

Belarusian Professional Protesters in the Structure of Democracy Promotion

Enacting Politics, Reinforcing Divisions

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes divisions within Belarusian protest communities by focusing on a particular group: the professional protesters. In Belarus, this group occupies a crucial position in between the international structures of democracy promotion and the internal attempts of political mobilization against the politics of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Performativity as an analytical perspective is employed to define positionality of professional protesters in relation to other political subjects and within the system of democracy promotion. The article shows implications of neoliberal rationality for social and political changes for protest communities in Belarus. It argues that the financial assistance obtained by protest professionals, as well as non-democratic leadership style of the oppositional leaders, fills the Belarusian protest field with suspicions and accusations, add to a hierarchical and exclusionary way of participation in decision-making, and alienate activists from protest politics.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Belarus, democracy promotion, performativity, political protests, protesters, protest community, subjectivity

For more than 25 years, Belarusian political activists have been struggling to challenge the power of the current president, Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Studies of the dynamics of political contestation in Belarus have a certain pattern: they tend to analyze the Belarusian opposition in connection to elections (Ash 2015; Bedford 2017; Nikolayenko 2015, 2017; Silitski 2012, 2015) and consequently deal with the electoral protests (e.g., Korosteleva 2009; Navumau 2016). As elections are indeed the most active period of the Belarusian oppositional politics, this approach captures the general tendencies and gives the overall understanding of the Belarusian opposition. At the same time, it lacks certain sensitivity toward processes beyond and in between the elections and homogenizes the Belarusian opposition. This article strives to deepen the existing understanding of Belarusian protests and their actors by focusing on a particular position within the protest communities: professional protesters. My analysis aims to demonstrate how professionalization of protests creates divisions and dispossessions within the Belarusian protest communities. For this, I use the ethnographic data gathered between 2015 and 2017 in Minsk.

I started my fieldwork in August 2015, just a week after the last political prisoner at that time, and a presidential candidate in 2010, Mikalai Statkevich, was released from prison.¹ Upon his release, Statkevich organized a series of public protests in Minsk that aimed, as he often repeated, “to enlarge the space of freedom” (field notes, fall 2015). Regular protest actions were



in clear contrast with the period after 2010 when activities of political activists and groups were mostly suppressed.² However, as it became gradually apparent, the series of actions in 2015 did not provoke mass mobilization but were instead supported by the same small groups of activists.

This reality influenced the atmosphere of the protests and was ambivalently interpreted among activists. On the one hand, in conversations with me, participants admitted feelings of closeness and fun to be with “their people.” On the other hand, many of them were concerned about the marginal status of the political opposition in Belarus. The latter became even more emphasized in my interviews with former activists and indeed revealed an even more notable process formative of the Belarusian protest communities: the shrinking of activists’ circles and the professionalization or NGO-ization of the Belarusian political opposition. In the reflections of the former activist Yana, the disengagement is perceived as a natural process of growing out of the protest activities: “I witnessed the lives of many people. My generation, those once young activists, grew up and left, first of all, as it is an issue of aging, people started families, some started business. Thus, only those who do [political activism] as a main occupation stayed” (interview, 9 October 2015).

At the same time, other activists expressed a certain disappointment in relation to their former communities, quoting difficulties in having their opinion heard and barriers in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the activists discussed how the political repressions and perceived inability of the movement to bring political changes had an effect of exhausting the streams of new political activists and of disengagement of former members from oppositional organizations. These processes have not only reduced the activists’ numbers but furthermore transformed the structure of political opposition in Belarus that now predominately comprises of people for whom political struggles are their main job. All this, in turn, creates a condition of political dispossession (Kocze 2015)—the situation where political power is transferred from volunteers and grassroots activists to a narrow circle of protest professionals.

It is against this background that the financial support of international funds and foreign governments needs to be considered. As I strive to show in this article, the particular way democracy was promoted in the region facilitated a project approach (Sampson 2004) to political activism. This, in turn, had particular implications for the protest communities: high competition for limited resources and significant dependence on the external definition of the movement’s agenda. Strategies of actions associated with this approach challenged the solidarity and dispossessed the members of the political power inside the protest communities. My data consists of the field diaries describing the participant observation of different oppositional events (mostly, street protest actions but also public discussions and gathering) and 57 in-depth interviews with different oppositional actors focusing on their political involvement. All my informants are anonymized with pseudonyms while quoting them in the text.

Belarusian protest communities³ can be thought as a constellation of different subject’s positions that together constitutes Belarusian protests. Based on this definition, I analyze Belarusian protest communities not as a set of political parties and organizations but as complex relations between different protest subjectivities. I scrutinize these relations as they are perceived by the members of Belarusian protest communities themselves. I differentiate the protest subjectivities based on two factors that have also emerged from the data. The first factor relates to the depth of involvement in social and political changes and encompasses a continuum from protests’ supporters to activists. The second factor relates to participation in protests as a professional activity and includes such actors as journalists, civil right defenders, experts, and professional protesters.

In this article, I focus on the figure of the professional protester that I have defined empirically as a politically involved person known to the public (indicated, for example, by their recog-

dition by journalists, observers, and protest communities and their preventive detention by the police), having a distinct symbolic capital within Belarusian protest communities and an access to the protest economy. I use the concept “protest economy” to define a part of aid economy that is allocated for a specific purpose of democracy promotion. As the article will demonstrate, professional protesters embody the processes formative for Belarusian protest communities. The positionality of a professional protester in the field of Belarusian political opposition, as well as in the way they relate to the international structure of democracy promotion (Carothers 2009; Pikulik and Bedford 2018), allows me to analyze the implications of neoliberal rationality on the efforts of Belarusian protest communities to achieve social and political changes.

Performativity and the Grand Narrative of Resistance

In her book *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler defines protests as materialization of “the people.” In protests, “the people” no longer function as an empty signifier of a source of political power. She suggests “a plural and performative right to appear . . . asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field” (2015: 11). Furthermore, Butlerian theory of performativity points to ambivalent dynamics of street politics. On the one hand, social gatherings need, perform, and establish “we” as a certain ontological entity. On the other hand, the construction of “we” puts into play the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. Looking at protests as the enactment of the right to appear and the embodiment of “the people” should not foreclose reflections on social differentiation and inequality. This part of the Butlerian argument becomes an inspiration for my article that attempts to reflect on who can in fact appear in Belarusian protests. Butler calls for recognition of privileges and complexities of social vulnerabilities, when “some people fail to show up or are constrained from doing so; many live on the margins of the metropole, some are congregated on the border in refugee camps . . . , and yet others are in prison or detained” (166). I engage with these inclusions and exclusions while analyzing how “we” of the Belarusian political opposition and the figure of a professional protester in particular are constructed.

Furthermore, my analysis of professionalization of Belarusian protesters draws its insights from the scholarship on neoliberal transformation of social movements. As research shows, turned into attractive commodities, alternative ideas and practices become devoid of their political and transformative potential and in fact help maintaining the status quo (Brown 2015; McRobbie 2008; Rothe and Collins 2017). This tendency in relation to protest communities and social movement is conceptualized in terms of “corporatization of activism” (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014) and “NGO-ization of resistance” (Korolczuk 2016; Roy 2016; Sampson 2004). Scholars criticize co-optation of activism by a business approach that in turn hinders activists’ abilities to demand structural changes. As Arundhati Roy (2016: 335) puts it, “The NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job . . . Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary.” At the same time, implications of neoliberal rationality for the work on social and political changes depend directly on the geopolitical context. Indeed, most of the critique is voiced from advanced democracies (e.g., Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Rothe and Collins 2017; Roy 2016). The analysis of Belarusian protest communities should also take into account multiple dependencies that are formed as a result of power asymmetries in the global structure of democracy promotion.

Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen point out the dominance of one, “Western,” model of resistance functioning as a blueprint in the research and practice of social movements irrespective of their context, and define this as “the grand narrative of resistance” (2015: 517). The

authors argue that studies of non-Western resistance often reproduces dominant power structure by suggesting “Western brands of liberal democracy” as a universal path for protesters to follow and the main approach to define what resistance is. They caution against such thinking that takes for granted capitalist liberal democracy as an unquestionable value and political model to fight for: “We claim that the current colonial logic of domination strongly influences nonviolent action practitioners and researchers across the globe, seducing many to believe that there is no alternative to the colonizing model of capitalist liberal democracy” (518). In this article, I draw on the ideas of Chabot and Vinthagen to reflect on visions and practices enacted by Belarusian professional protesters. I strive to shed light on how struggles for democracy in Belarus are shaped by “the grand narrative of resistance” that is mediated through the international economy of democracy promotion. I am interested in the effects that this process aiming “to gain access to the *privileged Western side of the coloniality line*” (530) has for local protest communities.

Professional Protesters: Defining Features

The embodied “we” of protesters is never homogenous, and neither are the professionals involved in protests. As my data suggests, the need for a certain professionally performed work in the field of Belarusian protests became apparent with strengthening of state repressions against protesters in the 1990s.⁴ Every entry in my field diaries that is devoted to mass actions contains descriptions of different professionals busy at the event. These could be differentiated into protest professionals—observers (human rights defenders), independent journalists, experts—on the one hand, and professional protesters (opposition politicians) on the other.

The last group is the most ambiguous, as it is formed at the intersection of positionality of regular protesters and of professionals. Furthermore, the position of professional protesters in Belarus reflects two processes: shrinking of the political sphere under Lukashenka’s presidency,⁵ and professionalization of activism. Contrary to the first process, which is limited to local and to a certain extent regional frames, professionalization of activism is a global phenomenon. Researchers argue (Alonso and Maciek 2010; Kleidman 1994; Stoker 2006) that new resources and opportunities associated with international flows of capital, expertise, and technology engender formalization and institutionalization of informal grassroots initiatives. This in turn affects the preferred form and accountability of activism: actions shift from protests to more conventional forms such as cooperation and negotiations with the state, supported by donors and increasingly detached from the communities (Alonso and Maciek 2010; Roy 2016).

Limited political opportunities and professionalization of activism define specific features of those who have become drawn into the position of protest professionals in Belarus. On the one hand, the Belarusian politicians deprived of traditional political means (e.g., participation in the elected state bodies, negotiations with the government, etc.) to oppose the state policy rely on protest actions. On the other hand, like their international colleagues, activists of Belarusian political organizations have faced effects of professionalization of activism that differentiate their access to resources of the protest economy. Moreover, in the Belarusian case, state repressions against opposition activists and politicians raise their symbolic capital in the eyes of the international community, donors, and local activists but simultaneously also marginalize the most active part of the opposition within the society. In such a way, the gap between the professional activists and the broader community that already exists because of the process of professionalization (Alonso and Maciek 2010; Stoker 2006) becomes even more pronounced.

The first generation of protest professionals came out of the national movement of the late 1980s. At that time, several civil and political organizations (such as the Belarusian Popular Front, the Union of Belarusian Students, the cultural organizations Talaka and the Francysk Skaryna Belarusian Language Society), mobilized by anti-communist ideas and the (re)discovery of “the truth” about national history and culture appeared.⁶ Many representatives of the younger generation of protest professionals also have activist backgrounds and were involved in the oppositional youth organizations such as Zubr and Malady Front in the late 1990s and early 2000s. My data suggests that moving to the position of a journalist or a civil right defender is regarded as one of the demobilizing strategies of activists, while moving to the position of a politician (professional protester) is associated with deepening one’s involvement in the political contestation. In general, the boundaries between different subject positions within the protest communities are blurred and permeable. In this context, the positionality of professional protesters is an ethnographically informed definition reconstructing its most salient traits.

The defining feature of professional protesters is their direct participation in the protest economy, which ranges from receiving financial support for their work to having access to financial assistance in some special cases, such as paying fines they received for participating in the protests.⁷ The police attention concentrated mostly on the well-known activists, who, as a result, were fined for their every appearance at a protest action, while the rest of the protesters (including me) faced no consequences for their participation.⁸ In this situation, access to financial help for paying the fines, especially as many of these activists had no other jobs, together with the particular status of these protesters confirmed by the police and court actions, singled the professional protesters out from others.

It should be noted that financial issues were one of the most controversial themes in the field. On the one hand, references to “Western money” were often used by the authorities to undermine the sincerity of protesters’ intentions and fed feelings of distrust in politics in a broader public. Indeed, financial issues actually did play a role in disillusionment and disappointment in oppositional structures that several activists recalled in the interviews with me, whether or not stoked by the authorities. On the other hand, open discussions on this topic were also difficult to some extent for security reasons, as well as because of discomfort associated with personal financial issues more generally.

Compared to professional protesters, the protest professionals such as independent journalists, observers, and experts emphasize as tokens of their professionalism their guiding principle of objectivity, positing noninvolvement and neutrality toward any side of contention, and disinterest in gaining power. Although there are a number of issues that makes objectivity rather illusory, it is important to note here how this principle is enacted in the field. It is manifested through spatial separation from protesters, special clothing (e.g., bright blue vests marked with #Control.by) and other attributes and signs (e.g., visible badges of journalists, microphones and cameras marked with names of media), as well as particular practices (e.g., the task of counting protesters, reporting of protesters’ actions), as opposed to other activities (e.g., joining in shouting slogans, carrying flags and banners).

Professional protesters, on the other hand, engage directly in the actions and are motivated to change the power. Looking from the perspective of performativity, the figure of the protester, in general, is the effect of repetitive performances of dissent and of accompanying recognition of these performances as such. Yet others, with their various relations to protesting subjects, starting from support and ending with acts of repression, confirm these expressions of dissent and of protest subjectivities as such. At the same time, recognition of professional protesters has its specificity. Their mere appearance at a protest site puts into motion practices, expressions

reproducing their status inside the community. The following extract from my field diary illustrates this form of recognition:

The initiator of the protest appears in the square. He immediately becomes the center of common attention. Participants and journalists start gathering around him trying to come closer, to shake his hand, to express their support and happiness seeing him being free, to ask for a comment and to report his words. I notice a woman behind me who attempts to move forward in a quite dense crowd and says, "Let me see this courageous man." (Field notes, 23 September 2015)

This observation shows not only how positioning a person within a protest happens through interactions among different actors but also that recognition translates into symbolic power inside the assembling group. As my informants suggest in the interviews, the influence of professional protesters is measured by the quantity of activists loyal to them. In street actions, professional protesters perform their claim for status as they choose elevated places (stairs or monuments' pedestals) to stand; they are those who address protesters, lead a column in the case of marches, and stay for some time after a protest for concluding interviews.

These empirical features allow representing the position of a professional protester as a combination of symbolic and economic power within protest communities. In case their role is seen as more significant, these people are also called "a leader of the opposition," "a national leader," and "an oppositional politician." In this article, I use these notions together with "professional protester." At the same time, the notion of politician might be somewhat misleading if one thinks of strictly political ways of doing politics. The Belarusian opposition has no representation in the governmental bodies and parliament, and does not participate in state decisions. The only form of political activities open for the Belarusian opposition is elections, which offer no real chance to be elected. Therefore, some of my informants are critical of their colleagues who stand as candidates, legitimizing problematic elections this way. Many nevertheless invest their efforts in electoral campaigns that, because of the need to create the illusion of free elections, are to a certain degree tolerated by the authorities and therefore are the only possibility to engage with a broader public. Independently of the decision to stand for elections or not, all Belarusian oppositional politicians see international political bodies as mediators between themselves and the Belarusian state and attempt to influence the Belarusian government through their international partners. In what follows, I predominantly consider professional protesters as actors in protests and look at how oppositional politicians are engaged in street politics.

The Issue of Relationality: Professional Protesters within Belarusian Protest Communities

Oppositional politicians embody an alternative political perspective for Belarusian protest communities. Over the years of oppositional street politics, a calendar of traditional oppositional protests has been formed. It includes the procession to Kurapaty, a site of the Stalinist repression and a mass grave of its victims on the day of Dzyady (commemoration of ancestors on 1 November); the celebration of Dzen' Voli (Freedom Day), commemorating the declaration of independence by the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) on 25 March 1918;¹⁰ and the Chernobyl March (commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster on 26 April). For these actions, professional protesters decide on details such as the schedule, location, and major slogans, and apply to authorities for permission.

In the observed period, most of the protests in Minsk were initiated by professional protesters and exceeded the traditional yearly oppositional agenda. In such cases, protest organizers either adhered to other dates important for the Belarusian history (such as the date of disappearance of oppositional politicians in the late 1990, the date of acceptance of the Declaration of Independence) or used current events to set protest agenda and channel popular concerns (e.g., of the potential for another Russian military base in Belarus, or the introduction of a tax to “social parasites”).

While such activities appear unproblematic on the surface, immersion into different oppositional communities has indicated complicated relationships between the different parts of the protest communities, in particular, the leaders and the activists. As relationality is formative for positionality of any protest subjectivities, I will focus on how professional protesters relate to other subjects in protest communities. Relations to activists, who do mundane tasks for protest professionals (spread leaflets and other mobilizing information, collect signatures in case of petitions or for registration of a person for election, etc.), support and literally embody their ideas (e.g. appear in actions, chant slogans suggested by speakers, carry oppositional and organizational symbols), are especially instructive for a position of an opposition leader.

Since the oppositional communities in Belarus are quite small and built on informal networks, many activists’ stories about politicians are based on personal interactions and direct experiences. In the interviews, my informants usually characterize every leader individually. For the purpose of this article, however, I concentrate not on particular personalities but on positioning the figure of a professional protester in the protest community. Accumulating in the protesting circles since the 1990s, stories about opposition leaders are an assemblage of facts, emotions, and judgments.

These stories demonstrate how the shared mood of activists’ reflections about politicians is formed around broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. In these narratives, publicity and politicians’ ambition to lead are juxtaposed with the possible consequences of political involvement and the required emotional and practical labor of the activists. Moreover, by using “us versus them” construction, the activists distance themselves from the professional protesters. They position themselves as working *for* leaders, which alienates activists from protests’ goals and reduces the meaning of their own efforts. For example, “None of the opposition leaders can propose to activists anything but going to prison for their leader” (interview with Nasta, a journalist, 20 October 2015); “Us, young and active, work ourselves to the bone and those people—the leaders—reap the rewards” (interview with Artiom, an activist, 20 April 2016).

Professional protesters not only benefit from activists’ work but, furthermore, are seen to evade their part of duties. Politicians who may seemingly be on the same side as the rest of the protesters are instead represented as untrustworthy and unable in critical moments to confirm and enact their ambition to leadership. Discussions about political leaders (mostly about the oppositional presidential candidates of different years) bring to the forefront numerous examples where they abandoned their once desired position of leadership soon after the elections, not prepared to actually lead and sustain electoral protests, and even becoming involved in fraud:

Hancharyk [an oppositional presidential candidate in 2001 from the united opposition] said—not even the next day [but] the day of the election—“Thanks everyone, that is it, goodbye.” . . . The campaign was cool and fun, but it ended with a complete failure because the candidate himself said “goodbye.” . . . In 2006, Milinkevich [an oppositional presidential candidate] said thank you and goodbye . . . He had had enormous support, but many people who had been organizing the protest action on the election day became disappointed.

Many of them at that time were already in prison with me. They had given their best and ended up in prison and Milinkevich did not put their efforts to good use. On the election day, he ended the protest and let people go home.¹¹ (Interview with Ian, a former activist, 15 October 2015)

In 2010, of the nine oppositional candidates, only two¹² collected 100,000 signatures [necessary for registration as presidential candidates]; the others are simply liars. And those people called for a protest. We came to the square and the politicians were at a loss. Those guys didn't have any plan at all. When after a year since the event, some people were still in prisons, there was a discussion. And the politicians were asked directly: Did you have a plan in 2010? They said that we hadn't found a time to meet. (Interview with Miron, a former activist, 16 October 2015)

These oppositional leaders don't even bother to make leaflets; they call to journalists, "Come, I will be there," and that's it . . . It was evident for me that they had not been prepared [in the 2010 protest after the presidential election]—they didn't know what to do with the people, where to take them, and what to call for . . . There was no coordination between different leaders. And this is disappointing. This is dishonest. (Interview with Nasta, a journalist, 20 October 2015)

Abandoning the political ambitions by emigrating or changing career is another example evoked by activists talking about the oppositional leaders as rather absent political figures: "For many activists, Sannikau ruined himself as a leader when he had said that he would never leave the country, but a week after he left" (interview with Ales, 14 October 2015); "If one looks at the presidential campaigns, there were ten opposition candidates in 2010. Who has stayed in politics? No one, except Niakliaeu, Sannikau left the country"¹³ (interview with Anatol, 16 October 15). Regarding formal leadership in the oppositional structures, activists suggested politicians occupy their positions unfairly and for a length of time that should be considered undemocratic:

What can one do after being a leader of a party? There is nowhere to go, so one considers their task to be staying as the party leader until old age. As a result, we do not have rotation. Let's take one example, Liabedzka, who has led the party almost as long as Lukashenka has been in power. During the party's elections, he simply faces a puppet opponent and becomes reelected. (Interview with Polina, 3 November 2015)¹⁴

In the environment of threats and repressions for political actions, activists posit a demand for care and accountability as a defining feature of a leader: "We should have a leader who is more attentive and responsible for the people he¹⁵ asks for support from. A leader should talk with people, especially those who sacrifice themselves, who work for him and are not afraid. A political leader is not on his own" (interview with Zina, an activist, 10 November 15). This quote, as well as other similar reflections, is important because, in contrast with the distancing accounts earlier, it places professional protesters back into the protest community and clarifies what is seen to be the ideal relation between the activists and the professional protesters.

Compared to the generalizing and judgmental statements about politics as a set of dishonest activities and politicians as untrustworthy people typical to the discourse of depoliticization among activists and volunteers (see, e.g., Bennett et al. 2013; Eliasoph 1998), the informants quoted above present facts and have concrete indicators and details that explain their vision of the role of politicians. Furthermore, activists see their efforts as benefitting and needed for someone else—the leaders. Alienation that activists feel from their actions points to the process of political dispossession accompanying the professionalization of protests.

Professional Protesters Envisioning Protests

Internal divisions and power conflicts undermine performance of political leadership. When I started my ethnographic research, Statkevich, who had just been released from his five-year imprisonment that he had served without requesting pardon from Lukashenka, differently from other politicians, had the highest symbolic capital. As my informant Ian put it: “Statkevich is among the few politicians who deserves respect, because he was in prison for five years. Five years! . . . And he was not afraid, he didn’t ask for clemency. He came out as a hero” (interview, 15 October 2015). At first, other opposition leaders also showed a will to cooperate with Statkevich and during the protests in the autumn of 2015 they were standing side by side. But already in February 2016, signs of a new division became visible. Political leaders organized a series of separate protests dedicated to the same cause—the introduction of the “social parasites” tax; furthermore, the center-right coalition¹⁶ explicitly refused to join the Belarusian national congress initiated by Statkevich as an attempt to unite different opposition structures. These events have only confirmed the perception of the opposition politics as troubled.

Importantly, professional protesters themselves also shared a critical perception of their circle and the opposition politics in Belarus. The examples they provided: conversations and discussions with their colleagues they recalled have the undertone of useless struggles, tiredness, and disappointment that is very similar to what I found in activists’ narratives.¹⁷ Reflecting on their own positionality, politicians juxtaposed politics and the work suitable for civil society. This discursive frame became especially salient in discussions of celebrating the BPR’s centennial on 25 March 2018. This occasion was employed to differentiate the professional protesters and political structures calling for a protest march on the main Minsk avenue from those who agreed with the proposal of the city administration to celebrate the anniversary only with a concert, which would have been an officially permitted event,¹⁸ as opposed to the protest march.

Advocates presented a protest march on 25 March as a political action that all real politicians should insist on and participate in. A concert without a march was, on the other hand, seen as a betrayal of the real cause the opposition was expected to support, and the professional protesters promoting it were derogatively referred as “the concert opposition.” In his announcement “Political opposition has no right for Helsinki [*sic*] syndrome” published on Facebook and V Kontakte, Mikalai Statkevich, one of the most active proponents of street actions, frames this division among the Belarusian protest communities as follows:

Today, many people confuse the political opposition with non-political civil organizations and initiatives . . . What is normal and enough for the latter is absolutely not enough and sometimes not normal for the former. Transformation of the political opposition into the civil sector, preoccupation with small deeds, and the search of the leaders for approval from third-rank officials are morally corrupt and dangerous [activities] for the health of the whole nation . . . Apart from the concert we insist on the dignified march . . . which will be free from censorship of slogans and of expressions of people’s grievances and pain. (Facebook post, 3 March 2018)

Several moments in this quote are worth noting with respect to positionality of democratic politicians in the Belarusian protest community. The text raises the issue of what might be considered a political action constitutive of political agency. One of the recurrent arguments for the march was that it is a traditional form of celebrating Dzen’ Voli in Belarus. Providing the repressive state power and the fact that it does not recognize the BPR as its predecessor, limiting celebration to only the concert was seen by some opposition leaders as depoliticizing the event. The proponents of the concert insisted on pragmatic gain from the safety provided by the official

permission of the event to attract more people and through that spread the alternative political message. Therefore, while Statkevich's supporters perceive public protests as the only proper form of political contention, their opponents suggest using the limited opportunities for their purpose.

Two moments are instructive in the division between these two groups: their relation to the state bodies and the way they define what is political. The conflict between protest politicians and politicians who, as Statkevich believes, confuse themselves with civil society, plays out around interactions with representatives of the state power. The protest-oriented politicians claim the position of the opposition leader to be about continuous enactment of conflict that excludes negotiations and agreements with state officials. Furthermore, the discussions around celebration of Dzen' Voli reveal an attempt to enlarge the spectrum of political expressions of dissent that will not lead to the persecution of the participants.

What the concert organizers attempted to achieve can be analyzed from the perspective developed by James Scott (1985, 1990), and seen as acts of hidden resistance. Scott insists that concealed ways of managing power disbalance should not be dismissed from the analysis of political resistance for being incidental, self-interested, and ideologically immature. The case of the BPR's centennial celebration shows also how some protest professionals reject the political significance of everyday activism and small deeds. Partially, it can be explained by the fact that hidden resistance requires recognition of one's position as weak and vulnerable: this is not the status that protest professionals aspire to.

Paval Seviarynets, one of the leaders of Belarusian Christian Democrats, whose biggest concern at that time was to keep the political community united, later characterized this conflict in oppositional politics as a division between "heroic losers" and "respectable traitors" (field notes, 30 May 2018). This definition highlights an important aspect of the construction of political leaders in Belarus that resonates with activists' perception of the democratic politics discussed in the previous section. Neither of the options presented by Seviarynets is attractive for protest actors to engage with. Repeated requests for heroic actions are exhausting human resources on the opposition side as people become affected by repressions, while negotiations with governmental bodies that the activists distrust feed suspicions of moral corruption of the opposition politicians.¹⁹

International Structure of Democracy Promotion as Seen from Belarus

One of the factors defining professional subjectivities is that activities associated with or related to protest actions are performed as part of the formal occupation and involve a financial component. At the same time, as Cathy Shutt (2012) argues, interactions and interpretations that arise around the issue of financial aid are never straightforward and unproblematic. Similarly, while being an accepted part of professional activities in the case of protests, financial support to political opposition provokes ambivalent reactions. For some of my informants, remuneration functions as a dividing line between selfless service in the name of big ideas and pragmatic interests polluting these ideas and activities.

The financial support is discursively entangled with, first, trust of a group or a person and, second, the protest subjects' freedom of actions. Money is perceived as jeopardizing truthfully held values and principles guiding protester's actions and making them dependent on a donor. One of the first splits in the history of the Belarusian political opposition was connected to the radical rejection of the involvement of Western donors in the national struggles. In many of his publications, Zianon Pazniak, a founder of the Belarusian Popular Front and the leader of the

Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, an oppositional leader himself, calls other Belarusian politicians receiving international financial support “quasi-opposition,” “political businessmen” (*palitbiznesmeny*), and “political freeloaders” (*palitkhaliaushchyki*). Pazniak and his party members boycott all elections and do not cooperate on the party level with other opposition parties. The following quote by Pazniak (2016) is instructive of his vision of the issue:

The quasi-opposition does not have any ideas, except expecting a big freebie and adjusting to Western sponsors . . . All fuss around “a congress” [to decide on candidates and unify forces] and “unification” of these political businessmen of “democracy” is connected, as always, to the possibility of receiving Western money for the election to the Parliament. The West has promised to give [money] if they unite (because it is easier to finance). For the political businessmen it does not matter what elections they get money for, even for one to hell, it is the money [that matters].

In this quote, the Belarusian politicians are represented as being driven only by financial interests and as lacking political principles, ideas, and genuine values. It is worth noting that this discourse is also built on the assumption of the “West” being a homogenous political actor with suspicious intentions. In addition to popular distrust of the politics discussed earlier, here, a key figure for the Belarusian political opposition, Pazniak, links financial support, moral doubtfulness, and the idea of dirty politics to construct the image of a Belarusian politician—a view that he repeats often, thus reproducing a division of the opposition structures along the lines of being a recipient of foreign aid.

At the same time, my interviews with activists, journalists, and civil right defenders belonging to organizations castigated by Pazniak and his party provide evidence of awareness and criticism toward structures associated with the promotion of social and political changes. Some interlocutors were open about their concern with drawbacks on activism as a funded project. Referring to their experiences and observations, they maintain that the dominant format of project work subjugates the content and the ideas, as well as the expectations of donors, and that the pragmatism and a managerial perspective of applicants distort the priorities.

Another popular trope in these stories is that of “seminars in Vilnius,” symbolizing both what protest professionals do and the infrastructure created around the work for social and political changes in Belarus. The fact that the opposition meetings and training for Belarusian activists are mostly organized in neighboring Lithuania was initially motivated by safety concerns but currently has some ironic undertones. Several of my informants built their activist position in our conversations, explicitly articulating that they had never received any money or participated in trips and “seminars in Vilnius.” For these informants, “seminars in Vilnius” stands for a dubious performance of dissent present in the Belarusian protest field that drains the budget but has no noticeable impact on the situation in Belarus. Sergei’s discussion about his experience of cooperation with a civil rights defenders organization illustrates the issue: “I helped writing an application for a long-term project with good money. Later, although I knew that the project was active, I was not able to see any relevant public activities [in Belarus], except that the people responsible for the project were in Vilnius and ate in restaurants that they openly shared in their profiles in social network” (interview, 7 September 2016).

To a certain extent, this reflection might be seen in the framework of academic discussions on cooptation of work for social changes by the logic of business projects and influence of financial capital and corporations on activist possibilities (Brown 2015; Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014). This scholarship argues that it is precisely the merging of activism and the neoliberal economic model that hinders real structural changes (Brown 2015). At the same time, while recognizing

issues with sustainability and the ability of what they call “the economy of grants” (interview with Pavel, 5 November 2015) to reproduce itself in the field of Belarusian dissent, my informants tend to see the problem as arising from people’s greed and lack of political principles. As the activist Sergei concludes: “The opposition and the work with human rights are 90 to 95 percent a sort of business. The majority of people are not interested in real changes in the country because they want to continue this European financial flow” (interview, 7 September 2016). In a similar vein, Vital, another activist, wonders, “Why change anything if you are fed and have a good life? . . . They [opposition politicians] have visas and trips to Copenhagen and Stockholm” (interview, 6 September 2016).

While emically, the focus of my informants is on the potentially corrupt and self-interested financial activities of the protest professionals, analytically, it is revealing to recognize also how the neoliberal script of promoting democracy in nondemocratic countries interacts with the local actors. Drawing on the research on democracy inside protest communities (della Porta 2015) and the problem of Europocentric universalism in the vision of democracy (Chabot and Vinthagen 2015), I suggest there are two intersecting lines of inequality. These lines define tensions and controversies around financial support in the enactment of a position of professional subject in the Belarusian protest field. The first disparity exists between activists and those professionals who negotiate and distribute foreign aid for Belarusian struggles. This also includes access to visas, travels, daily allowances, and participation in seminars and meetings abroad, all of which contribute into the power position in the protest economy. The other dimension of inequality relates to positionality of local actors in the structure of international financial assistance. My informant Vadim, who was present at the meeting of representatives of Belarusian media in the parliament of one of the European states, uses the verb “begging” to describe the process (interview, 24 August 2016).

Alexei Pikulik and Sofie Bedford add a dimension that complicates the issue of structural inequality even further. Scrutinizing democracy promotion in Belarus, the authors describe another influential group, the implementers, often confused with donors, but in fact an intermediary between the donors and the recipients of aid. According to Pikulik and Bedford (2018: 5), as the local civil society is usually perceived as immature, international organizations and NGOs are invited to assist the Western donors and manage financial support. The implementers not only consume 50 to 70 percent of the allocated funds but also make the whole structure of democracy promotion rather inert and ineffective. Motivated to secure the future cooperation with the donors, the implementers tend to choose and then stick to predictable and already known local partners that in turn precludes new local actors to be funded. Moreover, the implementers prefer those projects that ensure smooth realization, therefore selecting what Pikulik and Bedford (2015) call “tame programs.” These priorities shift the focus away from the purpose of building democracy to the safety of implementers’ reputation. Analysis of democracy promotion in Belarus presented by Pikulik and Bedford resonates with the criticism of transnational power asymmetries put forward in the decolonial reflections on resistance (Chabot and Vinthagen 2015) and aid and development (Gardner and Lewis 2015).

“Western Money” in the Construction of Professional Subjectivities in Protests

While structural analysis of democracy promotion done by political scholars (Carothers 2009; Pikulik and Bedford 2018) is important, it gives a partial perspective without explaining how subjective choices and strategies animate this structure (Shutt 2012). I strive to rearticulate crit-

icism that is sound in the data and turn it toward the effects of financial assistance on the protest communities in Belarus. Indeed, the access to financial aid has an ambivalent impact on activists and professionals. On the one hand, protest professionals and some activists frame the issue as one of basic needs and a prerequisite for work. Anna, a former activist and current civil rights defender, exemplifies the point:

No revolution, no changes, and no infrastructure inside an organization can be done without money or a material base. The material base is important not because someone will line their own pockets, but we need infrastructure to give people basic things like a hot meal, transport, warm clothes and blankets, all that is connected to nonviolent resistance . . . People from small towns have lower salaries, if they work at all because of their activism. We need money simply to pay for their tickets [for travels to locations of seminars or other activities], to give them tea and coffee so they won't be hungry here. How to pay for this all? We need infrastructure. (Interview, 26 November 2015)

Contrary to the earlier examples in Anna's quote, financial aid is not presented as an attribute of professional subjectivities' performances. Instead, it is directed as an act of care to activists and to the process of social and political changes.

On the other hand, my interviews speak of different problems associated with practices of the usage of financial aid, from the distortion of democratic decision-making inside protest communities, or the issue of resource distribution, to the acts of buying loyalty of activists and parties. Possession of financial resources literally functions as an ultimate criterion of defining those whose voice is heard. Ales, an activist, explains how the decision to boycott the 2015 presidential election, which he himself disapproved, was taken:

Ales: "All ours involved in the presidential campaign gathered and we had many cool ideas to offer, but Warsaw decided on boycott. That was it."

A.M.: "Why Warsaw?"

Ales: "[One of the exiled Belarusian politicians] decided. How do we find [a gesture signifying the money]? We don't have anything" (interview, 14 October 2015).

This story is important in respect to power relations among different politicians and political structures. In the situation described here, the leader who had the money decided to support a particular campaign²⁰—boycott—disregarding other suggestions and leaving others no option but to follow that decision. Therefore, under the surface of what may look like a consensus of the opposition leaders hides internal dynamics of money as power, and one person's decision becomes the unified political strategy of the Belarusian opposition.

Another troubling example of the exercise of power through money was presented in different interviews in relation to engaging experienced activists and establishing new organizations. This practice is worrisome for my informants: the number of activists is limited, and if they are financially tempted to join another initiative or organization, this has detrimental effects for the existing structures:

A part of activists was literally bought [before the 2010 election]. [An organization] had a lot of money. Many people had been working for free for many years before, and it was understandable that after some time they wanted something for themselves. (Interview with Anatol, 16 October 15)

[An organization] in the 2010 presidential election was a force of evil. They destroyed a lot of what had been built, they bought activists with money, they did not recruit new activists, they paid more to those who were already [members of] the existing parties and movements.

They totally deformed the oppositional space and simply spoilt many people because they gave money without proper documentation. (Interview with Palina, 3 November 2015)

[An opposition leader] came to a small town, for example, Orsha, where they met Vasil, an activist of another party, and told him: “What about you become our member tomorrow and we would pay you monthly. Deal? At the moment, you have nothing, but with us, you will be paid.” The activist thought for a while and agreed. The same happened in other towns. Actually, already during the presidential election of 2006 these kinds of things happened, even if to a lesser extent, but anyway. A presidential candidate took the money and bought the party that was previously led by another politician. (Interview with Yauhen, 17 November 2015)

As the first and last quotes demonstrate, in these narratives, the pragmatic choice of activists is presented as mostly justified, and the discourse about them is rather apologetic. On the other hand, how the politicians aiming for national leadership use the money is discussed in very negative terms—as destroying the community and as a manifestation of evil (the second quote). This feeds disappointment and sometimes provokes disengagement from the movement and cynicism toward opposition politics (the last quote).

Thus, protest economy created by protest professionals fills the Belarusian opposition communities with suspicions and accusations, and defines an area of vulnerability in politicians’ positionality. Being included in the international structure of democracy promotion and therefore sharing some effects of transnational inequalities with other countries deemed nondemocratic, the Belarusian leaders and other actors controlling resources translate the neoliberal script in the work on political changes further to their communities. This reiterates the alienation of activists and undermines the ability to protest.

Conclusion

Subjectivity of professional protesters as it is defined in this article from the perspective of performativity has multiple dimensions. It is constructed in relation to other protest subjects, especially those enacting an activist position. Professional protesters perform a higher status that is confirmed by being recognized by others. Furthermore, their position is built on participation in the protest economy that simultaneously empowers and subjugates professional protesters. Access to resources available to professional protesters can support the work for common cause, but it also allows for application of unequal power inside Belarusian protest communities. Moreover, if the structure of financial support is taken into account, the position of “Western donors” brings in another dimension in this hierarchy of protest economy.

The context that sets the background for Belarusian professional protesters’ actions is complex. First, it concerns small and divided opposition communities in Belarus that cannot actually deliver the promised changes to their activists and supporters. Second, it creates general distrust toward politics as “a dirty business,” a phenomenon known as depoliticization, characteristic in contemporary societies more generally. Finally, it refers to the international system of democracy promotion that influences what is supported in the fight for a new political future in Belarus and other local contexts.

My analysis highlights several tensions instructive of the position of Belarusian professional protesters. To begin with, a narrow understanding of the political as expressed in high-risk activities of unauthorized marches reinforces divisions in the oppositional communities and triggers conflicted feelings among activists. Furthermore, although Belarusian politicians tend to cling to their post in the parties, on the national scale, ambitions to and performances of lead-

ership by politicians are rather short-lived. The position of “a national leader” is abandoned after every presidential electoral cycle, which only feeds cynicism and suspicions among activists and the broader public. In the interviews, the activists repeatedly challenge leaders’ ambitions that are seen to be based on pure performances of power, for example, keeping one’s position in a party and using big words such as democracy, Belarusianness, and the people. Instead, the activists emphasize codependence of activists and politicians. In reality, professionalization of protest alienates activists from their struggle that they become to perceive as the work benefiting predominantly protest professionals.

This article followed Butler’s (2015) call for attention to exclusions and power asymmetries created in the performative appearance of the “we” of the protesters. Moreover, informed by decolonial perspective on resistance presented in the work by Chabot and Vinthagen (2015), I extended this criticism to the international system of democracy promotion that adds another dimension to the hierarchy and in fact is unable to challenge the nondemocratic power (e.g., Pikulik and Bedford 2018). Instead, the project approach to social changes and professionalization of resistance, as the scholarship on neoliberal transformation of social movements indicates (Brown 2015; Roy 2016), create external accountability, dispossess protesters of political power, and lead to maintaining the status quo.

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■ NOTES

1. Statkevich was accused of organizing a mass riot on the day of the presidential election, 19 December 2010, and sentenced to six years’ imprisonment under Article 291.3 of the Criminal Code.
2. The only exception to the suppressed political life in 2010–2015 is a series of silent protests triggered by the abrupt economic crisis in the spring 2011. The social and political base of silent protests is that although political activists did participate, most participants were mobilized via social networks and explicitly refused any association with existing oppositional structures.
3. I use the plural form of “community” to emphasize the internal divisions, multiplicities of visions, and conflictual understanding of preferable forms and means of actions within the Belarusian opposition.
4. Not accidentally, some of the independent media and human rights organizations refer in their names to this particular time period: for instance, charter97.org (an independent media-resource) and spring96.org (a website of human rights organization Viasna that was originally called Viasna 96).

5. Three referendums initiated by Lukashenka in 1995, 1996, and 2004 significantly expanded the power of the president at the expenses of free and independent courts and the parliament, but their results were not recognized by international communities and local observers because of numerous cases of fraud and manipulations in voting process. Consequently, the strong executive power managed to push the opposition out from all state governing bodies (Frear 2018; Silitski 2015).
6. The discovery of Kuropaty—a place of mass execution and a burial site of the victims of Stalinist repressions on the outskirts of Minsk—by the historian and political leader Zianon Pazniak in 1988 had the biggest influence on development of the oppositional movement. Later, more places were found in Minsk and other Belarusian towns. Those discoveries fed anti-Soviet sentiment and are still evoked by the national opposition against Lukashenka's politics of integration with Russia and Russian politics in relation to Belarus that is seen as a continuation of the Soviet politics.
7. In the observed period, fines were the most frequent official sanctions (e.g., for participation in an unauthorized mass event) against the protesters.
8. In many cases, activists were informed about their administrative case post factum, as the police present noted their presence at the unauthorized event and proceeded with the case later. As a result, only the known activists could be targeted.
9. Statkevich was the only former presidential candidate who never signed request for pardon to Lukashenka during his imprisonment. Those who signed such appeal were released within months of their imprisonment. As many of my informants pointed out, they particularly respected Statkevich for his persistence and readiness to serve full sentence.
10. The BPR was declared in times of the German occupation of the Belarusian territory during World War I and existed until 1919, when the Red Army came to establish the Belarusian Soviet republic (BSSR). As the first attempt to announce the Belarusian state, the establishment of the BPR is a key historical event for the national opposition. But it is barely emphasized in the official historiography and current state discourse that build the Belarusian statehood on the legacy of the BSSR.
11. The missed opportunities to sustain protest (e.g., by organizing a protest camp on the day of election) were one of the recurrent regrets in the interviews. Both Hancharyk and Milinkevich suggested that people would go home, and ended the action on election day. In 2006, there was a tent camp organized by young activists who did not fall the opposition leaders' call to stop the protests.
12. This information was revealed later by Lukashenka and was presented as his gesture of support to democracy and competition. Importantly, this was admitted by the candidates themselves. It is recalled in other interviews as the moment of informants' disillusionment (one even quit the party for this reason).
13. The informant forgets to include Statkevich as a candidate who has stayed in politics after 2010.
14. Interestingly, in April 2018, the youth organization of United Civic Party made a public announcement that called for an introduction of a limit to the number of terms that one person can serve as the head of the party.
15. The informant uses the pronoun "he" to signify an imaginative leader.
16. The coalition was formed in 2015 and consists of the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Christian Party, and the Movement for Freedom.
17. For ethical reasons, as some of the stories were told on the condition of not being recorded, I do not give specific examples of conflicts that my informants provided.
18. To obtain official registration of any public event is important so that its participants are not prosecuted based on Article 23.34 of Administrative code of Republic of Belarus (participation in unauthorized mass events)
19. One of the figures that might be seen as a symbol of this kind of suspicions and distrust in the opposition circles is an agent—a person who pretends to share the oppositional views but in reality cooperates with the KGB (Committee for State Security—its name and function are the same as during the Soviet time). Although there were many stories on KGB agents, several of my informants acknowledged that preoccupation with exposure of agents is problematic in itself, creating an atmosphere of suspicions.

20. Any political campaign needs financial resources that are used, for example, for printing leaflets, stickers, etc.

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