

# Power, People, and the Political: Understanding the Many Crises in Belarus

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## Abstract

The many recent crises in Belarus are often seen through the prism of democratization, post-communist transition, and nation- and identity-building. As a rule, it is put into the context of the 1989 democratization in Central and Eastern Europe and compared with similar societal mobilization in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004; 2014), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). This article, however, argues that while these theoretical approaches provide an important explanatory potential, they nevertheless fail to account for informal, hidden, and unstable processes presently unfolding in the Belarusian society, leading to profound change. We argue that, in the vulnerable, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world of today, our knowledge and ability to plan and achieve desirable outcomes are limited in contrast to a largely positivist or interpretivist epistemology of the mainstream theories, which conceive of the world as a closed system. In this article, we offer an alternative explanation of the many crises in Belarus by drawing on the insights of *complexity-thinking* to suggest that (hidden) transformative change in the country is now irreversible.

**Keywords:** complexity-thinking; Belarus; governance; change

## Introduction

On August 9, 2020, Belarusians went to the polls to vote for a new president. Prior to the election, there were already signs of state intervention manifested through extrajudicial violence and imprisonment of political candidates, as well as ordinary citizens (European Parliament 2020). How far the state was prepared to go to ensure another landslide victory for Alexander Lukashenko, who had been in power for 26 years, was a key question in people's minds. The ensuing aftermath, however, exceeded all expectations. It was not that Lukashenko claimed an 80.10% victory (Ibid.) that shocked the country and the world; it was the cynical and blatant way he stole the vote and then brutally thwarted hundreds of thousands peaceful protests by using special forces (OMON), the police, and the army, expecting people's silent compliance. When that did not occur, and international sanctions followed, Lukashenko chose to stage a major humanitarian crisis on the border with the European Union (EU) and then lent his support to Russia's aggression against Ukraine (Shraibman 2022).

Nearly two years on from the watershed moment of the August 2020 election, Belarus seems a different country: the mass protests faded away; the remaining independent media were purged; digital platforms were banned or declared extremist; dissident voices were forced out of the country;

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and those who remained were silenced through incarceration, torture, abuse, threat of unemployment, child abduction, or murder. Some tried to protest against Belarus' involvement in Russia's war, but the gatherings were disparate and easily dispersed (Belarus Watch 2022). In short, on the surface, Belarus seems to have been "returned" to "normal," with its policed way of life and state-organized activities, although finding itself much poorer and more isolated and militarized thanks to the presence of Russian troops on its territory.

In reality, today's Belarus is facing at least four profound and transformative crises with long-term consequences for the country's future: economic, humanitarian, political, and military. The country is on the verge of *economic default*, facilitated by its growing dependency on Russia and the five rounds of sanctions imposed by the West. Its inflation literally doubled in the past month, reaching 10.4% in January 2022, and averaging 220.3% over a decade (Trading Economics 2022). This spiked consumer prices and caused massive devaluation of the Belarusian rouble, which hitherto had been kept under tight control on presidential orders. Even more concerning is a *humanitarian crisis* triggered by Lukashenko's staging a hand-made migrant crisis on the border with the European Union (EU) in November 2021, enticing thousands of refugees of mainly Iraqi Kurdistan origin to come to the country on the promise of a free passage to the EU (BBC News 2021). In response, Lithuania had to declare a state of emergency and Estonia – to request full NATO involvement (Mortensen 2021). The *political crisis*, however, is most profound, with nearly 50,000 people detained, beaten, and tortured, and over 1,000 becoming political prisoners (Spring96 2021). Many young people who had participated in protests lost their jobs and the right to work or study in the country, and had to flee. The February 2022 constitutional referendum did not bring any respite to the crisis: instead, it caused further rupture between the anti-government and pro-Lukashenko's supporters, this time also assisted by the presence of the Russian troops. Connectedly, the *military crisis* is unfolding in the country, engulfing Belarus deeper into Russia's fold and its war with Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022. While Belarus still refrains from committing its troops to the war, the fact that it rendered the use of its land for Russia's "special operation," leaving 2.3 million people displaced and several millions in peril at home, makes it a war accomplice (United Nations Foundation 2022). Due to these interrelated crises, Belarus was described as a "ticking bomb" (Beatty 2006) – seemingly orderly on the surface and seismic deep down.

Paradoxically, however, despite these unfolding and deepening crises, there is a strong sense<sup>1</sup> that change is afoot: it may not be immediate, but it feels palpable and irreversible, at least in the way people still feel about the protests, violence, and the war (Astapenia 2021–2022). It makes the authorities nervous, rank-and-file aloof, and those on the ground or underground quietly resentful of, and resistant to, the imposed status quo. How can we explain this acute sense of *happening* with no visible signs of change? How do we all know that those powerful inputs into a complex system of Belarusian life, which occurred over the summer/autumn 2020, are not begone and thwarted but instead like protons in the quantum world, continue their pairing work in invisible and relational ways? Why do we feel that those localized impulses are already altering the system from within – similar to a "butterfly effect" in the chaos theory – and can cause its complete overhaul thereafter? More concretely, how can we explain the following: defiant and fearless female squadrons in red and white, regularly appearing throughout the capital; revolutionary street art flashing under the police's nose; and people's national embassies mushrooming and connecting across the globe to support the displaced and affected Belarusians? In other words, how can we understand the ongoing societal change and Belarus' manyfold crises unfolding in the country since the August 2020 election, with the political being at the heart of it all?

To date, all these crises in Belarus have been examined through the prisms of democratization and nation- and identity-building. It is often put into the context of the 1989 democratization in Central and Eastern Europe (Bekus and Gabowitsch 2021) and compared with similar societal mobilization, or what is known as the colored revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004; 2014), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). This article argues that while these theoretical approaches provide important explanations, they nevertheless fail to account for informal, hidden, and unstable processes

unfolding in society daily, inevitably leading to political change. They often overlook non-organized forms and hidden networks of civil society and tend to focus on fixed structures and institutions. On a deeper level, they build on a positivist epistemology understanding societal processes as linear, measurable, and predictable (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; O'Donnell, Cullell, and Iazzetta 2004). Furthermore, these theories, as a rule, have a built-in implicit normative bias defining an end-point to be reached, with an expectation that liberal democracy associated with a range of political institutions and practices will prevail (Norris 2002). However, we argue here and elsewhere (Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020; Korosteleva and Petrova 2021; Korosteleva and Petrova 2022; Korosteleva, Petrova, and Kudlenko 2022 forthcoming) that living in an increasingly vulnerable, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous world, known as a VUCA-world (Burrows and Gnad 2017), our knowledge and ability to plan and reach intended outcomes are fundamentally limited, especially when underpinned by linear, closed-system thinking. With this in mind, this article aims to offer an alternative approach to the analysis of the many crises in Belarus by drawing on the insights of *complexity-thinking* (Kavalski 2016) and *relationality* (Kurki 2020).

We contend that what we observe in Belarus (and other places) today goes well beyond any mainstream political science theories. The powerful force of change that has swept across the country is genuinely far more profound and unifying in bringing together people of all walks of life, nationalities, and age in their strife for dignity and humanity, so much so that it simply overwhelms the explanatory prowess of any mainstream theories on their own. Perhaps what we see today in the country may be more closely aligned with the studies of linkages/leverage (Levitsky and Way 2010) and/or citizenship as political participation (Gapova 2021); and yet we feel that, as a phenomenon of unprecedented mass mobilization observed in the late 2020–early 2021 elevating the societal self-organization to a qualitatively new level, it deserves more investigation so that it may go beyond the traditional understandings of networks or citizenry activism.

In this article, we assert that it is precisely complexity-thinking and relationality that allow us to see the invisible signs of change more clearly and as non-linear, emergent (i.e., self-organizing without any central control), and processual in the workings of societal entanglements and hidden relations. Complexity does not directly heed institutions or structures, exterior forces, or power resources. Rather, it sees a society as a complex open system where everything is interconnected, non-linear, in flux, and, hence, unpredictable; where, due to non-linearity, a minute and seemingly localized change can have tremendous repercussions for the stability of the whole, and where this whole, in response to crisis or adversity, has the ability to correct itself by transforming into a new and often more sustainable entity despite all the odds. This whole is not the state, regime, or one's authority; the whole is a relational mesh (Kurki 2020), a *community of relations*, “the human community” as a “constellation of persons or groups” (Bull 2012, 308), where, through contestation or conflict, as part of “the political” (Edkins 1999), a new ordering takes place, and where change is constituted “bottom-up and around” (Kavalski 2016) in the pursuit of set goals.

In what follows, we first examine “why complexity-thinking” and how exactly it may benefit our understanding of the many crises in Belarus; and then we look more specifically into the nature of the political crisis – which is at the heart of the societal schism – from a three-fold perspective of power, people, and the political to underscore the role of community of relations and to start contouring imaginaries of a possible future.

### Why Complexity-Thinking?

Most of the recent studies analyzing the ongoing change in Belarus used political regime (democratization and/or authoritarianism), nation- and identity-building theories to explain societal dynamics. They analyze political and civic processes from the positivist or interpretivist perspectives. The former, for example, assumes that the world is composed of separate and often siloed actors with their fixed sets of preferences and structures, which could generate an agency of their own premised on the anticipated input/output of the system. The underlying epistemological

supposition in this case is our *knowability* of the world around us. It is assumed that by looking at separate crises in Belarus through the prism of these mainstream theories and concepts, we would be able to “measure” ongoing political, social, economic, etc., change and predict how it will unfold. In turn, the interpretivist epistemology, utilized by the cognitive and constructivist approaches, accounts for the *complex web* of relations and their mutual construction by agencies and institutions, thus allowing us to analyze such intangible and challenging concepts as identity or nationhood. Yet this approach builds on predetermined categories and does not account for spontaneous self-organization or hidden processes of change.

This research aims to go beyond these studies to provide a deeper insight into understanding change in Belarus, often hidden and eruptive. For instance, the events of 2020 could be compared to the 1989 democratization processes in Central and Eastern Europe (Bekus and Gabowitsch 2021) and thus be interpreted from the perspective of mobilization of civil society and political elites. An authoritarian consolidation theory explains popular mobilization by the erosion of the foundations of authoritarian stability, i.e., repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Bedford 2021). Nation- and identity-building was traced through empirical studies of reappropriation of such symbols as the white-red-white flag and the Great Patriotic War (Kazharski 2021) and the analysis of shifts in national identity discourses (Bekus 2021). Gender and citizenship perspectives, as part of identity studies, highlight the role of women in societal change and explain how patriarchal relations are being transformed in Belarus as a result of a crisis and popular mobilization (Gapova 2021; Minchenia and Husakouskaya 2020). All these approaches offer useful explanations of certain political and societal dynamics. And yet, they share major ontological and epistemological premises of the world as composed of disjointed actors behaving in a linear and causal fashion (Kurki 2020), thus conveying a limited reductionist view of society/universe as a closed and controllable system. We argue, however, that society is essentially an open system – a mesh, a Pandora box full of entangled relations: it is characterized by radically different features and mechanisms. Complexity-thinking offers a more adept theoretical lens for the analysis of complex open systems with their hidden and opaque relations and a myriad of emergent and informal processes which re-relate to each other and alter the system from within. We therefore contend that applying complexity-thinking to understand the many crises in Belarus might be a more promising way forward, which looks at the processes through “the local” and even hidden lens, bottom-up and horizontally, as continuing strife for survival, in the pursuit of a shared vision for “the good life” (Berenskoetter 2011; Flockhart 2020). In this section we therefore briefly discuss the main assumptions of complexity-thinking and relationality to point out how these assumptions could help us rethink and understand such political concepts as “power,” “people,” and “the political” when applied to Belarus today.

Complexity-thinking emerged in natural sciences in the beginning of the 20th century but only proliferated to social sciences in the past few decades. Principles of complexity-thinking have been adopted by sociology (Baker 1993), public administration (Klijn 2008), international relations (Kavalski 2007; 2016; 2020); yet, despite its rich potential, it has not been applied to the study of political regimes and popular protests.

Complexity-thinking explains the functioning of open systems that are characterized by a vast number of heterogeneous units interconnected into various networks that are constantly in flux. Open systems are characterized by the principle of non-linearity, meaning that the amount of input cannot directly and causally explain a certain output. This quality makes open systems ultimately unpredictable. The developments in such a system are always highly context-specific, processual, and relational, meaning that units of a system are made up by the relational networks they are tied into, and they at the same time affect these relations. This is what Morton (2010; 2013) and Kurki (2020) refer to as a mesh of relations, a dynamic entanglement of co-constituting relations. Such an ontological frame deems all fixities (actors, institutions, fixed sets of preferences, etc.) meaningless because the mesh of relations is in constant (and often hidden) development. Furthermore, open systems are also characterized by the process of emergence, or self-organization, when a system self-

organizes without any central control by going through the feedback loops to correct itself to achieve sustainability (Sadiki 2016; 2017).

These principles of complexity-thinking have important implications for re-examining such cornerstone concepts as power, people, and the political. Understanding society as a mesh of relations and networks with no fixities sits uncomfortably with the conceptualization of power as something possessed by one or several actors, as is commonly assumed by the mainstream theories. The entanglement ontology implies that power is fluid and dispersed among multiple elements of an open system. Essentially, in this view, power emerges and operates through relations, rooted in the “human community” (Bull 2012). This might also imply that if we see a pattern of power relations, we observe path-dependency entrenched through multiple feedback loops or new emergent paths that may dissolve or grow stronger depending on the dynamics of the entire system.

Furthermore, complexity-thinking also allows us to see people not as masses on the background of political processes or as a particular factor affecting the development of political regimes but primarily as core actors involved in and shaping the myriad of relations, interconnected with each other, defined by and defining themselves the relations around them. Given that the inherent feature of open systems is the ability to self-organize in response to a challenge, human communities of relations can be seen as the *primary source* of a system’s change and resilience.

Finally, with the principle of emergence at its heart, complexity-thinking broadens the realm of politics, turning it into “the political” (Edkins 1999; Korosteleva 2017) as an open space for power contestation, as a “process of struggle and mutations of one social order into the next” (Edkins 1999, 5). Only when a new social order has emerged and is legitimized, Edkins contends, it turns “the political” into “politics” with relevant institutions of power to support one’s authority. Hence, being ingrained in human relations and essentially understood as a process, “the political” is not reducible to bureaucratic governance but is constantly manifested in the course of emergence and relationality. More importantly, “the political” draws on the collective aspirations for the future and a shared sense of the good life when opening space for debate.

Complexity-thinking therefore helps us better understand overt and hidden societal dynamics in the country: for instance, it explains why the large-scale protests occurred in 2020. Prepared by the emerging networks of self-help throughout the pandemic, people’s solidarity and mutual support became conducive to self-organization when a trigger moment of the disputed election in 2020 occurred. Complexity-thinking also challenges the view that failure of regime change signifies failed popular protests. On the contrary, it helps to understand a somewhat counterintuitive phenomenon of a “new state of awakesness” of the Belarusian society with no obvious political change. This puzzle is explained by the feedback loop logic where new power structures need to solidify throughout the repetition of multiple feedback loops, the process that requires time. As will be shown below, we empirically observe emergence and transformation of self-organization networks coupled with manifested change in perceptions of the regime and the visions of the future for Belarus. This allows us to conclude that there is a new emergent quality of Belarus society, which thus far, has not been detected by the mainstream theories comprehensively.

### Understanding the Many Crises in Belarus

Following from the above, we argue that complexity may not only be “a better lens” ... needed [to explain] politics ... and societies [that] are democratically challenged” (Sadiki 2016, 709; Korosteleva and 2021); it is also more ambitious and encompassing in capturing community’s hidden relations and “right to opacity” in responding to change (Glissant, in Chandler 2021). With this in mind we examine Belarus as a *social domain* where self-organization takes place in response to adversity and crisis, as a configuration of three constitutive elements, outlined above: power, people and the political, to understand the nature of the crises in Belarus from a complexity-thinking perspective. As discussed above, in a dynamic VUCA-world of today, a complex system would naturally undertake to correct itself through self-organization and renewal of its social



relations. This is an important point to emphasize once again: any social domain is first and foremost a mesh/universe of interconnected human relations, “the human community” (Bull 2012) and if one of the elements, e.g., power or practices, has come to conflict (rather than contestation) with the system – a community of relations – it would aim to reorganize itself in a processual ipsative manner, subject to “unanticipated interactions and unpredictable consequences” (Lebow 2010, 93). Whatever the outcome, it is never determined or controlled by the will of one or even a few, but rather is shaped and direction-ed by “a collective of ... actors ... who possess different levels of authority, knowledge, and influence, which shifts the focus from top-down control to partnership, ... [where] governance becomes a shared process” (Cavelty and Giroux, in Kavalski 2016, 220). Let us explore the complex universe of relations – unpredictable and generally, uncontrollable – in the case of Belarus, below.

### Power

If we imagine “the human community” as an ideal-type social domain, then power is one of the elements that come to manifest it. As Flockhart claims (2020, 221), power is characterized by a type of authority and hierarchy present as well as the notion of identity and a sense of “the good life” that underpin it by bringing communities together or splitting them apart. Stability of power is thus determined by the consensual, normative and processual configurations of relations within and outside a complex *open* system. In particular, the consensual and normative relations lie with the people aligning themselves with one’s authority in the shared vision for the good life – this way legitimizing their rule – while the processual dynamics could be defined by both internal agents and resources available, as well as external pressure and perceptions of power, as validated by other ordering domains (Duncan 1983). In practical terms, with reference to Belarus, this means that the authority of Alexander Lukashenko, the incumbent power holder, is not really determined by his office – nor is it predicated, to a full degree, by the resources and agents that he could amass by military or other means of persuasion, or indeed Russia’s backing. From a complexity-thinking perspective, it is actually “the human community,” in which he is a temporal manifestation of the relational mesh that comes to form, and transform, the existing power dynamics in many unpredictable ways. What may seem orderly and stable today becomes volatile and crisis-ridden tomorrow because, like in any complex open system, which is always in flux, what defines (but rarely reaches) the equilibrium is a process of emergence and self-organization of human force and their relational universe – or what Sadiki and Saleh (2021, 15) refer to as “ruly (civil) and unruly (violent) permutations of popular mobilization” in response to unsatisfactory power dynamics. This entanglement or mesh of relations – with/by the people and their rulers – is what makes power reciprocal and progressive if legitimated, or unilateral and eventually perilous if the consensus is broken or withdrawn.

From a complexity perspective, what we observe in Belarus today is a process of emergence, or self-organization of the system, with no central control to address the manifold crises. It represents a groundswell of popular mobilization (both overt and covert) built over the years, and more recently referred to as an “anti-war and freedom movement,” in response to a crisis of power relations between the people and Lukashenko’s rule. It is very much the crises of “the local” because in complexity-thinking all fundamental forces and structures “arise from *local processes* and not by means of action at a distance” (Gell-mann 1995, 177). “The local” in this context is not a geographical term but positionality in the mesh of relations, i.e., being situated close to a political challenge. We observe “the local” self-organization manifested in a composite of the acquired intergenerational knowledge system and the sociocultural imaginaries of the future (Sadiki 2016; 2017) that help people to “make sense of the world in the quest for self-conception” (Taylor 2004, 23, in Sadiki 2017) and to distinguish “the right” from “the wrong” in the process of their normative “self-creation” (Castoriadis 1994, 152, in Sadiki 2017). It is this cumulative cross-fertilization of knowledge, expectations, and conceptions of “the good life” that took people to the streets when

faced with shameful fraud and violence in the 2020 presidential election or anti-war protests in February–March 2022. This discontent, expressed through short waves of public mobilization prior to 2020 (e.g., in the form of the Jeans Revolution (2006) or the 2010 October square tent revolt), could be understood as an open system's previous attempts to find new pathways for more balanced relations through learning. These emergent new pathways were subdued but ongoing, making people resentful and persistent in seeking new ways to redress power imbalance. The protests of 2020 are yet another and, to date, a more successful development of a new relations trajectory reaching its turning point to change the broken system. It has been propelled by a number of factors, with the most notable including the following: a broken "social contract" associated with meager wages and miniscule pensions, which are barely enough to cover monthly bills let alone to afford basic foodstuff; the crippling health system, which, had it not been for the heroism of its medical staff (especially under the COVID-19 pressure), would have fallen apart a long time ago; the conformist and uncompetitive state education; and the increasing sense of insecurity when the state has no bounds for either public or private space and can murder or incarcerate citizens by breaking in their apartments or censoring private interiors for permitted insignnia. Notably, the shooting by KGB of an IT entrepreneur Andrey Zeltser (Guardian 2021), and torture and internment of his wife to mental facilities, and his son – to an orphanage, presents a testimony of how far the incumbent was ready to go to wipe out the emergent connections in the community of relations. The state, in the meantime, sponsored the bottom-up initiatives of violence from the rank-and-file members of the police and security forces in the country, giving them full license to kill and to use it for promotion purposes (Shraibman 2021).

Another factor of discontent and misalignment within the system is the barefooted corruption of the Lukashenko regime, which was uncovered by the investigative journalists of NEXTA, Stepan Putilo, and his team in their recent series of documentaries "Lukashenko. Goldmine." There was also the continued exposure by the BYPOL organization of the unlawfulness of the national police and security forces.<sup>2</sup> This, alongside unjustifiable violence – over 1,000 political prisoners, nearly 50,000 incarcerated, tortured, and interned to concentration labor camps or the infamous Okrestina and Zhodino prisons, and at least 10 known political murders, both within and outside the country – has ignited a Revolution of Indignation (in similar fashion to Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity of 2014). People revolted against Lukashenko's derogations and insults, refusing to be treated as "bydlo" (animals), "drug-addicts," "prostitutes," and "western stooges" and demanding to be called "people" in the words of the Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala (1905–1907).

This imbalance in the dynamics of power resulted in the irrevocable breakdown of public trust where even the most loyal of Lukashenko's electorate – pensioners whom he hand-fed for years with last-minute handouts on the eve of an election, and the workforce tamed through excessive drinking and a steady (though meager) pay – turning against him. All these formerly "loyal" forces, the pillars of the regime's stability, now demand him out, with 96% not trusting the president at all, 93% being concerned with excessive violence, and 86% stating that what united them was "the desire to live in a free and fair country" (Motolko 2021a). Not a single power institution in Lukashenko's regime enjoys more than 1% of public trust; and the top five blamed for the worsening situation in the country include Lukashenko directly, the presidential office, the authorities, the government, and the state (Motolko 2021b). Therefore, it seems that the only way to maintain a semblance of control and power by the government is to continue practicing exclusive violence and oppression, leaving no room for dissent or even a whiff of counteraction. In today's Belarus no one is safe – wrong-colored socks or hair or Facebook "dis-likes" can give a direct ticket to prison for many, let alone public criticism or open action these days.

Externally, Lukashenko's power has been invalidated too, including in Russia. While Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, the democratic leader who was ousted from Belarus after the 2020 election, enjoys open doors and full legitimacy with all major western powers, Lukashenko tries to secure and embolden himself with Putin's backing. This, however, comes at the cost of the potential loss of sovereignty and full dependency from Russia (Glod 2021), which has been visibly exposed by

Lukashenko's support of the war in Ukraine (Serhan 2022). People, however, view it differently from the inside: being sensitized by the grim situation of war in Ukraine and the peace-force presence in all break-away republics across the former Soviet space, the support for Russia's actions decrease proportionately with both governments' expanding effort: the March and April 2022 polling in Belarus suggested that 70% of respondents did not agree with Russian troops using the country's territory to attack Ukraine, with, on average, 40% strongly opposing the war action altogether. Once again, what seems like "walking a tightrope" for Lukashenko in his struggle for power in a complex universe is seen as an existential crisis by the people in Belarus, with their majority (two-thirds) trusting no institution under the incumbent leadership and wanting change (Astapenia 2021–2022).

## People

So, if we claim the salience of relationality and hidden processes of community relations under complexity-thinking, what then is of the role of the people themselves in this mesh of power entanglements? This is where complexity may again give us more insight into hidden power dynamics in understanding change – and not just from the International Relations' perspective but also from an angle of domestic "local" politics.

If we were to examine the current public response to power in Belarus from the mainstream political science theories in light of today's situation, nearly two years after the 2020 election, we should conclude that it is another case of a "failed" or a "stalled" revolution (Astapenia 2021–2022, wave 2). Even though the 2020–2021 protests in Belarus have been unprecedented in their volume and longevity, they seem to have been tamed by the regime, with many activists and civic organizations labelled as "extremist" being imprisoned or forced out of the country. Even from Levitsky and Way's perspective (2010), which gives public networks more credence as a transformational force through the formation of linkages and the use of leverage as necessary, or from the viewpoint of political citizenship studies (Gapova 2021), we would still arrive at the same conclusion – that is, of a failed attempt to change the regime: Lukashenko is still in charge; the Office of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (OST), while legitimized abroad, presently has a minimal impact on the internal dynamics inside the country; and the previous order is restored, working its way towards surviving the sanctions, and staying "neutral" in Russia's war. This article, however, argues differently – that is, while all the signs may indeed point to a failed attempt of tangible transformation, in reality, change is irreversibly afoot, hidden, and invisible as per the community's "right to opacity" (Glissant 1997) and through collective learning. This is not only visible in Lukashenko's desperate attempts to not get involved in Russia's war, fearing rebellion within his own loyal circles – i.e., the military. It is also evident in the continued public attitudes of still "feeling positive" about the protests, averaging at 40% over nearly two years since the election; continued demand for Lukashenko's resignation; release of all political prisoners; end of the use of force against protesters and fair investigation of state violence – all averaging to over 50% for the same period of time (Astapenia 2021–2022, wave 6). What is more instructive is the growing resentment to, and fear of, war, which is only supported by 20% of the Belarusian population (Astapenia 2021–2022, wave 9).

Elsewhere (Korosteleva 2021; Petrova 2021), we contend that what we observe in Belarus today is the formation and the rise of Belarusian *peoplehood*, facilitated in response to the many crises and the political, especially, with the violent crackdown of freedom by the regime. From a complexity perspective it originally emerged through a relational mesh of self-organization and support infrastructures to combat COVID-19 pandemic from the bottom-up in the absence of the state response. This soon turned into a political force, which not only brought people together in their process of fighting injustice and violence, but was also about conveying senses of meaning and value, defining political goals, and sustaining support for the political community in difficult times (Smith 2015, 3). This "being together, and not merely in similar ways" (Brown and Kuling 1997, 43)



served as a catalyst and amplifier of hidden processes of change, making them both inevitable and irreversible, even though without apparent signs of real transformation.

What occurred in the aftermath of the 2020 election in Belarus was a full-blown self-organized public mobilization. The multi-thousand crowds, regularly emerging here and there across the entire country, being guided by raw *emotions and the pain of indignation*, without any pronounced leadership, were marching in demand for justice and for a rationally envisioned collective “tomorrow” – a COUNTRY for LIVING<sup>3</sup> and not for Leaving. This was not an organized civic movement or a political grouping of any shape or form: it was the rise of peoplehood – of people from all walks of life, nationality, profession, age, and orientation, molded by an act of *civic activism* and triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which the government refused to recognize, forcing people to take charge over the crisis. Through opacity and hidden relational dynamics, what has emerged is an incredibly powerful moment of *becoming-with* “a peoplehood,” with a strong sense of self-worth – that is, being “people” who cannot be governed as before and who can only work through self-organization, networks, and linkages and be mobilized, for example, by the OST and global diaspora’s leverage to expedite the process of change. Multiple networks of *dvary* (“local courtyards” in Belarusian), *supol’nasts* (“immediate neighborhood” in Belarusian), and digital platforms, a collective sense of belonging – *tuteishyia* (born “here, local,” in Belarusian), and most of all, civic activism developed into *hramada* (“social movement” in Belarusian), born out in support of the vulnerable during COVID-19, and then the oppressed – all these make change very tangible, especially in terms of the new mindset and emotions, this way definitely passing the point of no return. From a complexity perspective, hence, this moment of peoplehood, ignited by indignation, violence, and injustice, is very transformative and cannot be taken away: the actual revolution in a classical sense might indeed have failed; but in reality change is already tangible in people’s minds. It is irrevocably afoot, “revolving” towards a better tomorrow to make power relations work in reciprocal ways for the people of Belarus – one day.

### “The Political”

From a complexity-perspective, change, while invisible, is nevertheless now irreversible: it has challenged the power of the incumbent through a relational mesh of “the human community” who disagreed with and disputed the actions of Lukashenko via lasting protests and democratic leadership abroad, making his claims to power untenable and his institutional enforcement and proposals for constitutional change irrelevant. Through multiple feedback loops (Sadiki and Saleh 2021) such as the rise of peoplehood, the emergence of strong people networks of support inside the country, and external leverage through sanctions and media, the processes that are now unfolding internally have opened a Pandora’s box of “the political” as a fiercely contested space of ideas and visions for the future. The question of what kind of new social domain should emerge in the process of transformation is being debated. This process has made previous power arrangements and practices – that is, “the politics” of Lukashenko’s regime, with its corrupt and oppressive institutions of power – null and void, even if only figuratively, thus paving the way for the emergence of new authority, new ideas, and shared visions of the future to be legitimized by the human community as a reciprocal and relational way forward.

In her work, Edkins argues that “politics” is essentially the outcome rather than the process of contestation: it is the debate that occurs within the limits set by new order arrangements (1999, 12) when a legitimate authority emerges to exert “a bureaucratic technique of governance elaborated through recognised expertise and endorsed ... through a regular, ritual replacement of the placeholders of authority” (Edkins 1999, 4). From a complexity perspective, when power and its practices are challenged (due to misalignment or conflict), an open system moves to a new stage of transformation and development by opening a deeply contested ideological space and allowing for the human community to self-organize and develop new social practices to balance the system once more.

In this sense, the future of Belarus' social domain, while clearly in the process of altering, is still unpredictable and uncontrollable. At the same time, given a societal response to Lukashenko's oppressive actions, deep and extensive social learning is clearly afoot, defining normative foundations for a new social order to emerge and re-relating the current (and largely delegitimized) government practices to the preferred expectations of the future. What is certain, given the scale and the depth of indignation experienced in Belarus, is this: the ongoing political, humanitarian, and other types of crises will lay robust normative foundations, no doubt, for what the future "politics" will be, thus, with time, closing "the political" space for a renewed open complex system of relations to take hold.

## Conclusion

In this article we have ambitiously introduced a new agenda for understanding crises in Belarus. Our new conceptualization, while drawing on some important insights of the mainstream theories of change – ranging from democratization, civic activism, to identity- and nation-building – argues that, by using only these lenses, we are omitting some hidden, emergent, informal, and relational processes within the society that actually could define the ongoing change as irreversible, despite the alleged "failure" of the 2020–2021 protests.

Belarus' many crises today, if viewed from a complexity-thinking perspective, offer a new, unfolding opportunity of understanding and embracing the world for what it is – vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, a VUCA-world. The "system" as it emerged during the early 1990s had been shaped by centuries-long history of suffering, loss, and near annihilation (Wilson, 2012; Ioffe 2014), only to be molded today into a quiet, hard-working, and resilient "community of relations" (Glissant 1997), which is ultimately longing for a dignified and peaceful life within and outside "the system." Even the hardships of the early 1990s, associated with the crippling economy, low earnings, limited resources, and Chernobyl disaster, were all, without objection, "adapted to" by Belarusians who were strongly motivated by their enduring belief in a better tomorrow. This would give them a fair and secure sense of, and direction for, a "good life," not necessarily one that is materially prosperous but one that is quietly satisfying and without conflict, with its neighbors to the east or west. This "tomorrow," however, has yet to arrive for many Belarusians, after nearly thirty years of continuing change. No matter how hard they seem to try – whether by voting in masses for change in their first and only fair presidential election in 1994; by protesting peacefully every five years; by enduring more hardship, oppression, and increasing state violence – a "better tomorrow" seemingly has been taken away from them, becoming a commodity of one – President Lukashenko – who continuously trades on the past sufferings to make the present stagnation the best-worst outcome. The system has now reached an impasse, associated with the impossibility of returning to the previous way of doing "politics" within/outside the country, even if its ruler, Alexander Lukashenko, were to stand down and a new constitution were to be tinkered with. In people's eyes this kind of "politics" of Lukashenko's regime has now been "spent": it has fully delegitimized itself to such a degree that it now causes severe system imbalance that needs correcting. The space is now open for "the political" once more to resolve the occurred misalignments through societal (re)self-organization, relationality, and emergence.

What the future will hold for Belarus is still unclear. However, the fact that "the local," "the human community," and the peoplehood are now the drivers of change, as this article has shown, is reassuring, and perhaps the only *certainty* that complex-thinking could warrant.

From end unto end, frontier mound unto mound  
On the breezes renewal is borne now, and,  
embracing the soul, without limit or bound,  
Mother-joy for the better day born now. (Kupala 1910)

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## Notes

- 1 See results of opinion polls available at [https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/anton.motolko/viz/C\\_16129805381080/sheet0](https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/anton.motolko/viz/C_16129805381080/sheet0) and <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/russia-and-eurasia-programme/belarus-initiative>. The evidence of societal transformation is further corroborated by the online survey of the adult population in Belarus, aged between 16 and 64, conducted by ZOIS in December 2020: <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/belarus-at-a-crossroads-attitudes-on-social-and-political-change>.
- 2 For more information, see <https://bypol.org/en>.
- 3 This was Sergey Tikhanovskiy’s presidential campaign slogan.

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