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COUNTERING LUKASHENKA'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME: THE
STRATEGIES OF THE BELARUSIAN DIASPORA

MA thesis

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The author's declaration

I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

Kristel Birgit Potsepp / signature of the author /

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Abstract

This Master's thesis intends to research the ways in which the Belarusian diaspora is countering Lukashenka's authoritarian regime. After the fraudulent presidential elections and protests in 2020, the majority of the country's civil society has fled the country and the events of 2020 led to a new wave of politicised diaspora. To study the case, this research uses qualitative methods and process tracing. The sample consists of nine interviews: seven interviews with members of the Belarusian diaspora, one interview with a foreign affairs expert/diplomat and one interview with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The analysis is based on five main themes that emerged from the theoretical framework and literature review. The results of this study show that the diaspora is using three main strategies in countering the authoritarian regime: a) raising awareness and bringing attention to the cause; b) policy-making and lobbying; and c) supporting the Belarusians and political prisoners. Furthermore, the role of utilising the ICTs is crucial in supporting the activities of the diaspora and they are used as a 'liberation tool'. The main functions of the ICTs are a) communication tool amongst the diaspora and people living in Belarus; b) source of news and media awareness; and c) mobilisation tool. As a practical outcome, I have developed policy recommendations for Estonia and the EU based on the empirical findings of the thesis.

Keywords: Belarus, civil society, democratisation, Belarusian diaspora, ICTs, democratic transition, democracy, authoritarian regime

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I will conclude with the slogan of the democratic Belarus:

Жыве Беларусь! Elagu Valgevene! Long Live Belarus!

List of abbreviations

EU - European Union

ICTs - Information and Communication Technologies

USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CEE - Central and Eastern Europe

NATO - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

EaP - Eastern Partnership

Introduction

In 2020, tens of thousands Belarusians protested against the false elections and risked their lives and safety for their democratic aspirations. The civil society in Belarus rose up against the dictatorship after years of oppression. Instead of democracy, the Belarusians ended up in an “open air prison”, *de facto* occupied by Russia.

Many scholars consider Belarus as “the last dictatorship in Europe” and while the claim can be controversial, the current regime in Belarus is a clear security threat. The opportunities of Belarusian civil society are strongly restricted by the government, especially during and after the protests in 2020 against the faux election results which maintained Lukashenka’s authoritarian position in Belarus and launched additional repressive methods on the civil society. Furthermore, Belarus left the Eastern Partnership initiative in 2021 (European Council, 2022), which had a negative impact on Belarusian civil society and opposition movements as well as suspended official connections with the European Union and strengthened relations with Russia. On 24.02.2022, Russia started an ongoing war in Ukraine and Lukashenka’s government is a supporting actor in the invasion (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2022).

According to the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, civil society is connected with democracy, autonomy and protection of rights and freedom (Astapova, Navau & Nizhnikau, 2022). However, this definition can be argued – civil society and authoritarian regime can coexist and the dynamics between civil society and authoritarian regime are present in different forms. According to Riley (2010), civil society can support totalitarian politicians, however some ‘softer’ authoritarian regimes can be more tolerant regarding civil society and that can lead to regime change and democracy (Radcliff, 2007). Thus, when researching regime change and authoritarian regimes, it is important to concentrate on the role of opposition movements and civic activism. However, as the civil society of Belarus has fled the country after 2020, this research will focus on the Belarusian diaspora.

In 2020, many activists, opposition politicians and protesters were arrested and imprisoned and the civil society posed a threat to Lukashenka's regime. Glod (2021) argues that the European Union should not only concentrate on sanctions but also support the activities of Belarusian civil society. According to Lokshina (2021), the aftermath of the protests and

elections in 2020 can be considered Lukashenka's war against civil society. The government has control over media and media representation, jury system, military, police and is actively repressing the activity of activists and opposition. The Belarusian government's goal was to suspend civil society and connected organisations which included at least 53 NGOs. Human rights activists were also imprisoned (Lokshina, 2021). At the same time, civil society and opposition remain active. However, their essence has changed. Most of the activists have fled Belarus and continue their activities outside the country. As public protests in Belarus are highly dangerous, Belarusian civil society is finding new and safer ways to oppose the regime, one of them being in exile. Opposing the regime from the outside has not been widely researched in the case of Belarus and this thesis intends to contribute to that field of research.

Authoritarian regimes and civil society movements have been previously researched in the context of the Arab Spring. Brownlee (2015) highlights the importance of concentrating on the communication methods and criticises the lack of this narrative in academia. Hence, I will also concentrate on the ICT methods, including the ways in which Belarusian activists outside and inside the country interact and use online activism. This Master's thesis intends to find out the strategies the Belarusian diaspora is using and the challenges with opposing the regime from the outside. Furthermore, this research intends to develop policy recommendations for Estonia and the European Union. Those recommendations are based on the empirical part. The issue of managing the situation in Belarus is on top of the agenda for both Estonia and the EU. Hence, from my experience and the interviews, I will develop applicable policy recommendations that might be relevant for the decision-makers.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Civil society in democratisation

The role of civil society in the process of democratisation can be arguable. Among academics, there are different views on this matter – while some argue that civil society is crucial in opposing authoritarian regimes, the others oppose and criticise the illusion of civil society alone demolishing an authoritarian regime. In Belarus, the massive protests in 2020 can be considered as a peak in civil society movement against the regime of Lukashenka. However, the dictator’s power remains there and the outcome of the protests for democracy is quite the contrary – the civil society in Belarus is more repressed than ever and the restrictive regime continues. Hence, in the case of Belarus, the mainstream approach is not applicable. In the first section, I will give a theoretical overview about civil society and its role in democratisation.

The concept of civil society – or defining it – is not absolute. There are many different approaches, many of them contradicting themselves. Furthermore, the mainstream definition has shifted and hence made the concept even more diverse. The most general and common definition of civil society is that it is a “realm between state and family” and in order to separate the concept from society in general, civil society is defined more precisely as “citizens who act collectively in order to promote or defend their interests towards the state” (Diamond, 1999). However, as mentioned, civil society carries more dimensions into it than before. Originally, the main actors in civil society were trade unions, however, with the changes in society, it is more broad. Civil society now consists of different movements and groups, for instance student movements, women’s rights activists, human rights activists, NGOs, etc. Within the process of internationalisation and the rise of international organisations, civil society has also gained a “*transnational dimension*” (Uhlin, 2001). A considerable amount of the Belarusian civil society has shifted outside of the country. However, the transnational dimension in civil society might not be applicable in this case. Once a vibrant civil society with different movements (Astapova et al., 2022) has been shut down and on the contrary to the continuing fight for democracy abroad, the national aspect of civil society is largely repressed. Here, the country’s civil society is turning more into an *international* than a *transnational* phenomenon.

The theoretical framework of the term 'civil society' is originated from Alexis de Tocqueville, although one can also trace its roots to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, more precisely to the concept of romanticisation of "the people" as a "force for collective good, rising up to assert the democratic will against an evil autocracy" (Diamond, 1994). When it comes to a more 'modern' approach, Diamond (1994) argues that the term "civil society" was gaining popularity during the late 20th century when the third wave of democratisation took place. For instance, the nonviolent movement of "people power" was part of reclaiming the stolen elections in Manila and different groups of people fought against corruption and authoritarian states in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America (Diamond, 1994). However, that is not the norm. Most of the democratisation processes have taken place through negotiations and led by the authorities, however that type of democratisation often has still some origins of grassroots movements (Diamond, 1994).

The mobilisation of civil society has played a role in the democratic change in the cases of South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Poland, China and South Africa among others. Diamond (1994) argues that the extensive mobilisation of civil society in (but not only) previously mentioned countries was a crucial source of pressure for democratic change. Furthermore, he states that the power was not in the hands of an individual but in different social groups and movements such as trade unions, human rights organisations, media groups, student groups etc. Diamond (1994) argues that to comprehend democratic change around the world, one must study civil society. However, the romanticised role of civil society in democratisation can be arguable in the case of Belarus.

Transition to democracy is often analysed in the framework of four (4) major events: 1848 revolutions, 1989 collapse of communism in Europe, 1998-2005 postcommunist colour revolutions and 2011 Arab Spring (Hale, 2013). Hale (2013) argues that research on these four events shows that cascading can occur in either protesting for regime change or in case of revolution, however these seldom lead to actual long-term regime changes. According to Hale (2013), regime change cascades often have the following prerequisites: (a) there exists a common frame of political reference, (b) unpopular leaderships are becoming lame ducks (ibid.); (c) elites lack other focal points for coordinated defection, and (d) structural conditions supporting a new regime type are in place. However, the previously cited author argues that cascading can lead to rather hybrid regimes or autocracy than democracy.

According to Diamond (1997), various types of civic organisations play an important role in affecting whether regime change will occur as well as how it will occur, either violently or peacefully, gradually or abruptly, to democracy or to some new authoritarian or hybrid regime. Diamond (1997) also highlights the importance of elites when it comes to democratic transitions, more specifically, the elites affect the new potential presence of democratic institutions and governance. Furthermore, Diamond (1997) argues that the regime change is affected not only from the commitment to democracy in theory but also the ability to perform politically, form coalitions, mobilise public support and respond to public pressures. According to Whitehead (2002), democratic transition insists on a political community respecting democratic aspirations, furthermore, the same community has to be responsible for political participation after the regime change. That impacts the stability and general direction of the democratisation process. Przeworski (1986) argues that a regime begins to crack if the ruling bloc needs to go outside for support as the regime is not cohesive or controlled enough. Furthermore, the author argues that most dictatorial regimes have fallen either in an external or civil war and the first critical milestone in the transition to democracy is the ruling group to obtain support from external forces.

2.1.2 Limits of democratisation

This chapter first offers a historical context about Belarus to give a deeper understanding of the country's political, social, and economic development over time, and how these factors have influenced the current regime. Understanding the historical context of Belarus enables identifying patterns and trends in the country's political and economic systems, which can shed light on the current regime's structure. Furthermore, the historical background will highlight key events that have shaped the country's political culture and ideology, as well as the role of external actors – such as Russia and the EU – in Belarusian history. Contextualising the current regime in a historical sense can develop a more nuanced understanding of the challenges of Belarus. Then, it will look at the democratisation through its limits in the context of the current regime in Belarus.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union and the big wave of democratisation in the 1990s, most of the previously occupied countries took a path towards democracy and ‘the West’ while shifting away from Russia. While the CEE countries successfully went through the

process of democratisation, several countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood still struggled with corruption, Russian-minded politics and socio-economic challenges. In 2020, during the massive protests in Belarus against the false elections, Belarus was considered as a reminder that the Soviet Union is still collapsing (Viačorka, 2020). Viačorka (2020) argues that after the collapse of the USSR, Belarus remained loyal to the mentality, symbols, traditions and narratives of the Soviet Union and the Soviet past is still strongly integrated into the country, specifically Lukashenka's government. Furthermore, according to Viačorka (2020), Lukashenka has turned Belarus "into his very own miniature Soviet Union" as he has rejected any aspirations towards democracy which includes rejecting the Belarusian language, the white-red-white flag and the country's traditions. After 1991, countries like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine faced similar challenges to Belarus with fighting the Soviet legacy and Russian colonialism, although, Belarus is the only country that is entirely *de facto* occupied by Russia and considered a 'puppet state' in 2023 ruled by – often considered – the last dictatorship in Europe.

Next to the Baltics belonging to NATO and the EU, Moldova and Ukraine as member candidates for the European Union in 2023 and the war for democracy and freedom in Ukraine, one can argue that Belarus has failed the democratisation process. Conceptualising Belarus through the lens of a strong civil society that opposes the regime from within has turned into a utopia after the failure of protests in 2020. The opposition and the country's civil society fought for democracy, yet Belarus ended up as a concentration camp. To explore the reasoning behind the failed democratisation process in the country, one must examine the limitations of democratisation.

One of the arguments could be considered as simply the geographic location of Belarus (Mantchev, 2016). However, that argument can be disputable as the country's authoritarian regime has remained firm and has seen little development, whereas the political environments in other post-communist countries strongly differentiate from Belarus (Mantchev, 2016) despite the geographical aspect being a common denominator. The static authoritarianism in Belarus can rather be explained through a historical examination which additionally examines Belarus' tight connections with Russia (Mantchev, 2016). According to Mantchev (2016), the latter is a result of a combination of political violence, long-standing absence of independent statehood and demographic change.

Similarly to other Eastern European countries, Belarus has been occupied and annexed for several periods of time through history – mostly by Russia. During the Soviet occupation, similarly to 2023, the USSR accused Belarusians of being ‘fascist’ and ‘nationalist’ and intended to destroy any sort of national identity by targeting different groups in Belarus (Mantchev, 2016). The process of Russification which tried to eliminate the Belarusian national identity also focused on destroying connections and shared culture with the Poles and Baltic nations (*Ibid.*). Again, similarly to other CEE countries, Belarus faced occupation by the Nazi Germany and after World War II, it once again became occupied by the USSR. When some countries under the occupation – such as Estonia or Armenia – managed to retain their distinct ethnicity, Belarus’s identity and culture were significantly more Russified and the country’s national identity was fragile (Mantchev, 2016). To be more precise, countries like Estonia managed to retain their identity, whereas Belarus was rather a Soviet administrative region. Due to the severe impact of Soviet Russia, on the contrary to most of the occupied countries, Belarus did not strive for liberation nor democracy. According to Kozlowski (2014), a referendum held in 1991 with a turnout of 83.%, 82.7% of people were in favour of the continuation of the USSR. While most of the previously occupied countries celebrated their freedom and took a course for democracy, Belarusian independence was not rooted in social movements and desire for liberalisation as the country was firmly connected with Russia both economically and socially. Hence, any political opposition was not successful to compete with party members rooted in the USSR.

In 1994, the first (and last) democratic presidential elections were held in Belarus. Alexander Lukashenka won the elections as the voters considered his plans with Russian integration more coherent than his opponents (White, Blatt & Lewis, 2003). The main opposition party was the Popular Front which tried to separate Belarus from the Soviet agenda as the party considered it a threat to Belarus’s sovereignty. Although, after Lukashenka won the elections, he soon restored the Soviet symbols and established Russian as an official language next to Belarusian, furthermore, the national anthem and flag colours were also changed to present Soviet symbolics (Mantchev, 2016). During the 90s, Lukashenka eliminated any existing opposition and established his authoritarian regime with his comrades. Ironically, Belarusian democracy peaked during the 1994 presidential elections which ended up as an authoritarian regime.

Democratisation is generally defined as a long-going process with multiple stages where an authoritarian regime transforms into a democratic one, and the process involves the system of power as well as the society (Wnuk-Lipiński, 2007). According to the previously mentioned author, the process consists of three phases: a) transition; b) consolidation; and c) institutionalisation. When looking at those phases in the context of Belarus, the country is far from the first stage of democratisation. However, the situation is different when looking at the actions of the Belarusian diaspora. The role of the Belarusian diaspora can be seen as a democratic opposition against the actions of the country's authoritarian regime, as well as a "force to build a vision of a new Belarusian nation, a transnational political community based of democratic values and civil society" (Jaroszewicz, Lesińska & Homel, 2022). According to Brubaker (2005), the diaspora is attempting to influence the political situation in their home country, particularly when the reason for leaving is political. Furthermore, Jaroszewicz et al (2022) argue that the modern national thought can develop in exile, for instance with the case of the Irish diaspora in the United States of America with their idea of a nation in modern Ireland.

According to Koinova (2009), the diaspora members who are living in a democratic country are often more involved in the activities supporting the democratisation process in their home country than those who are living in countries with other regimes. The diaspora can support the process of democratisation by promoting their agenda, principles and democratic institutions but also by focusing on the national traditions (Jaroszewicz, 2022). The diaspora has an important role in the democratisation process, nevertheless, according to Bedford & Vinatier (201), the diaspora does not necessarily aim to overthrow a dictatorship. Instead, it rather focuses on the gradual process of "authoritarian erosion" by establishing a credible democratic alternative.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 Civil society in Belarus

Civil society in Belarus is often considered an oxymoron. The presence of civil society usually presumes the presence of democracy, yet, some variations of civil society can exist in an authoritarian state. In the latter case, or in hybrid regimes, civil society can surely exist

only to some extent, especially under the rule of a dictator who has been in power for almost 30 years.

During the first decades of the 21st century, the Belarusian civil society was rather depoliticised until 2020 where the country's civil society strongly reacted to the presidential elections (Astapova et al., 2022). The importance of these protests can not be underestimated. For a country with such a deep rooted post-communist history and political environment, decades of repressing the national identity of Belarus and political violence, these protests were unprecedented and are considered a leap from apolitical to political activity. To illustrate the development of civil rights, freedom and civil society, Figure 1 clearly indicates how the elections in 2020 drastically decreased every aspect related to human rights or freedom in the country. After the 90s, almost 20 years of no remarkable change, the Belarusian people raised against the dictatorship and the government declared a war against the civil society and their hopes for democracy.

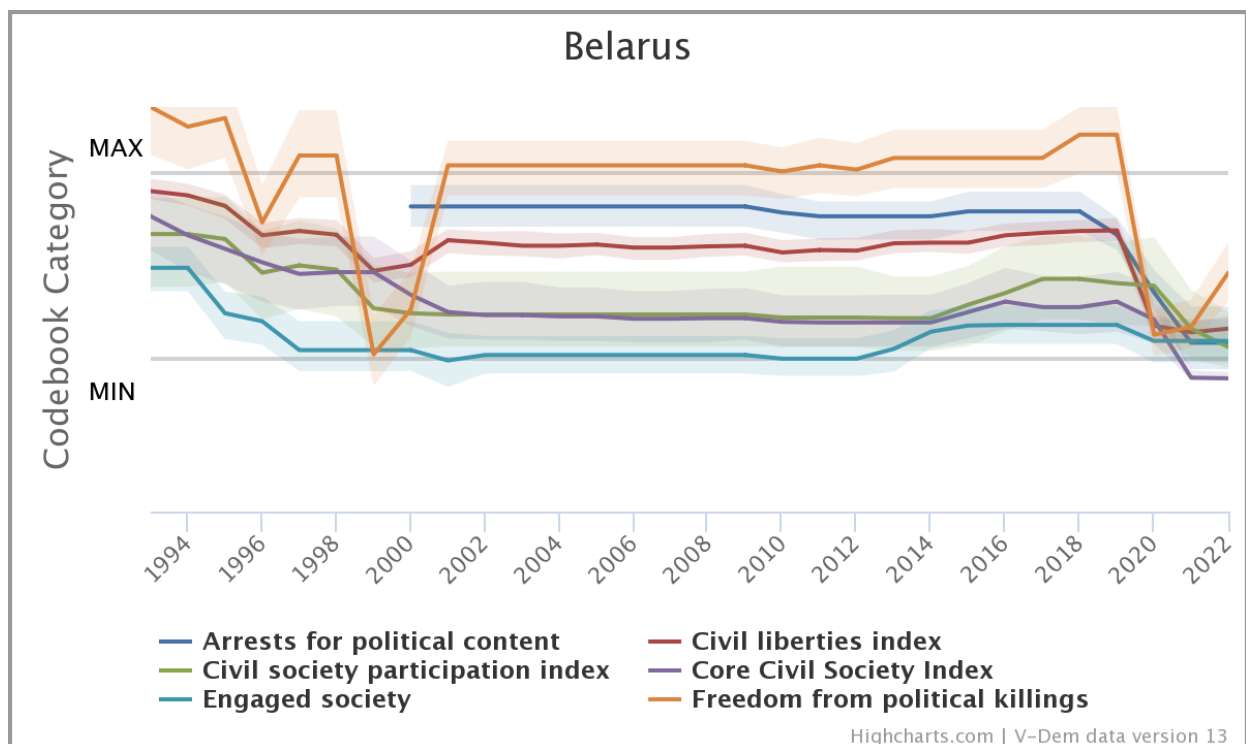


Figure 1. Variables regarding civil society, rights and freedom 1994-2022. Source: Graph made by the author based on data in V-Dem

The massive protests in 2020 were not merely a result of the unfair elections. By then, Belarusians had the same dictator for 24 years and they had experienced many false elections.

It was a result of years of oppressed dissatisfaction with the country. During the first decade of the 2000s, political rights and freedoms were exchanged for economic stability (Astapova et al., 2022). In 2006, a survey by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) showed that over 70% of the country was satisfied with the economic and political situation in Belarus (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2006). However, the economic crisis in 2008 left the Belarusian people dissatisfied with one of the key elements of stability in the country – the country faced several difficulties in recovering from the crisis. The economic stability as a pillar of stability was now gone and life satisfaction dropped to around 50% in 2010 and 40% in 2016 (Astapova et al., 2022). The dissatisfaction with the economic situation in the country was more arduous to control and suppress than the politically motivated and isolated protestests (Astapova, et al., 2022). Hence, the economic distress was one of the triggers that released the long suppressed civil society and the decrease in general satisfaction led to the civil society becoming more politically involved. After 26 years, the regime began to face severe challenges for the first time. The government aimed to remain its control over the population by establishing new ways of repression and ‘renovating’ its control system, which includes monitoring of landlines and mobile networks, social media and the internet and different ‘cyber protest’ prevention tools (Lysenko & Desouza, 2015; Prospieczna & Galus, 2019). The new repressive methods were directly targeting civil society organisations in Belarus (Amnesty International, 2016).

According to the United States Agency for International Development (2021), the civil society of Belarus has returned to survival mode after the events in 2020 as many – if not most – of the organisations have been forced to close and a considerable amount of the activists have left the country. As of Spring 2023, there are 1496 known political prisoners in Belarus and many of them are students (Penov, 2023). With the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, there have been cases where the Belarusian activists sabotage the Russian supply lines which are going to Ukraine through Belarus, and as a reaction to that, the Belarusian government has imposed the death penalty (Penov, 2023). In May 2023, the dissident journalist Roman Protasevich was sentenced to eight years in prison which shows that Lukashenka is actively continuing his pattern of violent governance.

The civil activists that have fled from Belarus are actively working with local civil society organisations and after the full-scale war in 2022, the focus has also been on Ukraine and working with the Ukrainian diaspora (Penov, 2023). According to a civil society activist Tony

Lashden (Penov, 2023), the Belarusian civil society organisations are supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians with evacuation, advocacy and direct aid. Here, the previously cited activist also highlights the importance of informing the public about the situation in Belarus. Furthermore, the activist highlights that the experience of the democratic Belarusians has been traumatising, humiliating and dehumanising as they have experienced arrests, state persecution and forced migration. The Belarusian community has been actively fighting for the political prisoners in Belarus but there are higher hopes on the EU to act on these crimes of the Belarusian regime.

2.2.2 ICT revolution in civil society

Using ICTs (information and communication technologies) in opposing authoritarian regimes has not been widely researched, though it has become more popular during the last decade. Opposed to organised anti-government mass actions and protests, the research about usage of ICTs to oppose the government still remains insufficient. Stein (2017) argues that the Internet can be an avenue for virtual protests, but not only. The Internet can serve as a tool for mass mobilisation, especially for transnational social movements (Stein, 2017). With the new opportunities provided by the Internet and social media, scholars have argued that ICTs (social media, media, etc) could become a “liberation technology” (Kulakevich, 2022).

Opposition parties in (semi)authoritarian nations, where the incumbent authorities wield control over democratic processes like elections and their outcomes, may perceive revolutions as the only viable way to bring about change (Lysenko & Desouza (2015). However, during the last decade, skillful and imaginative utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has played a crucial role in their success, especially in (semi)authoritarian states in the former Soviet Union (Lysenko & Desouza (2015) and the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Moldovan protests of April 2009 are excellent instances of this. Specifically, ICTs are essential for surmounting the censorship of alternative information enforced by non-democratic regimes and for organising and mobilising oppositional groups.

Another example of using new media in authoritarian regimes is the case of regime-destabilising protests during the Arab Spring (Stein, 2017).

Autocratic leaders have different approaches regarding the ICTs. The ICTs present a potential for mobilising the people against the government and are often perceived as a threat, hence many authoritarian leaders have restrICTed access to the Internet and ICTs. However, the ICTs can also be beneficial for the regime. According to Morozov (2011), the Internet helps the authoritarian regimes to filter content and monitor users as well as their online activities, and can make it easier to track people. Furthermore, access to the Internet can contribute to the economy. Hence, the role of ICTs in authoritarian regimes can vary.

2.2.3 Belarusian diaspora

The diasporas are identified as part of the homeland national community (Shain, 2003). The role of the diaspora as a transnational player in the process of conflict resolution or peace processes is often underestimated (Shain, 2003). Furthermore, diasporas are important players in politics and economics as well as the national identity in their country of origin (Shain, 2003). In this research, the focus is on the Belarusian diaspora, more specifically, the politicised diaspora which emerged after 2020. One can suggest that the case of Belarus represents a civil society in exile, however, the diaspora includes not only civic activists but also other people who have left the country before 2020 due to economic reasons as well as people who fled the country after 2020 but are not active. The more common approach is looking at the fled Belarusians through the lens of a diaspora. Furthermore, the term ‘Belarusian diaspora’ is commonly used in academia and this chapter intends to introduce the background and previous research about the Belarusian diaspora.

Diaspora is often researched in the context of African and Latin-American countries, however the Belarusian diaspora has not been widely researched, especially after 2020 when the political situation in the country changed drastically and most of the opposition, activists and human rights advocates had to leave the country. According to Neelen (2022), the Belarusian diaspora is a heterogenous group which was formed after the elections in 2020. Hence, the diaspora as it is now and in the context of this thesis is quite a new phenomena.

According to Neelen (2022), the Belarusian diaspora is a heterogenous group due to their different views on long-term interests. The diaspora is united in opposing the war in Ukraine and deposing Lukashenka, however, the group has different opinions about the future of Belarus. For instance, some of the differences include opinions about Sviatlana

Tsikhanouskaya – someone who is both unifying and polarising among the diaspora – and pursuing democratic and liberal values in Belarus (Neelen, 2022). More precisely, the diaspora has different beliefs whether the change towards a more democratic and liberal Belarus should be nonviolent or more radical, and future relations with Russia, as the latter is the main economic partner of Belarus (Neelen, 2022). These issues might now be relevant in 2023 due to focusing on rather short-term goals, however, the lack of a long-term strategy is a challenge. The long-term goals become relevant when Lukashenka is removed from power.

According to Neelen (2022), the main goal of the diaspora is to achieve short-term goals to fight against the regime of Lukashenka. The Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania does this through protesting, media attention, fundraising, cultural activities and advocacy (Neelen, 2022). The diaspora is part of the Belarusian opposition and is rich in human resources, since it contains mostly activists, NGO leaders, and other politically active people. Even though there are differences in future perspectives, generally the diaspora is united and they share a vision for democratic Belarus.

After 2020, approximately 150 000 Belarusians have fled the country and that has created a new wave of the Belarusian diaspora (Kulakevich, 2022). According to Kulakevich (2022), the diaspora plays a key role in addressing the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people. Furthermore, the new wave of diaspora caused by the political crisis in Belarus has led to politicisation of the diaspora, which is a new phenomena in this context. Kulakevich (2022) states that the ongoing political activity of the Belarusian diaspora is an evidence of the new Belarusian solidarity and highlights the importance of the Belarusian democratic movement outside the country. The political uprisings of 2020 in Belarus had a profound impact on the Belarusian diaspora, triggering a widespread mobilisation and leading the emergence of new organisations dedicated to assisting the Belarusian people (BiPart, 2021). The activities of pre-existing Belarusian organisations operating abroad, particularly those focused on human rights and other civil-political issues, became more active as a result of the events in 2020. The Belarusian diaspora organisations are involved in a broad range of activities, including providing humanitarian aid, helping Belarusians find housing, providing legal and integration assistance to those who arrive in foreign lands, supporting political prisoners and their families, developing tailored programs for certain groups like journalists, advocating for a Belarusian agenda, and organising a variety of politically and culturally

oriented events (BiPart, 2021). This means that these organisations pursue diverse objectives and operate in a variety of different areas relating to Belarus.

BiPart's (2021) findings suggest that leaving Belarus does not necessarily mean abandoning the current political agenda. Belarusians who departed the country after the summer of 2020 remain engaged with developments in their homeland, actively participating and, in some instances, coordinating support efforts. They often join organisations and initiatives that provide assistance to fellow Belarusians by imparting their experiences and knowledge, acting as a form of peer counselling. Nevertheless, there are some individuals who emigrated, particularly those who left immediately following August 2020, who either due to burnout and psychological trauma or other daily responsibilities, disengage from following events in Belarus and do not take part in any Belarusian initiatives in their adopted country.

The diaspora members are facing many challenges in integrating to a new country. Penov (2023) highlights the importance of the legal status of Belarusians who are living in the EU and the status of the Belarusians is often dependent on the political will of the host country. There is a lack of legislation in the EU Member States and Penov (2023) argues that the diaspora members need social support and rehabilitation and suggests that the EU should provide a safer environment for the political migrants and recognise the specific status of those.

Jaroszewicz, Lesińska & Homel (2022) have researched the Belarusian diaspora in the framework developed by Alfred Stepan (1997), based on the six functions of the democratic opposition. Those six functions are the following: 1) staying in, or coming into, existence; 2) resisting integration into the regime; 3) guarding zones of autonomy against it; 4) disputing its legitimacy; 5) raising the costs of non-democratic rule; 6) creating a credible democratic alternative (Jaroszewicz, Lesińska & Homel (2022); Stepan (1997).

According to Jaroszewicz, Lesińska & Homel (2022), as a response to a wave of repression in the country, the Belarusian diaspora adopted the role of the opposition and became a symbolic representation of the democratic section of Belarusian society. The authors identify three key areas in which the diaspora acts as a democratic political force, simultaneously fulfilling the functions of a democratic opposition. The first area involves socio-political mobilisation, including activities such as mass protests and social media use, which allows

the diaspora to maintain zones of autonomy. The second area involves the creation of stable opposition structures of political representation, primarily through international activities that dispute the regime's legitimacy, raise the costs of non-democratic rule, and publicise the regime's crimes. The third area involves conceptualising a democratic future for Belarus, directly related to the function of creating a credible democratic alternative. (Jaroszewicz, Lesińska & Homel, 2022).

From the theoretical framework and literature review, five main themes have emerged that the diaspora is using to counter authoritarian regimes. The themes will later be more elaborated on in the discussion part. The themes are the following: a) Role of the diaspora & civil society; b) Opposition and diaspora: strategies and challenges; b) Relations with the European Union and its role; c) ICTs – social media, media; and d) Democratisation and its limits.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the Master's thesis is to analyse the ways in which Lukashenka's authoritarian regime is weakened by the Belarusian diaspora. The diaspora represents the civil society and opposition of the democratic Belarus. I will analyse the topic in the timeline of 2020 until 2023. This timeline includes three most important events: 1) The protests in 2020; 2) The suspension of the Eastern Partnership; 3) War in Ukraine in February 2022.

I have formed one main research question and one sub question to analyse the topic:

- 1) Which strategies is the Belarusian diaspora using to fight Lukashenka's regime?
- 2) In which ways does the usage of ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) help the Belarusian diaspora with fighting against Lukashenka's regime?

Additionally, I will propose the policy recommendations through the lens of my empirical material.

I have developed five themes based on the literature review and the theoretical framework which are presented on pages 20 and 24. These five themes are used as the framework of the analysis and will be used to help answer the research questions. To find out the strategies the Belarusian diaspora is using, I will be concentrating on the role of the diaspora and the development of Belarusian civil society, the strategies they have adapted, the role of the European Union in their activity and the limits of democratisation. The latter will help to detect relevant challenges to the diaspora. To answer the second research question, I will concentrate on the topic of ICTs and the ways in which the diaspora is using them. Furthermore, these themes will be the framework based on which I will develop the policy recommendations.

I chose this case due to its high relevance in the world as well as in political sciences. The case of Belarus in general is highly understudied in academia, and there is a gap in research about the diaspora, especially after 2020. I argue that Belarus plays an important role in both the European Union as well as the Eastern Neighbourhood. The Belarusian government is a direct threat to European security, human rights and European integration. As the civil society

of Belarus is actively fighting against the regime, it is important to research the ways in which the civil society fights the regime. To illustrate the importance of the diaspora, Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya established a temporary executive body for Belarus in August 2022 (Tsikhanouskaya, 2022) which might act as a ‘government in exile’. In October 2022, Belarusian government took legal action against Tsikhanouskaya, accusing her (and other opposition figures) of participating in mass riots, inciting social hatred, conspiring to seize power, and founding extremist organisations (Fiedler, 2022). That indicates the importance and impact of the Belarusian opposition outside of Belarus. The civil society in Belarus performs important democratic functions and I am interested in the role of the Belarusian diaspora in this matter, since – as previously mentioned – a big part of Belarusian activists continues their activities outside of Belarus. In addition, the topic of civil society in Belarus has been researched before, however, the approach which considers the role of the diaspora is fairly new in academia, hence it would be a contribution to studying this narrative and the topic in general.

I have presented a literature review in chapter 2. There, I have gathered existing relevant research regarding the topic of this thesis. My research will contribute to the existing literature by exploring the role and the strategies of the diaspora in the timeline of 2020-2023. Furthermore, the research will be based on three different – yet connected – perspectives. The focus is on the direct diaspora members, however, to diversify the approach, I also conducted interviews with a foreign affairs expert who has worked with the Belarusian democratic opposition as well as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is the winner of the 2020 presidential elections and the main actor in representing the democratic opposition. This approach will help to conduct a more strategic analysis since it will connect different perspectives. Furthermore, this approach has not been used in analysing this topic before. The interview questions are designed to explore and analyse the topics that have not been directly or thoroughly covered before in both academia and media. Before designing the interview questions, I did research about the coverage of relevant topics. As the sample of this research is diverse, I concentrated on the topics that have not been publicly covered by political scientists, Belarusian activists, opposition politicians and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to avoid repetition. The interview questions do relate to the relevant topics in the field, however, they give an opportunity to analyse the topic in an innovative way to enrich the literature regarding the Belarusian diaspora.

3.1 Single case study

To answer the research questions of the thesis, I will conduct a qualitative research which intends to give a full picture of the research object – according to Virkus (2010), qualitative research helps to find out the full picture of a phenomena, and to understand it deeply and from different perspectives. More precisely, the thesis is a qualitative case study. The most important characteristic of a case study is the research unit, which is a social phenomena in its entirety (Strömpl, 2014). According to Yin (1993), a case study is a research strategy which results in generalisation. Yin (1993) brings out the difference between statistical generalisation and analytical generalisation, and in case studies the generalisations will be made on the basis of depth, not statistical data. This applies in the case of this Master's thesis, where I will not be using statistical data but rather in-depth analysis. Creswell (2007) defines case studies as 1) methodology where the researchers explain the case during a specific time, with collected data and through diverse information sources (i.e interviews, observations, documents, reports etc); and as 2) research report *alias* the description of the case and the description of topics based on case analysis. The objective of a qualitative case study is to get to know the research object and present it in its entirety, which differs it from quantitative or qualitative content analysis, which divides the cases into categories (Strömpl, 2014).

The empirical part is based on interviews as the primary source of data, and different articles as a secondary source of information in order to diversify the findings and place them into a more contextual framework. The interview sample consists of the members of the Belarusian diaspora, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (the Belarusian opposition leader) and one foreign policy expert/diplomat connected to the Belarusian opposition after the protests in 2020. That way, I will have three different dimensions which give more insight and a more diverse understanding of the diaspora and their activities. Those will give a valuable analytical addition. Most of the interviews are conducted with direct diaspora members, however interviews with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the foreign policy expert will give an additional insight. As an important note – the opposition of Belarus belongs under the diaspora and hence is also part of this research.

I conducted semi-structured interviews since it makes it possible to change the order of the questions as well as ask additional questions (Lepik, Harjo-Loit, Kello et al. 2014) which makes it possible to have a more dynamic conversation and it also gives a chance for

discussion. Before conducting the interviews and contacting the interviewees, I prepared an interview design with introduction, declaration of opposing the current Lukashenka's regime and questions. I found the interviewees through social media (Twitter and Facebook) and the snow-ball method which indicates finding people through connections. The latter has been used in similar cases before and it gives me a chance to find people with different backgrounds. More precisely, the sample consists of journalists, opposition politicians, activists, NGO leaders, students, academics, political scientists and political leaders. I argue that gathering info from previously mentioned social groups helps to give a more broad, yet clear, understanding of the diaspora. Furthermore, interviewing political scientists, activists and political leaders will ensure the reliability of the results as their insight involves their expertise.

One interview is conducted in Estonian, the rest are in English. One interview took place in person, three took place in a written form and the six took place in Zoom. The interviews are transcribed with online transcription tools. The interview in Estonian was transcribed with the Estonian Speech Recognition and Transcription Editing Service (Baltic HLT, 2022), and the interviews in English were transcribed with the Revoldil Online Transcription Tool. All the interviews are available in written form and they will be provided to the committee members only based on requests due to confidentiality matters.

I have developed five main themes. These five themes emerged from the theoretical framework and literature review and the interview structure is built around them. Furthermore, these five themes will be elaborated on in the discussion where I connect the findings to the theoretical framework and literature review. To illustrate the ways in which the interview questions relate to the five topics, I have prepared Table 1.

The themes are the following:

- Role of the diaspora & civil society
- Opposition and diaspora: strategies and challenges
- Relations with the European Union and its role
- ICTs – social media, media
- Democratisation and its limits

Table 1. Themes and applicable interview questions

Theme	Relevant interview questions
Role of the diaspora & civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do you see the role or importance of the Belarusian diaspora in the fight for democracy? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● How do you see the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya - do you see her as a legitimate leader of the opposition in exile? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● What were the main objectives of the opposition before 2020 and what are they now? <i>(Interview: The foreign affairs expert)</i> ● How effective do you see the activities of the opposition and the diaspora after 2020? <i>(Interview: The foreign affairs expert)</i> ● Do you see the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as an official government in exile? <i>(Interview: The foreign affairs expert)</i> ● How is the Office of Tsikhanouskaya supporting and mobilising the diaspora? How connected is the diaspora? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i> ● Does the Office of Tsikhanouskaya aim to be the official government in exile? What are the limitations of pursuing the role of the official government in exile? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouya)</i> ● Is the activity of the opposition and active diaspora members directed only to the situation inside Belarus or is it a possibility that the diaspora will become a separate community which represents the democratic Belarus outside the country with a legitimate exile government? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i>
Opposition and the diaspora: strategies and challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the main messages the diaspora should focus on? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● How connected is the Belarusian diaspora? How strong is the community? Please elaborate. <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● How do you see the role of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office? What's the potential and what are the shortcomings? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● How does the war in Ukraine affect the Belarusian diaspora and what challenges has it brought? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i>

Theme	Relevant interview questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If we think about Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office as an alternative government of Belarus, how much or in which ways can it contribute to the fight against Russia in Ukraine? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● What kind of strategies or methods should the diaspora and opposition use to weaken Lukashenka's regime? <i>(Interview: The foreign affairs expert)</i> ● When Lukashenka's power will be suspended, how will the new government manage the relations and the situation with Russia? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i> ● What is the Office of Tsikhanouskaya doing to support Ukraine in the war with Russia? What are the limitations and challenges? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i>
Relations with the EU and its role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do you see the role of the EU and EU countries in supporting Belarusians? What are the needs or expectations for the international community? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● How do you see the role of the EU in supporting Belarusians? Is it effective? What are the shortcomings? <i>(Interview: Foreign affairs expert)</i> ● What are the expectations for the European Union in fighting for democracy in Belarus? How effective do you see the cooperation and what are the challenges? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i>
ICTs - social media, media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How much is the diaspora connected to activists or civil society members in the country and how much social media interaction is there? Please describe it. <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● In which ways has the ICT revolution helped the Belarusian civil society in its activities? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i> ● You have stated that the protest against the regime in Belarus will take other forms. In which forms are the protests taking place after 2020? How do you see the role of social media and the internet? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i> ● What are the main messages that the Office of Tsikhanouskaya is focusing on? <i>(Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya)</i>
Democratisation and its limits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why do you think the protests in 2020 did not fulfil their goal? <i>(Interview: Diaspora members)</i>

Theme	Relevant interview questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the prospects of Belarus and how possible is the regime change when the regime in Russia won't change? (<i>Interview: Diaspora members</i>) ● How do you see the future of the diaspora? Is there a possibility that democratic de facto Belarus will begin to only exist outside of the actual country? (<i>Interview: Diaspora members</i>) ● Why do you think the protests in 2020 did not fulfil their goal? (<i>Interview: The foreign affairs expert</i>) ● What is the role of Russia, can the regime in Belarus be conquered separately from Russia? How does the war in Ukraine affect the Belarusians and their fight for democracy? (<i>Interview: The foreign affairs expert</i>) ● What are the prospects of the democratisation process in Belarus? (<i>Interview: The foreign affairs expert</i>) ● Belarus is considered as a puppet state of Russia which is de facto occupied. Which events would be necessary to change the current form of relations and connections with Russia? (<i>Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya</i>) ● What are the possibilities of regime change in Belarus with Putin still in power? (<i>Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya</i>) ● What are the military aspirations of the Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office and the future democratic Belarus? How and to what extent are you planning to shape the military? (<i>Interview: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya</i>)

3.2 Process tracing

According to Lerner (1958), one of the ways to illustrate the method of process tracing is the “modernisation” in a Turkish village. The transformation starts from the national government elections and the introduction of infrastructure in the village, and the transformation of the village is the cause-effect dynamics (Lerner, 1958; Collier, 2011). In that case, the process tracing method is used to describe the changes in the village over time.

Process tracing is considered as a fundamental tool of qualitative analysis and is often used in within-case analysis which are based on qualitative data (Collier, 2011). According to Beach (2020), process tracing is a social science research method that involves a detailed study of a single case to trace causal mechanisms and understand how they contribute to the observed

outcome. This approach can be used to test theories about causal processes in a specific group of similar cases or gain a deeper understanding of the factors that led to a particular event. The strength of process tracing lies in its ability to collect detailed mechanistic evidence about how causal processes operate in real-world cases (Beach, 2020). Furthermore, process tracing is defined as the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions posed by the author (Collier, 2011). In this research, the evidence in the analysis is examined in the light of the two research questions. Process tracing involves three key components: theorising about causal mechanisms, analysing empirical evidence of their operation, and using comparative methods to enable generalisation (Beach, 2020). The chapter 2 in this thesis fills a role of a conceptual framework which gives an overview of the prior knowledge of the topics as well as general ideas of how the concepts used in this thesis can be operationalised (Collier, 2011). The causal mechanisms are theorised in the theoretical framework as well as in the literature review, the analysis is based on the interviews and in the discussion, the results are placed in the framework presented in chapter 2. This thesis intends to find out the cause-effect dynamics between the events in 2020 and the regime in Belarus. These dynamics are seen through the prisms of strategies of the Belarusian diaspora.

According to Collier (2011), process tracing can be illustrated with a timeline that lists the relevant events. Hence, I am elaborating on the three events that are the basis of the timeline in this research. The key events in the thesis are the following: a) 2020 elections; b) 2021 suspension of the EaP; c) 2022 war in Ukraine. The analysis will be conducted in the framework of these events and follows the timeline logic. The logic of this timeline was used when preparing the interview questions, thus the analysis will follow the same logic of this timeline. In every topic, the analysis begins from 2020 and focuses on these milestones.

To reflect how these events relate to the objective of this research, I will briefly elaborate on that:

a) Elections and protests in 2020

This research will focus on the events that started and followed during the 2020 elections. In order to grasp the importance of these protests more scrupulously, there are some references to the historical background and events that led to these protests. The protests were a milestone for the Belarusian society and are fundamental when it comes to the further events

and development of the regime and society. The events in 2020 will give an important contextual framework for the analysis.

b) Suspension of the EaP in 2021

The suspension of the EaP in Belarus was a remarkable and symbolic event as it completely ended any relations with the EU and indicated that the country's regime took a turn towards Russia. This thesis will not focus on the efficiency of the EaP initiative, but rather on the development of the relations between Belarus and the EU. The EU is an important actor in the Eastern Neighbourhood, including Belarus, and even after the suspension of the EaP, the EU claimed to support the Belarusian civil society.

c) Russian full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022

The Russian full scale invasion in Ukraine shook the entire continent and beyond. It also impacts the situation in Belarus as the country is used as a vessel for Russia, which includes Belarus in the war. That has sculpted the international attitude towards Belarusians as well as the general situation in the country. It has also impacted the regime in Belarus, the country's connection with Russia has become strained and controversial as it destabilised the relations between the two countries by challenging the last crumbs of Lukashenka's autonomy. The outcome of the war is crucial for Belarus. Yet, this research does not intend to forecast the future, but focus on the way the diaspora relates to this.

3.3 Sensitive research and ethics

Before the interview, I offered to send the interviewees the interview questions and introduced them to the verbal agreement. A verbal agreement is an agreement made with spoken words and either no writing or only partially written (The People's Law Dictionary, 2023). In Zoom, before starting the interview, I read the interviewees a brief introduction of my thesis with the purpose, confirmed that I have provided the participant with transparent information about my motive and thesis, asked whether they wish to remain confidential and finally asked if they agree to participate in the interview. Since the interviews were recorded, I informed the participants about that and asked for their agreement. That way, I ensured that the participant is aware of all the necessary information and we have an official agreement regarding the participation in the interview for this Master's thesis.

Before the interview, I confirmed that in case of sensitive questions or topics, the interviewee does not have to answer and we will move to the next topic. The participant could stop the interview if they wish so at any time.

Before conducting the interviews, I consulted with Dr. Merle Linno about sensitive research and followed her instructions.

3.4 Limitations

In this section, I will address the limitations regarding this Master's thesis. To begin with, the biggest obstacle is the language barrier as I do not speak either Belarusian or Russian. That limited the amount of sources and could have been a limitation for the interviews, however the latter was not an issue since every diaspora member I spoke to spoke English. One could argue that the lack of Belarusian or Russian skills will also limit the sample as it will not represent Belarus. However, since I am researching specifically the diaspora, I argue that English is more common among the diaspora members as many of them are academics, students, younger people and activists, who tend to be more fluent in English. The sources I could not reach due to the language barrier were social media channels such as Telegram, websites regarding different projects and initiatives from the diaspora, and articles from media, journals and books. However, since the English sources are limited, I am contributing to the research about Belarus in the English language which can be useful for further research. I find the topic of my thesis important and not only among the Russian speaking people but also among the international community. That way I am hoping to enhance the range of English research about Belarus, more specifically about the diaspora. When looking at the diaspora as a politically motivated group, one can expect that those people are more likely to speak English. Furthermore, there is a much higher expectation that the politicised part of the diaspora is more fluent in English.

Another limitation is the security aspect. Since Belarus is an authoritarian country which is highly dangerous to people that oppose the regime, participating in an interview is a risk. Even though the diaspora members are outside of Belarus, many still have family living in the country. Furthermore, despite not living in Belarus, opposing the regime can still be dangerous and can make the individual a target for the Belarusian officials. To reduce the safety risk to the minimum, I offered every person I contacted a chance to remain

confidential. In that case, I formed an oral – recorded – agreement with them. When analysing the interviews, I made sure that the interviewee could not be recognised in any way by not publishing their background information or direct quotes from the interviews if they wished so. Furthermore, I only emailed public emails and the contacts I got from other interviewees had previously agreed to talk to me. The contact information of the participants, their names, locations, backgrounds and recordings from the interviews will not be shared with anyone besides the author of this thesis if not agreed differently.

The third limit of this thesis can be the chosen method of process tracing and qualitative research. The main weakness of process tracing is similar to the general narrative of weaknesses when it comes to qualitative vs. quantitative studies which is the question of quality (Collier, 2011). This discussion is relevant in a wider debate regarding the methodology in social and political sciences, and there is some scepticism among some of the quantitative researchers (Collier, 2011). However, I argue that using qualitative methods is the most relevant and useful way in the case of this research. As presented in the research design, the qualitative methods can help to dive deeper into the topic and ask questions like “how?” or “why?” (Intract, 2017). The value in this thesis stands in the in-depth analysis which is most effectively done using qualitative methods. Furthermore, Freedman (2010) counters the argument of credibility in qualitative research with an argument that the qualitative analysis which is used in process tracing is a scientific inquiry in its own right. To conclude, “both qualitative and quantitative research are hard to do well” (Brady, 2010; Collier, 2011; Seawright, 2010) and I am tackling the limits of this chosen methodology with using relevant literature about the methods and following the guidance from my supervisor(s).

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 Perspective of the diaspora, S. Tsikhanouskaya and & foreign affairs expert

In this section, I will present the findings of this thesis. The interviews were conducted with diaspora members (7), a foreign affairs expert and the democratic opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The foreign affairs expert is identified as “H”.

4.1.1 Role of the diaspora and civil society in Belarus

2020 was the first year in Belarus where the civil society started growing – that can also explain the politicisation of the new wave diaspora (Kulakevich, 2022). There were some anti government protests in 2010 and 2015, however, they were rather isolated cases and they weren't nearly as massive. Furthermore, there were some political activists that had to emigrate in 2010 but that was rather an exception when looking at the first wave of the diaspora.

There are two different diasporas – the first wave and the second wave. The first wave represents those who emigrated before 2020 and the second wave, the more politicised one, represents those who had to flee the country after 2020. That distinction plays an important role – Belarus has a really young civil society and 2020 was the milestone for Belarus as it started the politicisation of the civil society as well as the diaspora. When talking about the second wave of the diaspora, we are also talking about the civil society of Belarus as most of the people who fled after 2020 are parts of different opposition movements, i.e. political leaders, academics, NGO leaders and people working with law and human rights. Even though the main differentiator between the first and second wave diasporas is the politicisation, several people from the first wave have also joined the politicised diaspora. In addition to the process of politicisation, the diaspora has also changed in its nature regarding the presence of national thought – the diaspora that has emerged after 2020 is dedicated to ‘staying Belarusian’ and has the goal to return to Belarus. On the contrary, those who emigrated before 2020, generally integrated with their host nation.

Alesia: “The first wave joined the diaspora before 2020 when a lot of Belarusians left the country seeking better economic stability, seeking better conditions or joining their families who already were abroad. /.../ When it comes to the second wave of diaspora, we could talk about the new class of Belarusian diaspora, which are activists, IT specialists, journalists and many, many other groups of civil society that have been moving out of the country in order to find security. “

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “We can talk about hundreds of thousands of Belarusians in exile after 2020. Though Belarusians have already had strong diasporas in Canada, the USA, Australia, and the UK formed during the last century, there was a situation that when a Belarusian emigrated [before 2020], they became Polish, American, French, etc., really quickly. Now we are happy that Belarusians want to stay Belarusians and are connecting with each other.”

The main goal of the democratic Belarusian diaspora is to fight for democracy. Here, the strategies may differentiate, nevertheless they share the main purpose of fighting for a democratic Belarus.

Maria: “I think the main goal of every member of the diaspora is to fight for democracy in the sense that we are the voices of people who are in Belarus now, they can not say anything, they can not fight.”

The main role of the diaspora is representing those who are in Belarus and representing the democratic aspirations. The members of the diaspora are fighting the regime with spreading knowledge in media and social media and building the democratic community and narrative. They are actively posting on social media, both for the audience in and outside of Belarus – the diaspora acts as a connecting bridge here. The diaspora encourages each other to be vocal and represent the people who are made quiet in Belarus, to make their voices heard. They also intend to keep their friends and relatives in Belarus safe as they advise them to stay home and to stay safe. The diaspora is working both on national and international level which also includes supporting the families of political prisoners in Belarus, lobbying, talking to local politicians and forcing the Belarus agenda on an international level.

Maria: “We just tell them to stay safe, stay at home, we’re going to protest, we’re going to show European citizens that we are fighting, we’re still here, we are not Lukashenka.”

As the civil society has largely moved out from the country, the diaspora is the main actor in standing for democracy. The protests in 2020 were a significant milestone for the democratic movement of Belarus. The regime remained authoritarian, however, the protests started a new, more politicised era amongst the Belarusians.

Irina: “We are the only resource to keep international attention on the Belarusian situation on this question as often as possible. So that is what we are doing now.”

Maria: “We were so excited to see that [protests] happening. We were so happy, we were literally protesting and crying because of how strong we are, how many people are fighting with us on the same side.”



Figure 2. 2020 Belarusian protests, Minsk, 18 October. Source: Homoatrox, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=95190958>

The reasons behind the outcome – or the lack of it – of the protests in 2020 are not universally agreed on and there is no ‘correct’ answer. One of the issues and reasons behind that is the fact that the civil society in Belarus is young and they have no experience in democratic processes or the functioning of civil society. According to Mudrov (2021), there are four main reasons behind the failure of the protests. First, there was an underestimation of the actual rating for Lukashenka; second, the participants of these protests were mainly people from certain social groups; third, a significant consolidation of the Belarusian governmental institutions; and finally, the loyalty of the police and military to Lukashenka (Mudrov, 2021). However, Mudrov (2021) argues that even though the protests did not manage to remove Lukashenka from power, the political atmosphere among the Belarusians has changed. The protests released the result of years of oppression and has mobilised the Belarusians to fulfil their desire for change in the country.

The outcome of the protests in 2020 and their reasons can be explained through different dimensions. There are institutional, political, national, cultural and international explanations. Similarly to Mudrov (2021), Alesia Rudnik argues that the protests did in fact fulfil their goal. The protests changed the narrative among the Belarusians, as they stopped coming to terms with the fact that they live in autocracy. The Belarusian society was largely depoliticised and the citizens were rather passive as they did not feel any connection to their political leaders.

Alesia: “We go to election because it's needed to go to election, but we don't really care who is the president because it doesn't matter anyhow, we don't have our representatives in the parliament, so why should we care? So that was the general thought [before 2020].”

Even though the society was largely depoliticised before 2020, there still were some political movements. However, their support was around 1% and they did not have a significant impact on society. In 2020, the situation started to change. A new generation of political activists started to gather attention. While Belarus is an authoritarian country and one can not talk about pluralism in the political sphere in a classical sense, the case of Belarus is not classical by its nature. The opposition movements were fragile before 2020, they did not have the support of the Belarusians and they did not have a concrete structure nor a strategy. Even

though the structure started to form during the protests, there was no leader or a political activist that could have organised the protests more effectively, the protests were self-organising. Next to the self-organising non-violent protesters, there is a massive military and police structure supporting the regime and using violence against the people. In 2020, Lukashenka had been in power for 24 years and the regime controls all of the power structures in Belarus, whereas the politicised civil society has just started to form without any arms or structure. That is an important note – the power dynamic was thoroughly asymmetrical and understanding the political and social grounds in the country is important in understanding the diaspora.

Alesia: “And okay, they [the protesters in Belarus] get arrested, they get long imprisonments. And unfortunately, this is the stage that they had to go through. So I think that in that matter the protest has fulfilled its goal because any grandma, any kind of usual person who's working at the factory, the grocery store... They knew that authorities are actually arresting their neighbours, their daughters, their sons, and that this is extremely unjust. Revealing these relations with authorities and this injustice and how without any shame, they could actually steal the votes. This was the most important goal of the protest because for the next election, everyone will know that the aftermath of such actions will be repression. So you either need to agree with that, and you know, maybe boycott the elections, or you need to do something else so that you beat this repression.”

Furthermore, the role of Russia cannot be underestimated. When talking about the regime in Belarus, there is always the ‘elephant in the room’ – Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. According to Irina, the reason behind the outcome of the protests is – amongst other things – Putin. More precisely, the support from Putin and his long-term neo-imperialist strategies.

Irina: “As soon as the war started in Ukraine, I was absolutely sure that we did not have a chance at all. Otherwise, Putin wouldn't have got this additional bridge he has as Belarus. It could not have been different for us.”

Many political scientists and Belarusians believe that even if the outcome was different for Belarus in 2020, Russia would not have let that happen in Belarus. With Putin's neo-imperialist dreams of ‘Mother Russia’ which consists of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine,

Belarus had little chances of regime change. Considering the military, political and economic ties with Russia, and the invasions to Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (and later in 2022), Belarus would have most likely been invaded. There have been different opinions about the nature of the protests – some argue that the protests should have been violent, however, that seems not to be a popular opinion. In that matter, it is also important to note that the protesters did not have any arms or support from the police or military structure. As Mudrov (2021) argues – the police and military have strong ties with Lukashenka and the governmental institutions working for Lukashenka caused violence and more repression towards the protesters as well as helped Lukashenka to retain his power.

*Maria: “The amount of people in the army, in the police departments and the [governmental] structures, it's so big and almost everyone in the structure is supporting the regime. It's not the Belarusians and their families. It's Lukashenka and his relatives, his family. They would protect his a** till the very, very end. So we were without arms, we were without social media access like the television or radio and we didn't have a political activist who could affect us. Everyone in the government, they are supporting Lukashenka, secretly, openly... but they are supporting him.”*

After 2020 and the first national experience in democracy after 1994, the diaspora and opposition have changed. The second wave of diaspora, as previously mentioned, is largely politicised and more united. Many interviewees mentioned the nature of the Belarusians – they are rather introverted as a nation. However, 2020 mobilised the people and the diaspora turned into a more united group of people. They have started different national and international initiatives, developed strategies and started working on the visibility of Belarus.

The protests in 2020 played a significant role in the development of the political opposition. The main challenge with oppositions in authoritarian countries is generally the lack of experience in democratic functions. Often, the opposition is too fragmented and has challenges in mobilising people (Hale, 2013). The same applied in the case of Belarus. The first six months after the false elections were the most critical and they failed to efficiently mobilise people – there was no leader(s) to lead the movement and the protests were happening organically. According to both the diaspora members and the foreign affairs expert, the protests offered a chance to form a more united opposition but that did not happen

then. The opposition was not working together and they lost sight of the actual goal, more precisely, the goal was to get Lukashenka out of power, however, the strategies in order to do that were lacking. Furthermore, there was a lack of strategy on how to mobilise people against Lukashenka's power and how to get the support of the people in Belarus for the opposition. According to Hale (2013), the opposition to an authoritarian regime needs to have strong structure and ability to mobilise people, however that seems to be a challenge for the Belarusian opposition.

H: "From a professional perspective, one of the reasons the cooperation [with the opposition] ended was that there was no clear strategy – in general, the goal is to get rid of Lukashenka, but what next? There was quite a lot of mess."

The strategies, however, have changed within the past years. At the beginning, the opposition relied on the hope that Lukashenka kept making big mistakes which could make it easier to gouge his regime. The fact that Lukashenka turned the country's military on its own people and the hijacking of the RyanAir flight gave sights of hope that he keeps repeating such mistakes which would help to gain more international support and attention in the fight against Lukashenka's regime. However, things turned out differently.

H: "At some point, it was clear for us [organisation], that Europe has lost some of its interest [in Belarus] and Lukashenka stopped making such big scale mistakes. And that indicated that the opposition needed to change their strategy."

After recognising the decline in interest among the EU, the opposition started to concentrate on cooperation and creating unity. They announced the government in exile, however, according to the foreign affairs specialist, it should have happened earlier as the government in exile was announced roughly after a year from the protests and elections. However, the announcement of the government in exile showed that the different parts of the opposition have increased their cooperation and are becoming more united.

After the events in 2020 and the deepening restrictive politics in Belarus, the opposition has largely moved outside the country. The protests of 2020 were large and carried a hope for democracy and regime change, however, instead the Belarusians ended up in an even more controlled and oppressive state. There are many reasons behind that. According to many

Western diplomats – the Brits, French, Norwegians etc – had doubts about the actual number of people inside the country that were supporting the opposition.

H: “When talking about these protests, which indeed were enormous and impressive, the situation of the general population was not clear. Even the opposition itself recognised that the support [for opposition] is around 50%.”

Hence, one of the reasons was the general uncertainty about the general population in the country. Furthermore, Lukashenka managed to emigrate most of the opposition out of the country which made the opportunity for mobilising the people in Belarus nearly impossible. People started to fear for their lives – for a reason – and the momentum was lost. Around 90% of Belarusians are working directly under government owned businesses or organisations, they had financial issues, they had no resources for protesting anymore. The breakthrough should have happened fast, however, it did not, and the people do not have the resources to prepare for long lasting protests, especially after the long years of dictatorship.

When it comes to the potential and effectiveness of the Tsikhanouskaya’s Office, the foreign affairs expert argues that the strategy and policy is focused on her identity which might not be the most effective political foundation. The biggest issue regarding the office is the fact that they have not managed to develop a clear role in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine. They have been clear that they do not support Belarus joining the war and they have also tried to connect to their audience in Belarus, from which unfortunately many still support Russia’s war in Ukraine. According to the foreign affairs expert, the opposition tends to not choose sides, which might be since the Belarusians have not had the clear wish or the ‘European inspiration’ as the Ukrainians do – they have rather aspired to be a neutral bridge between Russia and Europe. However, the fact that the war in Ukraine did not create new opportunities for Belarus as well to change the situation with Belarus, is a failure – they have become almost invincible.

H: “I think there are many unused opportunities and perhaps a misread political situation. Which is deeply saddening, I highly support the democratic movement of Belarus and they have many great people who have made significant personal sacrifices. But I think that right now, they are rather failing.”

While the foreign affairs expert remains sceptical about the role of the Belarusian opposition in the war in Ukraine, the findings indicate that the situation has become more clear and the reaction from the democratic opposition is stronger. The interviewed diaspora members and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya have highlighted different initiatives the Belarusians have taken to support Ukraine and Ukrainians. The interviews with the Belarusians show that there is a will for cooperation with Ukraine. For instance, Tsikhanouskaya's Office offered Ukraine and the Ukrainian people to build an alliance with the democratic Belarus. From that, the triangle between Lukashenka, Tsikhanouskaya and Zelensky has emerged (Khvostova, Kryvosheiev & Slunkin, 2023). According to Khvostova, Kryvosheiev & Slunkin (2023), Lukashenka is actively supporting Putin's war in Ukraine, however, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has invested a significant amount of her political capital to support Ukraine.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: "We are ready to act together with Ukraine because, without free Ukraine, there can be no free Belarus and Europe."

As of May 2023, the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has rejected the offers for cooperation with the democratic Belarus and the one of the arguments behind that is the fact that the democratic Belarus does not have resources to help Ukraine with the supply of aircrafts or tanks (Khvostova, Kryvosheiev & Slunkin, 2023). However, the role of Lukashenka cannot be underestimated in this matter as his presence and connections with Russia challenge the relations between Zelensky and Tsikhanouskaya. To conclude, the situation of the Belarusian democratic opposition in this geopolitical field remains controversial.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: "We [Belarus and Ukraine] have a common enemy and goal: freedom and independence for our countries. We are ready to cooperate fully with Ukraine and establish diplomatic and political relations. /.../ We understand that democratic world leaders see the situation in Belarus and Ukraine as connected, and they understand that they must support us both. Ukrainians must see that Lukashenka can't be trusted; he is complicit in war crimes against Ukrainians and can never be an honest broker or peacemaker. He will do whatever serves his own interests - and Ukraine will never be safe as long as he is in power."

While the diaspora and the opposition see the importance of supporting Ukraine, they also ought to highlight the situation of Belarus in this context. Similarly to the foreign affairs expert who brings out the misread political situation and hence the lack of attention on Belarus, Tsikhanouskaya acknowledges the challenge of keeping the focus on Belarus. The challenge remains on bringing international attention to the situation in the country and to stress the importance of Belarus in the geopolitical arena. According to Tsikhanouskaya, the European leaders have seen the need to bring a democratic Belarus closer to Europe, however, the politicians still cannot grasp the connection between the events in Belarus and Ukraine.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “Belarus is the key to security and stability in the region because the dictator will continue to threaten his neighbours - since 2020, we have seen the Ryanair hijacking, the migration crisis, and now the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Belarus regime does not respect international law any more than it respects the rights of its citizens. /.../ We explain that our fates, of Belarus and Ukraine, are interconnected, and we face the same enemy.”

4.1.4 Towards democratisation: strategies of the diaspora and the opposition

The foreign affairs expert argues that the main focus should be on the people inside Belarus – there is a clear support for change. From the perspective of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, keeping the connection between the diaspora and Belarusians living in Belarus is principal, yet challenging due to the regime.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “One of our goals is to keep the exiled Belarusians and Belarusians inside the country connected. Unfortunately, the regime tries to weaken these connections and to prevent the spread of the information. People outside the country have different problems than people inside the country. Therefore it can be hard for them to understand each other.”

According to the analyst perspective, the Belarusians living in the country are not ready for a long period of resistance and the opposition needs to clearly earn their support. Since it is not clear how big part of the society actually supports them, they need to focus on building the foundation for support among Belarusians living there. Clear support for the opposition will

help to gain more support from the European Union as well as the big European countries. The interaction with people in Belarus is the key here for the opposition. However, it is definitely a challenge to interact with people from the outside. One of the risks is the development of “us” and “them”, where “us” are the people living in Belarus and “them” are the segregated opposition outside, as the people in Belarus might feel left behind as they are living in worse living conditions.

H: “There are more and more reports from people living in Belarus that the people who got left behind feel some sort of resentment towards those who left. During the USSR, the same applied in Estonia, the people living Estonia felt a sense of protest towards the diaspora – “we have to eat potato peels to get free and you are there, living in coffee mountains!”

To avoid the division between the diaspora and people living in Belarus, it is important to help build grassroot movements inside the country, interact with them and build a democratic aspiration. The opposition needs to have a long-term strategy. From the analyst perspective, the power of a government in exile is political and that is their main role. That indicates the need for more political structure, a plan and strategy and figuring out what is the ultimate goal of the opposition. According to H, the Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s Office was betting on more international support – they wanted to show that they are united and the Belarusian people are supporting them. However, after a year of the protests, they did not manage to fulfil their goal as planned and the international political impact that they hoped for was not as efficient.

The diaspora, however, is organised and highly efficient. If they manage to stay organised and keep their communication strategy efficient, it will affect the country. The role of the diaspora is highly important. When the country is ready for democracy, then the diaspora will be the foundation of building the democratic Belarus, they won’t be starting from nothing. If the protests in 2020 would have happened in a situation where there already is a government in exile, an existing system that could be ‘imported’ to the country, the result would have been different. The biggest task for the diaspora is to build the system which could be later already applied in Belarus.

H: “The diaspora carries the hope of the whole country [Belarus].”

The diaspora has been working hard for the past fifteen years. For instance, The Belarus Free Theatre (the only theatre in Europe banned by its government on political grounds) has conducted in-depth lists of sanctions. They know the financial structures of Belarus, they know the backgrounds of Belarusian officials, and when the sanctions were applied to Belarus, the Belarus Free Theatre already had a list of people who should be sanctioned. The leaders of the Belarus Free Theatre have worked with the EU and the United States (Flock, 2017).

As previously mentioned, the diaspora has started many different initiatives to support the fight for democracy in Belarus and as the foreign affairs expert suggests, the diaspora is organised. The activities range from political to cultural initiatives. The findings of this research indicate that the main activities of the diaspora focus on the following: a) raising awareness and bringing attention to the cause; b) lobbying and policy-making; and c) supporting the Belarusians and political prisoners.

Raising awareness and bringing attention to the cause

Raising awareness among the public and the politicians is one of the key activities for the diaspora. Those activities are important on different layers. The main goal is to keep Belarus in the picture and the topics regarding their activities relevant. There are some challenges to that which root from the reasons inside the diaspora as well as the outside factors, like politics, policies, the general attitude and national and international priorities. Here, the ICTs play a crucial role. The findings from the interviews show that using (social) media to promote the cause is one of the most important things as it gives the opportunity to reach many different audiences, raise awareness and bring attention to important topics. Furthermore, social media is easily accessible for many people, it is a fast way to share information and helps to share the messages across the borders. On a national level, the ways in which the diaspora works on this matter may be distinct in different countries – in some countries, the diasporas are bigger and more active. In any case, the strategy of using ICTs is the main tool for the diaspora and is tightly connected to all the other activities.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “Since the regime stopped representing the interests of Belarusians and only represented their own interests, it became our task to make

sure that Belarusians are heard in the world. It is important to maintain international support, solidarity, and unity..”

The findings of this analysis indicate that the main messages of the diaspora focus on political prisoners, promoting the Belarusian democratic agenda, being a source of information and acting as a human resource, and representing the Belarusians and their culture. The messages also include many democratic and cultural symbols. The most important one is perhaps the white-red-white flag as it is the symbol of democratic Belarus. Promoting the usage of this flag has been effective as the flag is recognisable and carries a deep meaning. The diaspora also brings attention to different cultural events and important dates in their history. Promoting Belarusian culture also involves popularising the Belarusian language and the public image of Belarusians.

After the 24th of February in 2022, the focus has been on the war in Ukraine. The goal is to show support for Ukrainians, highlight the fact that the Belarusians are against the war and communicate the ways in which the Belarusians support the Ukrainians. They want to send a clear signal that they oppose the war, and that the regime and the people in Belarus are different. That is the biggest challenge in the international arena right now, thus there is a lot of media work done throughout the diaspora. Working on the image of Belarus is one of the most pervasive strategies.

Alesia: “It comes to the media presence of Belarus. It comes to highlighting different news, like Belarusians fighting in Ukraine for Ukraine and other kinds of context where you could see that Belarusians are doing something good. And of course the political track when it comes to not only media image but purely political communication with local politicians.”

Policy-making and lobbying

The diaspora has started several different initiatives to support the Belarusians and their agenda. There are think-tanks, international organisations, different events and crowdfunding projects. The activities range from political to cultural ones. The initiatives can be cultural, economic, or political and the essence of these initiatives often focuses on many dimensions. Considering the nature of the diaspora, all of the initiatives carry a political meaning.

The diaspora has succeeded in many ways in that sense. One of the examples is cancelling the Hockey World Championship which was supposed to take place in Minsk. The diaspora strictly opposed the idea and managed to cancel the event in Minsk. Another bigger accomplishment is the lobbying for sanctions in the EU, Canada, the UK and the United States of America. The lobbying is strong and the cooperation with the Western countries is relatively strong as the diaspora has already prepared information about launching the sanctions to make sure they affect the regime.

Belarusians also participate in the process of local policy-making. They are doing that by lobbying, talking to local politicians, and again starting different initiatives. The goal is to represent and protect the interests of the democratic Belarus both nationally and internationally. For instance, in Sweden, the diaspora members actively engage in the policy-making process. One of the examples of the activity of the diaspora in Sweden is changing the name of Belarus in the Swedish language. Belarus is often translated to ‘White Russia’ and that carries a symbolic political meaning for the democratic Belarusians, hence they started an initiative to change the name. Now, Belarus is also called ‘Belarus’ in Swedish and the local community highly appreciates that. The initiative of changing the name to a more politically correct one has also begun in other countries.

Similarly to the previous subsection, the political track of the diaspora focuses on the narrative that not all Belarusians support the war and not all Belarusians support Lukashenka.

Alesia: “After the war started, we [the diaspora] understood that there is a misunderstanding which mostly comes from this similarity to Russia narrative. Belarus is always put together with Russia. And therefore people just simultaneously think that ‘okay, in Russia people support Putin, so in Belarus it must be the same that they support the regime. But it is not like that.”

On a political level, one of the priorities are the political prisoners. Additionally to supporting the families of the political prisoners inside the country, the diaspora is lobbying and interacting with different institutions to encourage pressure on the regime and work on freeing the political prisoners. That mostly takes place on the international arena.

Supporting the Belarusians and political prisoners

After 2020, a sense of unity was created among Belarusians. The diaspora started becoming more united and active measures were adopted. All the participants mention the importance of supporting each other, both in Belarus and abroad. When it comes to communication between the diaspora and local Belarusians, the ICTs, again, have an important role. Social media, especially Telegram channels, gives an opportunity to interact and support each other. As it is highly dangerous to oppose the regime in Belarus, the diaspora represents their interests in the international community and acts as a platform. Maria highlights that the communication with people in Belarus is as tight as it can be, as using certain Telegram channels can immediately lead to getting arrested by the Belarusian authorities. Hence, the people living in Belarus need to use precautions when using the ICTs.

Along with the opportunities provided by the ICTs, the diaspora is working with the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The Office and the Cabinet have permanent connections with the People's Embassies in different countries. Furthermore, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is hosting meetings with the diaspora during her meetings to different countries which give an opportunity for discussion and feedback. The usage of the ICTs is also present in the communication between the diaspora and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her Office.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: "Of course, the social media channels of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Office are always open for people's messages. /../ At the end of April, the Office organised a diaspora conference where we gathered representatives of Belarusians from different countries to discuss what is important to them."

The opposition

An important representative part of the diaspora – more specifically the political opposition – is Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her Office. The foreign affairs expert agrees with the diaspora members that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has done a significant job in raising awareness and building connections and relations with foreign partners like the EU and its Member States. However, the legitimacy as an official government in exile is controversial. According to the foreign affairs specialist, the existence or nonexistence of a legitimate alternative government is challenging to assess. The main issue lies on the legitimacy of the

Office implying opposing arguments at once: a) the election results in 2020 are completely fake, and b) she has won the elections. The two arguments are strongly contradictory – on the one hand, the election results are fake, on the other hand, she has won the elections. That makes the foundation of the legitimacy fragile. That was also one of the reasons the announcement of the exile government was postponed.

When it comes to international law, the concept of an exile government does now have any meaning. The meaning is rather declarative, however, it can create international opportunities and it can make it for some countries to support the opposition.

H: “The existence of an exile government confirms that they are not some random candidates who have lost from a random country – it gives them some sort of declarative power, because they are the government in exile.”

According to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the resistance of the Belarusians continues.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “On the anniversary of the full-scale war, Belarusians hung a big Ukrainian flag above a factory in Minsk, blew up a rare and valuable Russian military plane that helped to calibrate Russian attacks on Ukraine, hacked the site of the Social Security Fund, and set the Ultimatum to release the political prisoners. /.../ Every day mass campaigns of disobedience continue. This means the resistance continues, though it has changed its form/image.”

As mentioned by the diaspora, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya says that the Belarusians organised and joined Ukrainians in meetings of solidarity with Ukraine in more than 40 countries. Similarly to the diaspora members and the foreign affairs expert, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya stresses the importance of supporting Ukraine, while also standing for Belarus. Tens of thousands of Belarusians came up with Belarusian white-red-white flags which are the symbol of the democratic Belarus. Furthermore, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya highlighted one of the new initiatives by Pavel Liber called “The New Belarus”. “The New Belarus” is a platform for communication between Belarusians worldwide which offer a range of services provided by Belarusians.

Sviatlana Tsikhaouskaya: “This is a platform for communication between Belarusians worldwide, from “where to repair a computer” to “how to get a doctor consultation.” We hope for its quick development and engagement. What is more, the platform is testing the mechanism of tax-gathering firstly to support the platform and then to finance important projects for Belarusians.”

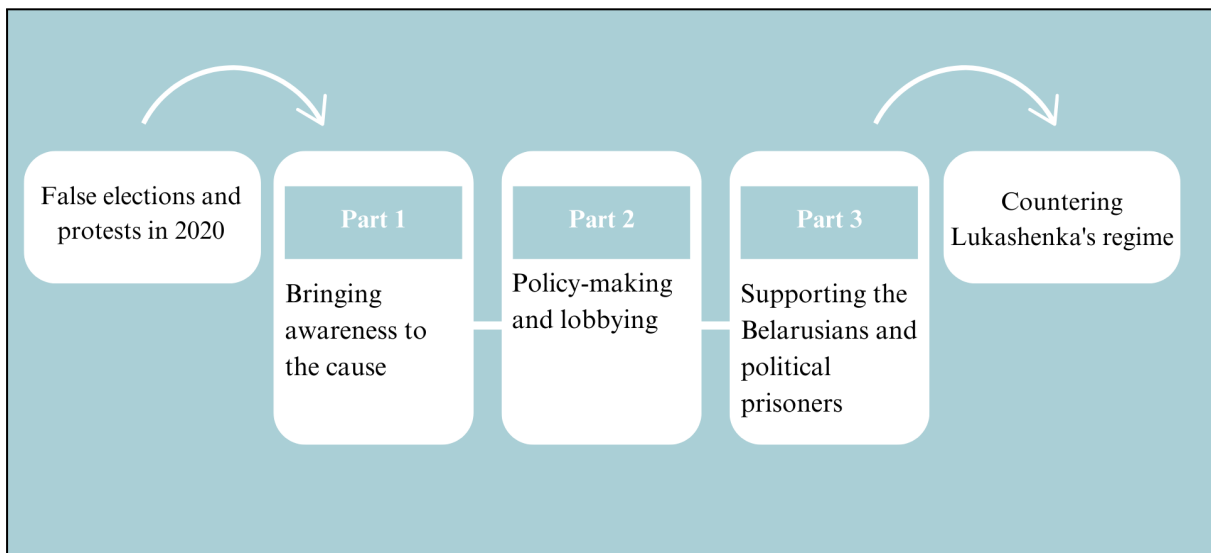


Figure 3. Tracing the strategies of the Belarusian diaspora. Conducted by the author of the thesis.

4.1.3 Relations with the European Union and the EU’s role

Belarus has four main allies: the Baltic countries and Poland. Estonia was strongly sided with the Belarusian people according to their sayings, the action part however can be argued – that applies to the whole European Union. When it comes to other countries, the further they are from Belarus, the less interest there generally is.

H: “Many people have accepted the fact that Belarus... is like it is. The interest was low and it can be challenging to increase that.”

The EU in general has been rather supportive. That, however, is highly due to the persona of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Her story received support and she has developed tight relations with the EU. The foreign affairs expert argues that the opposition and the allies could have rather put more focus on how to lock in the EU’s support so that the EU cannot step back. Unfortunately, the support for Belarus started to fade off the EU’s agenda. The financial

support was there, however, from a more practical side, the topic became less relevant. The foreign affairs expert states that she does not have a clear opinion about the effectiveness of the EU's support – they have done more than many people hoped, however the topic of Belarus fell off their priorities, and their role in solving the issue in Belarus is significant. The European Union is not fulfilling their full potential in managing the conflict.

In 2021, Belarus suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative. After that, the European Union stated that it continues to cooperate with the people of Belarus, more precisely, the official site of the European Council states that “the EU continues to engage with and support Belarusian citizens, civil society and independent media, including through a comprehensive plan of economic support for a democratic Belarus of up to €3 billion” (European Council, 2022). Hence, the EU's official standpoint is that it supports the democratic aspirations of the Belarusians.

Similarly to H, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya sees more room for development when it comes to the support from the European Union. The main challenge is that the EU seems to have a lack of understanding the severity of the situation in Belarus. Tsikhanouskaya sees that the main activities of the EU should concentrate on increasing assistance to the democratic forces, media and civil society of Belarus. Furthermore, it is important to put pressure on Lukashenka's regime with a) initiating the international tribunal against Lukashenka as a criminal and recognise his regime as a sponsor of terrorism; b) increase sanctions and impose secondary sanctions to block the regime's assets abroad; c) block the regime from taking the seat in the UN Security council; and d) declare all agreements of Lukashenka as void and illegal. Tsikhanouskaya also highlights the importance of international cooperation, as she suggests that the EU should initiate the coalition for independent Belarus with like-minded countries. The focus is mainly on international support and here, the EU has a significant role. To conclude, Tsikhanouskaya suggests that the EU should speak out in support of the independence of Belarus.

From the activist perspective, the effectiveness of the EU in supporting Belarus can be argued. The most effective form of support from the EU is financial support, however, the Belarusian diaspora has higher expectations when it comes to political and humanitarian aid, international support and real actions. With the beginning of war in Ukraine, the attention on Belarus has faded and there has been a shift in attitude towards Belarus.

Maria: "I definitely need to thank all the [EU and Estonian] authorities, I should thank the Estonian government that they issued the protection and we see that Estonian authorities and EU authorities are welcoming Tsikhanouskaya when she's here, they're ready to talk to her they're ready to talk with us. But at the same time we have sanctions and we have war and definitely the situation after the war became much worse. Before the war everyone was saying "oh my God Belarusians are so brave, Belarusians should be supported, should be protected". But then Lukashenko's regime started participating in war and many many people do not see the difference between the regime and the democratic part of the country."

According to Maria, the 'regular people' can not be blamed for not seeing the difference between the regime and the people of Belarus, however, she sees responsibility on the EU politicians. She argues that the EU politicians should be more aware of the situation with Belarus and not punish the people who are fighting with the regime themselves – it is an important note when it comes to sanctions. For instance, Belarusian students were banned from Estonian universities. One of the interviewees is a human rights student in Estonia and a refugee under international protection. She is studying here, under international protection, to later help to improve the situation in Belarus. Banning Belarusian students, however, will eliminate that opportunity for many young people in Belarus who are targeted by the regime. That will only help the regime in Belarus. There is another perspective, though. According to Irina, the sanctions for the Belarusian people are part of the process.

Irina: "I think it [sanctioning the general population] is [reasonable]. If you fight for democracy you face some situations which are not so comfortable for you and I think it's a temporary situation. It's better to be free without having access to international education or not being able to travel as you used to, than sitting in prison for nothing. It's not because of the function of the elections in Belarus but because of the war; it is like that and I take it as it must be."

Ihar: "I think European politics don't support the Belarusians enough. Of course, we are in the shadow of the war in Ukraine. And we absolutely understand that. But I think that the situation in Ukraine is very connected with the situation in

Belarus, because it's a belt of stability for Europe at the eastern side, at the eastern border. Not only in Ukraine and Belarus, but also in Moldova.”

Generally, the democratic Belarusians strongly support the sanctions directed at the regime. Furthermore, the activists are lobbying and working to help launch sanctions. The main criticism towards the European Union is the lack of reaction and activity behind the claims of supporting Belarus. Here, the diaspora is actively participating in raising awareness which are explained in subsection 4.1.4. On top of that, the EU has been welcoming to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team which is a largely appreciated phenomena among the Belarusian diaspora. According to Alesia, the European Union is well experienced in supporting any actors seeking and striving for democracy, but mainly when it comes to financial support. She argues that the EU is not putting enough pressure on the regime with sanctions and helping the political prisoners, and secondly, the legal framework for Belarusians. The lack of legal framework prevents many Belarusians from receiving any legal protection from the regime. The lack of legislation also affects the countries where the diasporas live as they have no data about the actual number of people living in the countries. For instance in Sweden, many Belarusians were living there illegally and belonged to the ‘grey zone’ before 2020. Considering that the amount of people who emigrated from Belarus after 2020 is higher, there are even more people living in the ‘grey zone’.

Alesia: “Management of asylum seekers is not the best in all the countries. Only in Poland, there is something called humanitarian residency permit that allows people to live there for at least three years under humanitarian protection. So it's a much easier procedure than asylum. And I think this is something that could be introduced in all the countries within the European Union, because it's an easy decision. And it shows how good it works in the Polish case.”

According to the diaspora members, the current asylum policy is not favouring the Belarusian refugees (who in most cases are not considered refugees due to the lack of legislation). Similarly, Ihar suggests that the Belarusian refugees should be accepted on the same terms as Ukrainians as those who emigrated after 2020 are not economic refugees but political refugees who fled from the violent regime.

Irina: “The attitude towards the Belarusian situation wasn't serious enough in the EU. I think they didn't treat the threat coming from the dictatorship or from the regime, from Lukashenko, as something which is really a threat for the whole continent, not just for the local territory like Belarus. And we see after that, we got this migrant crisis and then Belarus was involved into the war and now this new statement from Putin about the nuclear weapon – again a new threat. I think if the Western countries had been tougher with their attitude at the very beginning of our protests, the revolution, we could have had other results.”

4.1.5 Usage of the ICTs: Social media & media

Maria: “I think that social media was the one of the main guns, one of the main weapons of the people who were protesting.”

In Belarus, all of the media is state controlled – there is no free media and the media channels only represent the interests of the dictatorship. During the protests in 2020, the only source for information was social media. The role of social media channels, especially YouTube and Telegram is inherently important for the Belarusian diaspora in supporting their fight for democracy. All of the participants agree that the ICTs play a crucial role here. Social media has become a platform for alternative opinions. ICTs became the main alternative information source in the country and social media took the role of independent media. Social media platforms provide the Belarusians with news, opinion pieces and other media functions, especially with the development of technology and smartphones.

According to Alesia Rudnik – who has researched the role of social media during her PhD studies – it is often understood that Telegram is the main source of information for the Belarusians, especially during the protests in 2020. Here, the role of Instagram is often undermined.

Alesia: “I do research on this matter, and I talked to people who took part in the protests and they say that for many of them, actually, Instagram has become the source of information. Majority have used either Telegram or Instagram. So it

brought a lot of people to the streets. It's impossible for people to actually think that joining the protest is something normal, and it's something safe, and it's something legal. And that's it, that's how it worked. It [social media] was the platform of alternative thinking, and it was available across the whole country.”

Additionally to the role of being an alternative news outlet, social media was also used for daily communication. There was a change in this matter – the politicisation of the civil society in Belarus reflected on the social media messages as well. Before 2020, the group chats did not touch politics, but rather everyday matters. In 2020, there was a shift. Instead of talking about house renovation, people started discussing politics and the protests, and sharing information about them. The focus turned political. Alesia argues that the presence of social media was the main factor that made the protests available – otherwise there would have been no information about them, or the protests would have not been so large scale.

Alesia: “I think the penetration of the internet and the social media coverage across the whole country has impacted a lot of people finding the information, and also sharing it with each other so that basically triggered the big wave of protest.”

The importance or the presence of the ICTs did not fade after the protests, on the contrary to that social media still serves an important role for the diaspora. Social media is used in all aspects of the diaspora regarding their fight for democracy.

4.1.6 Democratisation in Belarus and its limits

Russia, especially with Putin in power and the ongoing war in Ukraine, remains the biggest obstacle for regime change in Belarus. There is a common understanding among the Belarusians that the regime in Russia must change in order for it to change in Belarus. Here, Ukraine also plays an important role. The dynamics between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are complicated – the Belarusians do not support the war in Ukraine and it is utterly important to differentiate the regime from the people. Opposed to Lukashenka’s regime, the Belarusian pro-democracy movement is supporting Ukraine and fighting with both Putin and Lukashenka (Nix & Dietzen, 2023). However, the diaspora and the opposition needs to put more effort into spreading this narrative to the public. Here, cooperation with local and

international politicians is important. Moreover, the hope for both Belarusians and Ukrainians lies in the European Union and the US.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “If we don’t stop Lukashenka and Russia today, the world will have to pay a much higher price later. Lukashenka and Putin understand only the language of power. The more aggressive and comprehensive the Western response, the quicker this war will end. If Russia senses weakness among our allies, it will be taken as a green light to continue the slaughter. Russian troops must be withdrawn not only from Ukraine but also from Belarus.”

From an activist perspective, there is a strong belief that when Ukraine wins the war, it will also help the regime change in Belarus. Belarus is supporting Ukraine in different ways: communication, financial and humanitarian aid and directly fighting in Ukraine against Russia. For instance, there is the Kastus Kalinouski regiment which is a military formation within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, created in March 2022 to protect Ukraine from Russian invasion and it consists of Belarusian volunteers (The Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, 2023; Skove, 2023). After the war started, the Belarusian diaspora is actively working with the Ukrainian diaspora, has joined many initiatives and is generally in deep contact with them.

Maria: “All of us [Belarusians] know that Russia will lose this war. And of course, the only supporter of Lukashenko is Putin, and we are fighting against two dictators, not against one, because now we know that Putin was ready to invade the country [Belarus], or to put his troops in Belarus. I really hope that the war in Ukraine will help to change the regime in Belarus.”

All of the interviewees agree that the regime in Belarus is dependent on Russia and in order for Belarus to reach democracy, the regime, or at least the leader, of Russia needs to change. There are doubts that Russia will reach democracy in the near future but the change in the power structures would still give an opportunity to Belarus.

Alesia: “For Belarus to become free from what is happening between Putin and Lukashenko today, there is someone else who needs to be in power in Russia, and this person needs to be a little bit more liberal than Putin, and not take part in the

war. Then it will be enough for the Belarusian society to have a window of opportunity at least to try again to change the regime.”

Irina: “With such a strong connection between two regimes [Russia and Belarus], it's [regime change in Belarus] impossible, unfortunately. And the future, in my opinion, is full stagnation in economics, poverty and massive emigration of the most active and intelligent people, and loss of independence. That's why Ukraine must help us. That's why some Belarusians are fighting.”

Ihar: “According to the independent opinion polls in Belarus, 85% of Belarusians don't support war. But it is not only Ukraine winning the war, it's the whole West. I think only if pressure will continue on the Russian regime, change in Belarus is possible. I am not sure whether Ukraine winning the war would change the situation in Belarus.”

According to Tsikhanouskaya (2023), there is a clear connection between the destiny of Ukraine and the destiny of Belarus. Furthermore, Tsikhanouskaya (2023) argues that when the people of Ukraine win, Belarusians will see the loss of Putin and will be inspired to reject the dependency that Russia has set on Belarus. That is one of the reasons for the democratic activists from Belarus working to resist the war with their involvement in different anti-war activities (Nix & Dietzen, 2023). For instance, there are cyber partisans. The Cyber Partisans initiative has impacted the technical infrastructure of the Belarusian government, while the railway partisans movement has created obstacles in the logistics support provided to Russian forces during the initial phase of the conflict (Nix & Dietzen, 2023). Moreover, these activists are engaged in combating propaganda and disinformation by conveying the truth about the war to the Belarusian populace (Nix & Dietzen, 2023).

According to the foreign affairs expert perspective, the Belarusian diaspora and its opposition is working hard to challenge the regime in Belarus. However, there are more dimensions into the process of regime change – as previously mentioned, stating the obvious, Lukashenka and Russia.

Lukashenka has cleverly played his role as a ‘bridge’ between Russia and Belarus, however, it is important to note that his government is rather Russifying Belarus. The Belarusian

opposition has stated that the only way for Lukashenka to maintain his regime is to move towards a greater integration with Russia.

H: “Lukashenka has efficiently played his role for a very long time and he always runs to Putin. They take their submissive pictures and that’s all very ‘nice’, however, Lukashenka has so far tried to maintain some sort of difference between Russia and Belarus. The war in Ukraine messed up things for Lukashenka, he recognised that he still had some sort of power.”



Figure 4. An example of a classical submissive picture of Lukashenka. Source: Center for Eastern Studies, 2020.

The military of Belarus is already strongly controlled by Lukashenka. However, since Lukashenka’s regime relies strongly on Russia, the war in Ukraine has challenged Lukashenka’s ‘independence’ as a dictator. The Belarusian border is approximately 80 kilometres from Kyiv and Russia expects unconditional support from Lukashenka, and the war is no exception. The people in Belarus do not want to join the war, they do not want to fight in Ukraine, and Lukashenka knows that. The dictator allows Russia to use their bases, however, he disagrees with sending Belarusian troops to Ukraine. That makes Lukashenka’s future as a dictator and Putin’s puppet uncertain. Inevitably, Putin and Lukashenka have

strong ties, and the regime change does not only depend on Lukashenka or the strength of his regime.

H: “Moscow might want to change Lukashenka for someone else and I believe that Lukashenka is also afraid of it. Regime change in Belarus is possible without the fall of Putin, however, in that case, Putin is the one to change the regime – he is the one who decides that it’s time for someone new.”

When it comes to the democratic future of Belarus, the most crucial thing is the direction in which the majority of Belarusians are moving. The diaspora and the opposition are planting the roots of democracy and the majority living in Belarus needs to have similar aspirations. They do not have the experience with democracy, hence it can be a long process. They need to deeply feel the need for a democratic change – the same effect that took place in Estonia during the end of the occupation by the USSR.

H: “I think things in Belarus need to get worse before they can get better. That the years of ‘eating potato peels’ is worth it – when we look at the end of the Soviet period in Estonia, the people were ready to do anything to escape from the Soviet occupation. For them, the best thing that could even happen was that no more orders would come from Moscow.”

The foreign affairs expert argues that the Belarusian majority is not there yet and their democratic aspirations are not strong enough. That is also the most important thing for the diaspora, to develop a long-term strategy to engage with the people in Belarus, and to start practising them with the idea of democratic regime. According to the foreign affairs expert, that is the most crucial thing for the diaspora.

When it comes to the future prospects of the democratic Belarus, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya argues that the new direction will depend on the will of the Belarusians. However, after 24.02.2022, the attitude of the Belarusians has changed. In 2020, the geopolitical choice was not relevant as the attention was mainly on protesting against the false elections.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: “When the war started, it became obvious that ‘Russian’ means war and poverty. Europe means safety and prosperity.

Pro-European moods are growing. Belarus should leave Belarus-Russia Union State, CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), and all agreements with Russia that harm our national interests.”

While this research does not intend to predict the future, there is an understanding about the strategy and direction. According to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the opposition and the diaspora are preparing reforms to make Belarus closer to Europe. However, when it comes to joining the EU or NATO, Tsikhanouskaya states that this decision is up to Belarusians. Furthermore, these decisions will be made after the changes in the country and Tsikhanouskaya stresses that only the Belarusians can decide on their own future and only they can make the choice. This illustrates the development of the democratic narrative that the democratic opposition is building. Furthermore, it is aligned with the recommendation of the foreign affairs specialist to start building the democratic idea or mindset amongst the Belarusians.

To illustrate the interviews with the diaspora members, I have prepared a word cloud in Figure 5.

5 Discussion and recommendations

In this section, I will elaborate on the findings based on the five themes that emerged from the theoretical framework and literature review. Furthermore, I will answer the research questions.

Role of the diaspora & civil society

After 2020, there was a significant shift in the essence of the diaspora. There are two waves of the diaspora: before 2020 and after 2020. The diaspora after 2020 is largely politicised and as mentioned by the foreign affairs expert, “carries the hope for the whole country”.

The main role of the diaspora is to represent the Belarusians and the interests of the democratic Belarus. The diaspora and the democratic opposition are the main actors that carry the initiatives and responsibilities for the democratic future of the country. As stated by Bedford & Vinatier (2019), the diaspora does not necessarily aim to overthrow a dictatorship and this applies in the case of the Belarusian diaspora that is countering the regime. Rather, the diaspora is focusing on the process of “authoritarian erosion” (Bedford & Vinatier, 2019) by establishing a democratic alternative as well as implementing the narrative of the democratic thought in the country. That is implemented through different initiatives from diaspora and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The focus is both on the diaspora and people still living in Belarus, though the latter is challenged by the current regime.

As the civil society of Belarus has largely fled the country and is now part of the diaspora, the civil society has gained a more *transnational* dimension. As suggested in the theoretical framework, the civil society in Belarus can be either *transnational* or *international*. The majority of the civil society has fled the country and most of the democratic opposition is active abroad, however, since the diaspora is actively initiating communication with those living in Belarus, the civil society remains *transnational*.

Opposition and diaspora: strategies and challenges

The findings of this thesis indicate that there are three main ways the diaspora is countering the regime in Belarus. These are: a) bringing attention to the cause; b) lobbying and policy-making; and c) supporting the Belarusians.

Neelen (2022) suggests that one of the controversies in the strategies or the directions among the diaspora are the future relations with Russia. The analysis shows that this is not the case in 2023. Even though Russia is the main economic partner of Belarus (Neelen, 2022), the war in Ukraine has increased the need for the democratic Belarus to detach from Russia. Furthermore, the findings indicate a clear will to gain independence and the democratic opposition sees the future as a country that is no longer dependent on Russia. The detachment from Russia is one of the main interests amongst the diaspora.

Diamond (1994) suggests that the process of democratisation often has origins of grassroots movements. Similarly, the foreign affairs expert suggests that the diaspora and the opposition should focus on the changes in Belarus. One of the keys here is to start developing the roots of the idea of democracy to the nation and the analysis shows that both from the perspective of the diaspora members and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, implementing the narrative of the democratic Belarus is a priority. The politicisation of the diaspora after 2020 has led to a more united community amongst the diaspora members, cooperation between the diaspora and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office as well as different initiatives to support the Belarusians. Diamond (1994) highlights the importance of the mobilisation of civil society and its role in being a source of pressure for democratic change. The findings of this research show that the diaspora has become more united or mobilised after 2020 and their main goal is to stand for the democratic change in Belarus.

The foreign affairs expert stresses the importance of having a clear structure and developing a common strategy, which remains a challenge. However, there is a will and resources to develop a more effective strategic approach. Diamond (1994) argues that when it comes to the democratic pressure, the power is rather in the hands of organisations than an individual, hence it is important to focus on the unity of the diaspora and the nation in general.

Relations with the European Union and its role

According to Hale (2013), one of the conditions for regime change is the structural conditions that are supporting a new regime. In the context of Belarus, there are no structural conditions in the country. However, the focus here is on the European Union which plays an important role in supporting the democratic Belarus and the democratic opposition.

The analysis shows that the expectations towards the European Union are higher. The diaspora members are appreciative of the help so far. However, the diaspora, the foreign affairs expert and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya agree that the EU is not fulfilling their full potential. The EU has been efficient in providing financial aid, however, the biggest challenges are about political and humanitarian aid as well as legislation. The diaspora members and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya stress the need for direct and clear sanctions on the regime as there is not enough pressure on the current regime.

The EU also has an important role on the international arena. The interviewed Belarusians are dedicated to helping Ukraine and highlight the interconnection between Belarus and Ukraine. Meanwhile, the attitude towards Belarus is shifted on the narrative of Lukashenka. Here, the EU should take a clear stance to support the democratic Belarus.

As a practical addition to this thesis, I have developed policy recommendations for the EU which are based on the analysis.

ICTs – social media, media

The ICTs have a crucial role in countering the regime in Belarus. To begin with, social media was the main channel to communicate during the protests in 2020. Furthermore, the usage of social media has changed with the politicisation of civil society – after 2020, social media became a weapon for the democratic Belarus.

Stein (2017) suggests that the Internet can serve as a tool for mass mobilisation, especially in the case of transnational social movements. The findings show that this applies in the case of Belarus. Social media has helped to mobilise the Belarusians, both in 2020 and after. As Kulakevich (2022) argues, social media is used as a “liberation technology” among Belarusians.

The usage of ICTs was apparent in every interview and is tightly connected to the activities and goals of the diaspora. The diaspora is using media and social media for bringing attention to the cause, starting different online initiatives, communicating with people living in Belarus and promoting the agenda of the democratic Belarus. Furthermore, the ICTs fill a role of an alternative news channel as it is the only way for the Belarusians living in the country to

access news that are not state controlled. Furthermore, the ICTs offer an opportunity for different initiatives, for instance the platform “The New Belarus”.

Democratisation and its limits

The ongoing authoritarianism in Belarus can be explained through a historical examination, more precisely Belarus’ tight connections with Russia (Mantchev, 2016). According to Mantchev (2016), the latter is a result of a combination of political violence, long-standing absence of independent statehood and demographic change. The findings of the analysis align with that as Russia remains the biggest challenge for Belarus. The economic and historical ties are not only affecting the country internally, but also internationally. There seems to be a lack of understanding among the public regarding distinguishing the country with Russia, or more specifically, distinguishing the regime which is connected to Russia from the democratic opposition of Belarus. After Russia started the full-scale war in Ukraine, that phenomenon has been more apparent as Belarus is now rather in the background.

The analysis shows that the regime in Belarus is now not only dependent on Russia but also Ukraine. Hence, the Belarusian democratic opposition is actively fighting against two regimes – Lukashenka and Putin. The diaspora and the opposition need to put more effort into spreading this narrative to the public and cooperation with local and international politicians is important. The foreign affairs expert argues that the reason for the matter is that there is a lack of understanding amongst both the public and international politicians about the severity of the situation in Belarus is rooted in misreading the political situation. Here, the strategy of raising awareness should be used more. It is apparent that both the diaspora and Tsikhanouskaya’s Office are supporting the Ukrainians through different initiatives, and the diaspora should focus more on promoting these activities.

When it comes to the current regime, the direction regarding the relations with Russia are critical. Lukashenka is moving towards greater integration with Russia, however, the democratic opposition aspires to regain independence from Russia and lose the structure of current relations with Russia. The shift is moving towards Europe and the diaspora has a crucial role in narrating the future of Belarus.

The aim of this research paper was to find out the ways in which the diaspora is affecting the regime in Belarus. For that, I prepared two research questions and I will now elaborate on the answers.

Q1 Which strategies is the Belarusian diaspora using to fight Lukashenka's regime?

The diaspora is using three main strategies when it comes to countering Lukashenka's regime:

Raising awareness and bringing attention to the cause

Raising awareness among the public and the politicians is one of the key activities for the diaspora. The main messages of the diaspora focus on political prisoners, promoting the democratic agenda, being a source of information, acting as a human resource, and representing the Belarusians and their culture.

Lobbying and policy-making

The diaspora has started several different initiatives to support the Belarusians and their agenda. There are think-tanks, international organisations, different events and crowdfunding projects. The activities range from political to cultural ones.

Supporting Belarusians and political prisoners

The diaspora represents the interests of the Belarusians in the international community and acts as a platform for those who cannot counter the regime in Belarus. Furthermore, the focus is on supporting the families of political prisoners as well as highlighting the cases among the public. The diaspora has become more united after 2020 and supporting each other plays an important role.

Q2 In which ways does the usage of ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) help the Belarusian diaspora with fighting against Lukashenka's regime?

The usage of ICTs plays an important role in the process of countering Lukashenka's regime. The findings indicate that the main roles of the ICTs are the following:

Communication tool amongst the diaspora and people living in Belarus

The diaspora represents the voice of Belarusians and the ICTs give them a chance to connect to those people that still live in Belarus.

Source of news and media awareness

The media in Belarus is state controlled and the ICTs have the role of an alternative news channel. Furthermore, the ICTs are used to raise awareness about the situation in Belarus and the importance of them was apparent in every interview.

Mobilisation tool

ICTs are used as a ‘liberation tool’. Moreover, ICTs have played a significant role in the process of mobilising the people during the protests in 2020 as well as the diaspora.

5.1 Recommendations for Estonia

Based on the analysis of the interviews with the diaspora members living in Estonia, I have developed the suggestions on how to support the Belarusians who have fled from the country due to their security. As the situation for civil society activists in Belarus is highly dangerous, it is important to develop strategies on supporting the diaspora. The case of Belarus carries a high security risk for not only the individuals but also Europe. Supporting the fight against the dictatorship in the country is a common interest for the European Union and its Member States, including Estonia. With Russia being a high level security risk, supporting the democratisation process in Belarus – which currently acts as an extension of Putin’s Russia – should belong among the priorities. This will not only show solidarity with the Belarusians, but will also help to pave the way towards a more democratic Europe and diminishing the power of Putin.

The recommendations for Estonia are the following:

1) Showing clear support for the Belarusians fighting for democracy

Estonia should show support for the Belarusians not only with words but with actions. Estonians politicians and Parliament Members have already met with the Belarusian opposition leader, however, there needs to be a common strategy in the decision-making process to avoid cases like banning Belarusian students from studying in Estonia. It is important to be coherent in public messages.

2) Forming working groups within the governmental institutions

Developing working groups with foreign affairs experts who are aware of the situation in Belarus can advise the politicians and policy-makers on the matter. Furthermore, the working groups can inform the public, work on raising awareness and public campaigns. The working groups can cooperate with local Belarusians and the Tsikhanouskaya’s Office to understand the situation. The working groups are needed not only for raising awareness among the

general population, but also authorities, i.e. migration workers and police. There was an instance, where a Belarusian refugee under international protection was applying for new documents in Estonia and the police suggested that she should apply for it in Belarus, the country where the refugee had to escape from. To prevent such cases, it is utterly important for the public sector employees to be aware of the situation in Belarus. The situation in Belarus is important to Estonia not only due to humanitarian reasons but also as the current regime presents a clear security risk for Estonia due to its tight connections with Russia. Estonia, with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, has been one of the strongest partners and supporters for the Belarusian democratic movement and the working groups would be a clear way to continue that.

3) International Office for the Belarusian refugees

It is important to remember that most of the people who have fled from Belarus after 2020 are political refugees and they are facing serious security risks in their home country. They need legal protection. Since people with such backgrounds often face trauma and grief, it is important to develop supporting networks to assist with the legal matters and integration process. International Offices are a common way to support refugees and migrants and establishing such institutions could serve as a bridge between the local community and foreigners.

4) Changing the name in Estonian to ‘Belarus’

Currently, the Estonian name for Belarus translates into ‘White Russia’ which instantly associates Belarus to Russia. Some countries in the EU have already adapted the new name for Belarus and I suggest Estonia should follow the lead.

5.2 Recommendations for the European Union

In addition to the recommendations for Estonia, I have developed recommendations for the European Union. The importance of the EU has been present in the analysis and though the diaspora members are appreciative of the aid provided by the EU, there are some challenges that have emerged from the analysis. The political situation in Belarus is a challenge for the whole continent and the cooperation between the Belarusian diaspora and the EU is crucial to counter the regime. Furthermore, these recommendations intend to help the policy-makers at

the EU level have a more strategic approach on addressing the issue which is based on empirical evidence.

1) Clear sanctions to the regime

The sanctions to the Belarusian regime are absolutely necessary, however, for the sanctions to fulfil their goal of putting pressure on the regime, it is important that they are actually clearly targeted. Sanctioning citizens who are endangered by the regime is not effective as it gives Lukashenka more power over the society and restricts the actions of civil society. There are many experts among the Belarusian diaspora who can be consulted on launching the sanctions as they have clear knowledge and strategies on pressuring the regime with that method.

2) Clear support for the democratic Belarus

The European Union is promoting democratic values and is supporting the democratic aspirations of Belarus. Although the EU has already adopted effective methods on supporting the diaspora, there should be a common strategy for the EU and its Member States to prevent hypocrisy and putting the Belarusian democratic movement into danger. The EU already has developed relations with the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the EU should continue on strengthening those relations and focusing on cooperation. Furthermore, it is utterly important for the EU and its decision-makers to distinguish the people of Belarus from the regime and adapt this differentiation to its policies regarding Belarus.

3) Strategy for political and humanitarian assistance for Belarus

The Belarusians who have escaped the country after 2020 should be provided international protection and they should be considered as refugees. The current legal framework is lacking and the EU needs to adapt a strategy that is protecting the democratic interests and human rights in Belarus. There is a lack of political and humanitarian initiatives, and here the EU should collaborate with the diaspora members to develop the necessary strategy(ies) and support the activities of the diaspora.

4) Developing a legal framework

Currently, there is a lack of legislation which could protect the Belarusians. I argue that similarly to Poland, the EU should adopt a policy which allows it to provide humanitarian visas to Belarusians, or provide the Belarusians with refugee status. There needs to be an

understanding that the people who emigrate from Belarus are not economic migrants but political refugees and their lives are in danger in this country.

Conclusion

After the fraudulent presidential elections and protests in 2020, a large part of the Belarusian democratic opposition has fled the country's oppressive regime to find security. The democratic resistance of the Belarusians continues, however, the resistance has moved out of the country and has become a matter of the diaspora.

The political situation in Belarus is often considered an oxymoron and has been examined through historical narratives. Belarus is the only country from the post-soviet space that is still strongly rooted in the experience of the USSR. Moreover, Viačorka (2020) argues that Belarus is a reminder that the USSR is still going through the process of collapsing as the country is strongly under the influence of Russia and the government embraces the soviet agenda with the symbols, traditions and narratives of the USSR. Due to these circumstances, the concept of civil society was not relevant in Belarus until 2020. More precisely, civil society did not picture a threat of any kind to the country's authoritarian rule and the society in general was largely depoliticised. With the events in 2020, the situation in the country changed and the protests were a remarkable milestone for the society of Belarus. The main outcome of the protests was the politicisation of the Belarusian civil society and diaspora. Furthermore, the protests led to the emergence of a political opposition which is now represented by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her Office. This thesis looks at the Belarusian diaspora in the timeline of 2020-2023, which includes the false elections and protests in 2020, suspension of the EaP in 2021 and Russian full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022.

In authoritarian regimes, civil society can have a critical role in advocating for democracy, human rights, and freedoms and can that way participate in the development of democratisation. The protests in 2020 intended to do that and aimed to move towards a more democratic regime. However, Lukashenka's authoritarian regime remained in power and the pressure on the civil society of Belarus continued to grow. Thus, the civil society of Belarus became even more oppressed and according to Lokshina (2021), the regime started a war on the country's civil society. Hence, the mainstream approaches on the role of civil society in authoritarian regimes are not applicable in the case of Belarus. Rather, one must concentrate on the role of the diaspora which, according to this study, plays a pivotal role in countering the authoritarian regime.

The role of the diaspora in countering authoritarian regimes has not been widely researched before. Koinova (2009) argues that the diaspora members that live in a democratic country are often more involved in supporting the process of democratisation in their home country. This study looks at the Belarusian diaspora members that live in democratic countries, yet the role of the regime in the host country is not under the focus. Hence, researching the impact of the host country's regime can be focused on in further studies. This research sheds a light on the role of a newly politicised diaspora which is focused on countering the regime in Belarus. Furthermore, the Belarusian diaspora has changed in terms of the integration process in the host country. With the politicisation of a new wave of the diaspora, the members maintained their national identity. This research suggests that the matter of 'politicisation' among the diaspora is an important component in the contribution to countering an authoritarian regime.

Furthermore, when looking at the connections between tyrannical regimes and diasporas, the results of this thesis suggest that the presence of an active diaspora is one of the key factors in countering the regime. The diaspora, as a democratic opposition, can provide a platform to organise and mobilise resources to support democratic values and democratic transition. Through transnational networks and the usage of the ICTs, diaspora communities can bring attention to political developments in their countries of origin, advocate for change, provide support for civil society organisations and lobby for international support. This way, the diaspora can play a vital role in promoting democratic values and countering authoritarianism. As suggested by Hale (2013), a well structured opposition movement is one of the pre-requisites of the occurrence of regime change. That also applies in the case of the diaspora, a well established structure and strategies are a crucial element in its success.

The objective of this Master's thesis was to research the ways in which the authoritarian regime of Lukashenka is countered by the Belarusian diaspora. The analysis is based on five themes that emerged from the theoretical framework and literature review in chapter 2. To research the topic, I conducted nine interviews and analysed them using qualitative methods and process tracing. The analysis consists of three perspectives: the Belarusian diaspora, a foreign affairs expert and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

The results of this research show that the Belarusian diaspora is using three main strategies to counter Lukashenka's regime and contributes to the process of 'authoritarian erosion'. The strategies are the following: a) raising awareness and bringing attention to the cause; b)

lobbying and policy-making; and c) supporting Belarusians and political prisoners. The strategies are used by both the interviewed diaspora members as well as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her Office. The findings show that the diaspora has the most crucial role in countering the regime. However, the diaspora faces two main challenges. The diaspora members share a vision of a democratic Belarus, yet, there is a lack of a common strategy in pursuing their goal. Secondly, the question of Russia remains a challenge as the country shows a clear aggression and military ambitions in their neighbouring countries. Furthermore, Russia's strong connection with the current regime poses a challenge and a threat to the whole continent.

The importance of the ICTs is present in every strategy the diaspora is using. Furthermore, the ICTs are helping the diaspora in their activities in the following ways: a) communication tool amongst the diaspora and people living in Belarus; b) source of news and media awareness; and c) mobilisation tool. To conclude, the ICTs serve as a 'liberation tool' and support the democratic opposition of Belarus in their activities.

This research intends to fill a gap in the existing literature regarding the role of the Belarusian diaspora in countering Lukashenka's regime by providing insight about the strategies the diaspora has adopted. Furthermore, the analysis included three different perspectives to offer a more diverse understanding of the diaspora. This research can also contribute to a larger narrative about the ways in which the diaspora members can engage in promoting democracy and challenging tyrannical regimes in their countries of origin. By examining the case of Belarus, I provided empirical evidence to enrich existing research and frameworks regarding the topic. Furthermore, this thesis offers practical insights for policy-makers, civil society organisations and Belarusian activists as I have developed policy recommendations based on the empirical findings for both Estonia and the European Union.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE DIASPORA MEMBERS

1. How do you see the role or importance of the Belarusian diaspora in the fight for democracy?
2. Why do you think the protests in 2020 did not fulfil their goal?
3. What are the main messages the diaspora should focus on?
4. How do you see the role of the EU and EU countries in supporting Belarusians? What are the needs or expectations for the international community?
5. How much is the diaspora connected to activists or civil society members in the country and how much social media interaction is there? Please describe it.
6. In which ways has the ICT revolution helped the Belarusian civil society in its activities?
7. How connected is the Belarusian diaspora? How strong is the community? Please elaborate
8. What are the prospects of Belarus and how possible is the regime change when the regime in Russia won't change?
9. How do you see the role of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office? What's the potential and what are the shortcomings?
10. How does the war in Ukraine affect the Belarusian diaspora and what challenges has it brought?
11. How do you see the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya - do you see her as a legitimate leader of the opposition in exile?
12. If we think about Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office as an alternative government of Belarus, how much or in which ways can it contribute to the fight against Russia in Ukraine?
13. How do you see the future of the diaspora? Is there a possibility that democratic de facto Belarus will begin to only exist outside of the actual country?

APPENDIX 2 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS EXPERT

1. Please tell me about your background and your connection to the topic
2. What were the main objectives of the opposition before 2020 and what are they now?
3. How effective do you see the activities of the opposition and the diaspora after 2020?
4. How do you see the role of the EU in supporting Belarusians? Is it effective? What are the shortcomings?
5. Why do you think the protests in 2020 did not fulfil their goal?
6. What kind of strategies or methods should the diaspora and opposition use to weaken Lukashenka's regime?
7. What is the role of Russia, can the regime in Belarus be conquered separately from Russia? How does the war in Ukraine affect the Belarusians and their fight for democracy?
8. Do you see the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as an official government in exile?
9. What are the prospects of the democratisation process in Belarus?

APPENDIX 3 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA

Dear Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya,

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to interview you for my Master's thesis. The purpose of the thesis is to analyse the strategies of the Belarusian diaspora on the current authoritarian regime led by Aleksandr Lukashenka. The empirical part consists of two parts: interviews with members of the Belarusian diaspora and interview with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

I hereby confirm that the materials will only be used for research purposes if not agreed differently. I will keep the best interests of the democratic Belarus in mind and strictly oppose the presidency and legitimacy of Aleksandr Lukashenka.

I have provided the team of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya with correct and transparent information and motive about my thesis. I am ready to answer any additional questions and requests at any time convenient.

The interview will be conducted in written form. By answering the interview questions, the participant confirms that she agrees to participate in the interview.

Best regards

Kristel Birgit Potsepp

University of Tartu, MA European Studies / author of the thesis

Questions:

1. You have stated that the protest against the regime in Belarus will take other forms. In which forms are the protests taking place after 2020? How do you see the role of social media and the internet?
2. Belarus is considered as a puppet state of Russia which is *de facto* occupied. Which events would be necessary to change the current form of relations and connections with Russia?
3. When Lukashenka's power will be suspended, how will the new government manage the relations and the situation with Russia?
4. What are the possibilities of regime change in Belarus with Putin still in power?
5. What is the Office of Tsikhanouskaya doing to support Ukraine in the war with Russia? What are the limitations and challenges?
6. How is the Office of Tsikhanouskaya supporting and mobilising the diaspora? How connected is the diaspora?
7. What are the expectations for the European Union in fighting for democracy in Belarus? How effective do you see the cooperation and what are the challenges?
8. What are the main messages that the Office of Tsikhanouskaya is focusing on?
9. Does the Office of Tsikhanouskaya aim to be the official government in exile? What are the limitations of pursuing the role of the official government in exile?
10. What are the military aspirations of the Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office and the future democratic Belarus? How and to what extent are you planning to shape the military?

11. Is the activity of the opposition and active diaspora members directed only to the situation inside Belarus or is it a possibility that the diaspora will become a separate community which represents the democratic Belarus outside the country with a legitimate exile government?

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