanov na verejných priestranstvách ako výzvu, či skôr ako problém. Verejný priestor nemôže byť v súkromnom vlastníctve, ale paradoxne si ho prisvojila štátna administratíva a pokusy občanov o jeho využitie sa interpretujú ako problém až obštrukcia. Minsk nemá sovietsku identitu zapísanú do svojej „DNA“ iba v ľuďoch, ale aj v budovách, námestiach a uliciach. V Minsku je protestovať problematické, pretože mesto je zrkadlom Lukašenka a jeho úspechov a vplyv má aj propagandistický a oficiálny pohľad na históriu. Dve hlavné námestia (Kastychnitskaya a Nezalezhnasti) sú miesta, ktorým sa väčšina ľudí v každodennom živote vyhýba, vďaka čomu sú protesty pre mnohých ostatných obyvateľov takmer neviditeľné. Počas Lukašenkovho prezidentovania sa staršie, zavedené sovietske miesta, stali ešte autoritatívnejšími a menej priateľskými k ľuďom. Námestie Kastychnitskaya je geograficky najcentrálnejším námestím v Minsku. Od roku 2001 tam bol tiež štyrikrát inaugurovaný Lukašenko, symbolickým názvom námestia je Nezalezhnasti. Vo všeobecnosti,

Lukašenko a sovietska minulosť predstavujú veľkú väčšinu tých najdôležitejších črt mesta.

O tom, aké miesta sú prijateľné pre politickú masovú demonstráciu, rozhoduje najmä to, aby boli viditeľné pre štátnu administratívu. Zaujatie priestoru blízko miesta, kde sa prijímajú politické rozhodnutia, má symbolickú hodnotu, pomáha to demonštrantom vyjadriť, že verejný priestor v Minsku im patrí tiež. Pre mnohé opozičné protesty sa centrum mesta stáva pre chodcov nedostupné, ulice sú zablokované a doprava je zakázaná alebo úplne zastavená.

Reťaze solidarity boli prvou politickou akciou obyvateľov Minska po prezidentských voľbách v roku 2020. Ženy v bielych šatách robili pozdĺž cesty rady, zvyčajne držali kvety, aby zmenili spôsob protestu a upozornili na masové mučenie mužov v záchytných centrách. Je možné vysloviť hypotézu, že ženy zastavili radikalizáciu na uliciach. Deň nato úrady prestali ľudí mučiť a prepustili mnohých ľudí z miestnych záchytných centier.

Po desaťročiach tradície zhromažďovať sa iba v logických, no nepriateľských politických centrách ľudia zmenili stratégiu protestu. Po prvé, každú nedeľu sa veľa obyvateľov Minska zhromažďovalo v centre mesta. Počas protestov v Minsku sa ľudia sťahovali zo svojich domovov do centra mesta a odtiaľ do vlastných dvorov, prvé dvorové zhromaždenia sa objavovali v rôznych miestnych štvrtiach. Dôležitou formou protestu sa stali aj susedské pochody. Nikdy predtým ľudia nemali pocit, že „vlastnia“ alebo „patria“ k miestu, kde žijú. Ľudia boli motivovaní opustiť svoje domovy a riskovať svoje životy, pretože sa chceli „ukázať“ a nechať sa vidieť na verejnosti.

Každá miestna štvrť si dokonca vyvinula svoju vlastnú vlajku, ktorá symbolizuje najdôležitejšie prvky a históriu ich oblasti. Ľudia väčšinou jednoducho chodia po dvoroch a skandujú heslá a po pol hodine zložia vlajky, skryjú si ich pod kabáty a idú domov. Akcie sa spočiatku netýkali protestov, ale skôr spájania. Čajové večierky, párty, aktivity pre deti, niekoľko koncertov v podaní bieloruských hudobníkov, výlety po okolí. Celkový počet ľudí, ktorí sa zúčastňujú takýchto protestov po celom Minsku, hoci na rôznych miestach, možno počítat na tisíce. Bieloruská revolúcia bola kolektívna politická akcia, ktorú Hannah Arendt popisovala vo svojich knihách.

Zhromažďovaním v relatívne malých skupinách susedov si ľudia vytvárali vlastné miesta slobody pri zvyšovaní totalitnej kontroly štátu. Protestu sa mohol zúčastniť každý. Demonštrácie v Minsku v roku 2020 boli úspešné v ovplyvnení ich typických spôsobov interakcie s mestom a identifikácie medzier a tmavých oblastí, kde mesto zostáva hierarchické a odcudzené pre obyvateľov. „Právo na mesto“ sa vzťahuje nielen na právo obyvateľov okupovať mesto, ale aj na ich právo podieľať sa na rozhodovaní o jeho budúcnosti a upravovať svoje životné prostredie. Sloboda zhromažďovania bez strachu z polície a štrajkový aktivizmus zblížili ľudí a prispeli k ich právu privlastniť si mesto. Protesty v miestnych štvrtiach dávajú ľuďom šancu uplatniť si svoj vlastný mestský priestor v meste. Opozícia medzi augustom a decembrom 2020 použila novú taktiku – namiesto otvoreného protestu na hlavných uliciach a námestiach sa ľudia začali oveľa viac búriť lokálne na dvoroch medzi domami. Pri tom všetkom mali obyvatelia Minska konečne pocit, že patria k svojmu mestu, istým spôsobom sa postavili za právo na mesto a jeho priestor.

Napriek neúspešnej revolúcii, ktorej cieľom bolo odstaviť Lukašenkov režim od moci, sa občianska spoločnosť emancipovala. Keď Lukašenkova administratíva násilne potláčala demonštrantov, občianska spoločnosť neúnavne bojovala, aby zaznamenala zverstvá štátu a oslobodila politických väzňov. Nový formát protestu priniesol zmenenú interpretáciu úlohy mestského priestoru ako priestoru pre verejný život a prispel k ďalšej transformácii myslenia ľudí a vnímania mestského priestoru.

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