"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus

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Aleksandr Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus for the past 26 years. Often referred to as Europe's last dictator, he seemed to have widespread support in the Belarusian society until just recently (Victor, 2020). In 2020, Belarus has experienced nationwide protests against Lukashenko's authoritarian regime (BBC News, 2020). The time for a shift in power appears to have come. After excluding several male opposition politicians from the 2020 presidential election through incarceration or forced exile, Lukashenko found himself facing Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, an opposition leader's wife, alongside two other women – Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova – as his election rival. The public quickly caught on to the situation and supported Tikhanovskaya out of a wish for change and a just election (BBC News, 2020). Having lost legitimacy, Lukashenko is now trying to hold on to his power with the help of a tremendous security apparatus and direct violence against the population (Smith, 2009).

Lukashenko is attempting to uphold old norms of exclusion and delegitimization of the Belarusian population, especially women, in the political process and is trying to promulgate his idea of the Belarusian identity. However, 2020 has brought massive change to the Belarusian political arena. This paper will attempt to explain one aspect of this shift in the political realm in Belarus. Namely, it seeks to analyze what role norms and identities have played in the conflict surrounding the presidential election.

Therefore, this paper will try to answer the question *"To what extent have new political norms and identities shaped and influenced the protest movements around the 2020 presidential election in Belarus* ?" and investigate norms and identities, their emergence, their role in the conflict and their political potential. It will therefore use the theoretical framework of feminist constructivism and the theory of the norm life cycle proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink. To analyze the aforementioned question this paper will examine both the situation before and after the 2020 election regarding prominent political norms and the prevailing national identity. It will conclude that Tikhanovskaya and her fellow campaigners brought about a normative shift in Belarusian politics and gave the population a new sense of identity that is detached from Lukashenko's person. I argue that this process can be termed a political emancipation or awakening in the population.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will adopt a feminist constructivist framework to investigate the proposed research question (Locher & Prügl, 2001). More specifically it will look into the concept of norms and identities – their emergence, their role in the conflict and their political potential. It will therefore use the theory of the life cycle of norms proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 892).

Feminist Constructivism

Central to the theoretical framework of feminist constructivism is the ontology of becoming (Hurd, 2008; Locher & Prügl, 2001). Stressing the fact that our understanding of the world and its existence is a "transformational" rather than a "positional" process, feminist constructivism focuses its research on social phenomena such as norms, identities and language. These phenomena are the means to reproduce our social structure and help to understand

"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus
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aspects of global politics such as the constitution of international agents and the emergence of social change (Locher & Prügl, 2001). This makes the approach appealing for the abovementioned research question as it allows a more nuanced analysis of the relevant phenomena than classical IR theories such as realism and liberalism might do. As already mentioned above, the aspect of feminist constructivist theory that will play the main role in this paper is the influence of norms and identities on the socio-political power structure in the present conflict in Belarus. The paper will focus on Lukashenko and his supporters as so-called norm spoilers on the one hand and the opposition-movement revolving around the trio of Tikhanovskaya, Tsepkalo and Kolesnikova as norm entrepreneurs on the other. It will furthermore illustrate how the female trio helped to create a new Belarusian national identity that is the driving force for the political emancipation in the country.

Norms, Identities and the Norm Life Cycle

Actors according to Wendt adopt certain identities by participating in collective meanings. These identities manifest as stable, role-specific expectations that influence behaviour and perception of the political happenings. They are attached to a specific socially constructed world and carry an inherent social definition of the actor grounded in the actor's beliefs (Wendt, 1992). Leading on to norms, Wendt states that identities serve as the basis for norms and interests. Norms are generally understood as "a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). They become apparent through the judgement of a community or society which manifests itself as disapproval in the case of norm-breaking behaviour and praise in the case of norm-conforming behaviour. As norms embody some type of expectation or feelings of "oughtness" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) they can help us to understand political actions that are based on considerations of justification or approval. To understand how norms emerge, change and cease, Finnemore and Sikkink developed the theory of the "Life Cycle of Norms". (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) This theory illustrates how an emerging norm can reach widespread agreement through acceptance by a critical mass of actors. Finnemore and Sikkink divide this process into three steps – norm emergence, norm cascade and norm internalization (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The first stage is characterized by the work of so-called norm entrepreneurs who actively seek to promote new norms and to convince a critical mass of actors to adopt them. They call attention to a certain issue based on the notion they have about the desirable conduct regarding that issue in a society. The difficulty here is that new norms never enter society in a norm vacuum but always in a highly contested normative space. Therefore, to reach the second stage – the norm cascade – the norm entrepreneurs need to manage to surpass a tipping point of convincing a certain number of actors who support the newly proposed norm. Once that has been achieved the norm can spread quickly through a mechanism of socialization such as legitimation, conformity and esteem. The third stage of the norm life cycle model indicates the time when a norm has reached the status of internalization and is widely taken for granted (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This paper will however mainly focus on the first two stages of this model as the Belarusian society has not reached the level of internalization yet.

Analysis

The Situation before the 2020 Election

Formerly being part of the Soviet Union, Belarus became independent in 1991. The country struggled to develop its own national identity as it was known to be amongst the most "Russified" countries within the USSR. The Belarusian population held strong appreciation towards the Soviet Union as has been shown through several surveys showing that e.g. in 1991, 69% of Belarusians identified themselves with the Soviet Union or in 1999 that only 36.7% spoke the Belarusian language (Jachovič, 2019). Yet, despite these high levels of approval towards the former USSR values, nationalist discourse emerged in the country claiming that the Soviet Union had destroyed the Belarusian population and consciousness. This, however, did not meet a lot of support as the proposed changes such as the reintroduction of the Belarusian language were implemented to promptly (Astapova, 2017; Bugrova, 1998).

When Belarus held its first democratic elections in 1994, Alexander Lukashenko appeared in the political arena for the first time and was welcomed with support from the population as he promised stability and to uphold many of the old Soviet values. He won the first presidential election with 80.1 per cent (Astapova, 2017). By keeping the promises he had made, Lukashenko managed to increase his popularity within the population. Following this wave of approval,

"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus
Written by Thomas Riedlsperger

the president held a successful referendum allowing him to start his 5-year term count anew. In 1999, opposition members voiced their disagreement and declared his presidential term was now over. The major candidate, however, was soon imprisoned, and the oppositional protest shut down violently (Astapova, 2017).

At the next election in 2001, Lukashenko claimed to have won again, this election, however, was declared as undemocratic and unfair by European supervisors. According to the Belarusian constitution, Lukashenko would have to step down as president after ending this term. In 2004, however, he held another referendum that granted him participation in an unlimited number of new elections. Lukashenko used this and claimed a win for the next three elections in 2006, 2010 and 2015. All of these past elections have been accompanied by accusations of electoral fraud and protests which have been violently suppressed (Astapova, 2017).

The main issue with the missing success of these past oppositional movements is the fact that they were facing pressure from both the state and from civil society. The state did not recognize them as agents capable of participating in the decision-making process. The rest of society did not recognize them because in an authoritarian regime the majority of people often do not intend to protest against authoritarianism. They perceive the social order as legitimate and the struggle against authoritarianism as illegitimate (Lavrinenko, 2015). Social movements were considered to only reflect the values and ideas of a small parallel civil society in Belarus.

That is mainly due to the way Lukashenko has shaped the political norms and the national identity in the young Post-Soviet country (Rohava, 2018). When discussing Belarusian national identity scholars often portray the country as a struggle of identity discourses within the uneven political arena of autocracy as Rohava (2020) lays out. The country is said to lack the imagination of a shared history or the idea of common perspectives on the future. Many Belarusians formulate their national identification based on the territory in which they were born and its political regime that is personified in president Lukashenko. Their identity is based on the stability that seems to be held together through the presumed stability that is provided by the authoritarian ruler. The shared meaning of being Belarusian seem to be determined by non-conflictual and depoliticized stances on identity (Rohava, 2018). This group of the population is in the majority and is also referred to as the "Soviet Belarusians" who are said to preferer stability over progress (Manayeva, Aniskevich, & Dinerstein, 2011).

This is further reinforced through the control of mass media and the informational flow in the country through the regime. The media serves as a propaganda tool for the authoritarian government and allows the president to promulgate his conception of "Belarusianness" (Bekus, 2011). Astapova discusses in her research that the Belarusian state media is highly biased in favor of Lukashenko and his agenda. This helps him to foster the common image that the population has of their president (Astapova, 2017).

Furthermore, the president openly admitted that his government manipulates the elections and tries to block the opposition from entering the political arena with all means at its disposal (Astapova, 2017). It does this for example through adding fake ballot papers supporting Lukashenko, suspiciously losing voting registers or more directly by publicly devaluating or even incarcerating opposition candidates (Astapova, 2017).

The startling thing about this whole system is that the people are completely aware of the fraud and the manipulation that is happening, but the majority do not interfere. People are numbed to the political crimes that are happening in their country. They accept the norms that shaped Belarusian politics for decades, namely: the population's incapacity to change the political power structures, the overt manipulation of the political process and the natural exclusion and degradation of Belarusian women in the political realm (Hosa, 2020). Especially the exclusion of women from the political realm is very apparent as Astapova shows in her paper. "I am a girl and I do not interfere in politics", says a 21-year-old interviewed in Minsk (Astapova, 2017, p. 22). Many women claim that they cannot change anything about the current political situation or argue they are satisfied with their position of not being expected to voice political opinions or to deal with political decision-making processes (Astapova, 2017).

This environment makes it very difficult for different political norms and national identities to arise in Belarus. The analysis of the events surrounding the presidential election in 2020 in the following part of the paper, however, shows that it is possible. It will investigate how Tikhanovskaya, Tsepkalo and Kolesnikova have functioned as so-called

"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus
Written by Thomas Riedlsperger

norm entrepreneurs and gave the Belarusian population a new sense of what it means to be Belarusian. It will furthermore investigate what role gender has played in this process and how the role of women in Belarusian politics has drastically changed.

The Situation in 2020

With Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's appearance in the Belarusian political arena, the situation in the country has changed. While acknowledging her lack of political knowledge, she quickly grew in popularity (Specia, 2020). Merging forces with Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo the trio soon became the face of the opposition and won the hearts of the broad public and gave them the hope that political change might be possible (Hosa, 2020).

Tikhanovskaya and her fellow campaigners can be described as norm-entrepreneurs, proposing a new norm of including and empowering the Belarusian population and especially women again in the political process. The trio illustrates the possibility of stirring up the political structure in Belarus and gives the people a new national identity that is not connected to Lukashenko and his government. Tikhanovskaya is a stay-at-home mother and English teacher – a woman of the people (Specia, 2020). She shows the people that they can and should participate in politics. She is the figurehead of a normative shift and a new understanding of what it means to be Belarusian.

Following the lead of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova women have formed the "Women in White movement", and played a central role in this year's protests surrounding the presidential election (Serhan, 2020). This female unity has encouraged thousands of women to believe in their power and agency and reclaim their influence in a society dominated by men. "It is widely recognized that the recent fight for democracy in Belarus has a female face", states CEDAW (2020, p. 1). Women from all stages of life march the streets together, peacefully fighting Lukashenko's brutal rule. Dressed in white and holding flowers, they create strong images that appear on the news all over the world and with that are contributing to the critical norm cascade that is currently happening in Belarus (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). "The Women in White" might be the start for a change in Belarus that is long overdue (Serhan, 2020). "From the beginning, this has been an uprising inspired and led by women," said The Guardian (Provost, Torrisi, & Snip, 2020).

The women's power has been heavily underestimated by the regime. This became apparent after Lukashenko admitted Tikhanovskaya to the race for the presidential election after having forcefully eliminated several male candidates as he had done for previous elections as well (Astapova, 2017). His misogynist opinion allowed her to stay in the race as he did not grant her any chance. "Our society is not prepared to vote for a woman. Because in our country, according to the Constitution, the president has strong power (…) the president will be a man, I am absolutely convinced of this" claimed Lukashenko in May (Hosa, 2020, p. 1). By publicly stating this, he pointed at the deeply held norm of the population's – and especially women's – incapacity to change the political power structures in Belarus (Hosa, 2020).

Despite far-reaching support for Tikhanovskaya and her new political agenda, Lukashenko claimed his victory with an overwhelming 80 per cent of the votes (BBC News, 2020). This obvious electoral fraud was met with large, peaceful protests across the entire country. Lukashenko's response to the mainly peaceful protests included police brutality, shutting down internet and phone services as well as the detention of the thousands of demonstrators. Since the beginning of the campaign season, in May, Belarusian authorities have arbitrarily detained close to 12,000 individuals as the NGO Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH) states (FIDH, 2020). These included peaceful protesters, presidential candidates, human rights defenders, and journalists amongst which a distinct share was female. Excessive violence and arbitrary arrests have led to mistreatment and harassment of over 500 individuals in police vans and places of detention (FIDH, 2020).

Tikhanovskaya, as well as her ally Tsepkalo, were forced to leave the country, Kolesnikova was arrested. (BBC News, 2020) But despite "losing" the spearheads of the opposition movement to Lukashenko's cruel rule, the protests do not cease. Mass street protests continue to take place in Minsk weekly, showing that society demands change and does not stand behind Lukashenko anymore.

"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus
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The violent and degrading response by the authorities has shown not just a lack of rationality, but also a lack of acceptance towards the new norms emerging on the political stage. Lukashenko's resistance to allow the shift and meet with the female-led opposition to come to an agreement as equal counterparts highlights his thirst for power and his deeply misogynist view. He has further confirmed this through his secret inauguration that has symbolic value for the attempt to uphold old norms and power structures (FIDH, 2020).

Under the current happenings, the norms present regarding women involved in politics seem to finally be challenged on a broad social scale. People of all social groups are part of the discourse initiated by the three women leading the opposition. Lukashenko is losing his grounds in the discourse revolving around the normative framework present in Belarusian politics but tries to hold on to the still present power structures with all means available to him. He ignores that Tikhanovskaya and her fellow campaigners have connected with the country; they have won the people's hearts, and the people are protesting for them to have a voice.

Conclusion

The proceedings in Belarus illustrated above definitely represent a country's fight for democracy but not only that they also symbolize a movement of female political empowerment. As I have illustrated, the movement headed by Tikhanovskaya, Tsepkalo and Kolesnikova has led to a normative shift in Belarusian politics and a development of a new sense of national identity. The Belarusian population regained their belief in political agency and participated in the push for an overthrow of the Lukashenko regime. Therefore, the answer to my research question is: The newly emerged norms and the new sense of national identity has promoted the emancipation of the Belarusian population towards a more democratic and free future. This shift has been instigated to a great deal through Tikhanovskaya and her companions.

However, witnessing the current situation in Belarus, the question remains whether this was enough for a complete political change in the country. It can be witnessed that Lukashenko continuously uses violence to eliminate the opposition movements and remains with the full support of the country's executive authorities.

International spectators such as CEDAW and FIDH state that the goal of this revolution is to establish a free, democratic, participatory and inclusive election process that fully respects women's rights and is free from flaws or coercion (CEDAW, 2020; FIDH, 2020). The organizations plead for starting a dialogue aiming to reach a peaceful solution consistent with the people's demand for new and fully democratic elections.

Given the limited scope of this paper, the question of how to achieve such a peaceful agreement remains unanswered. It holds potential for future research projects that might investigate whether e.g. heightened international scrutiny of Belarus might be the key to discourage the authorities from further abuses and to help victims in their quest for democracy and justice as Human Rights Watch proposes (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

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"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus
Written by Thomas Riedlsperger

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"The Women in White" – Protesting for a Peaceful Political Emancipation in Belarus
Written by Thomas Riedlsperger

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