

VIRTUAL SPACES OF FREEDOM: THE TELEGRAM-ENABLED PROTEST IN BELARUS, 2020

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Abstract: In August 2020, Belarus experienced its most intense protests. Daily protest activities lasted almost a year, driven by frustrations with the COVID-19 pandemic response, rigged elections, and brutal repressions. Citizens demanded President Lukashenka's resignation. These protests were notable for their scope and the use of Telegram channels and digital platforms. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's theoretical insights, this article highlights that such collective movements create new informal but impactful political institutions and principles, breaking from the past. Event and network analysis revealed that prior to the August 9, 2020, elections, civic initiatives were mainly led by social entrepreneurs and were less interconnected. After August 9, a more diffused and interconnected network of civic initiatives emerged, marked by high social relevance and innovation despite the repressive context. This increased interaction signifies a transformation in collective consciousness, potentially laying the groundwork for future democratic development.

Keywords: Belarus, revolution, protests, civic initiatives, Telegram channels.

Introduction

Contemporary social movements use the Internet and social media to challenge dominant narratives and change non-democratic practices (Herasimenka 2022). In authoritarian states, civic actions may not immediately change political leadership but politicize issues, laying the groundwork for future protests. These grassroots efforts change collective consciousness toward taking greater responsibility for a common future. Hannah Arendt describes this as creating consultative bodies or semi-autonomous institutions — “spaces of freedom” for joint action and deliberation that represent a “break from the past” (Arendt 1963: 269). H. Arendt's approach to examining the phenomenon of revolution informs the structure of this study and guides the analysis.

In Belarus, electoral procedures primarily serve to consolidate the authoritarian regime. The country operates as a hegemonic authoritarian state where elections, though regularly held, are ritualized spectacles (Naumov 2014). Results are predetermined and ensured through systematic falsification and violations of democratic rights. The regime proactively identifies and eliminates political alternatives. Due to widespread repression, especially during election campaigns, activists often distance themselves from politics and retreat into private life, “delegating” political decision-making to the authorities (As-tapova et al. 2022).

In 2020, despite government efforts to suppress political participation, authorities failed to maintain control. They used their usual tactics, including arbitrarily arresting opposition leaders and activists and manipulating elections by forcing students, soldiers, and public sector employees to vote early. The two most popular opposition candidates, Viktor Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanousky, were arrested, and Valery Tsapkala was barred from registering as a candidate. Unlike in previous elections, where citizens often avoided political involvement, these actions led to public outrage. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya entered the race in place of her imprisoned husband and, by uniting with the teams of other opposition candidates (Maria Kalesnikava and Veranika Tsapkala), gained significant public support. Despite this, the government declared Aliaksandr Lukashenka the winner.

Confronted with blatant electoral falsifications and brutal repression, Belarusian citizens mobilized using technological tools like Telegram and other digital platforms to monitor elections, coordinate protests, and support victims. Civic initiatives emerged to address the lack of civil rights and support dismissed public officials (Matveieva et al. 2022). Local decision-making bodies also formed as urban districts organized to address daily issues and express their civic stance, sharing their activities on social media. In line with Arendt's concept of councils, activists created a "new public space for freedom" (1963: 249) both online and offline, maintaining richer civic interaction and strengthening civil society through more safe individual contributions to collective action.

This paper uses a mixed-method analysis to evaluate the rise in civic action. First, a content analysis of Belarusian independent media tracks and categorizes civic initiatives that emerged following the falsified August 2020 presidential election. Second, network analysis examines the dynamics of interactions between these initiatives before and after August 9 to identify patterns in civil society activity.

Thereby, this study aims to reveal the role of Telegram in social mobilisation during the 2020 Belarusian protests. It explores the following *research questions*: What transformations have the pre-2020 and the post-2020 innovative initiatives triggered? Have they contributed to the broader democratic development of civil society, even though they did not change the regime?

The *hypothesis* posits that the massive protest action witnessed in Belarus as a reaction to rigged elections and further repression against civil society instigated a change in the ways of interaction, causing a deeper change in the collective consciousness.

The paper begins with a review of the literature on the dynamics and forms of the 2020 protests in Belarus, focusing on digital media,

followed by a description of our research methodology. The main analysis maps the most visible grassroots initiatives during the first wave of mass mobilization, as reported by leading independent Belarusian media, and examines them through the lens of Arendt's *On Revolution*. We then use network analysis of selected Telegram-based initiatives to illustrate the intensity and dynamics of interactions between civic groups. The paper concludes with insights on the theoretical contributions and the interconnections of the analysed civil society initiatives in Belarus.

1. Literature Review

The 2020 Belarusian protests were significant due to their scale, the ensuing repression, and the subsequent wave of migration to neighbouring countries like Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania. Scholars sought to understand the causes of the uprising, examining past protest movements. Some, like Mateo (2022), highlighted the well-developed and connected nature of Belarusian civil society before the rigged election. Minchenia (2020) noted a “slow and hidden resistance” in Belarus dating back to 2017 and even 2011. Sierakowski (2020) observed that the opposition, with help from IT-experts and social media specialists, had already broken the government's monopoly on information during the election campaign. Bodrunova and Blekanov (2021) showed that commenters on Belarusian YouTube channels showed solidarity and readiness for protest by August 2020. Although Belarusian activists had previously attempted political action (organizing collective actions and launching virtual states (Astapova and Navumau 2018)), they often failed because a significant part of society was focused on well-being and immediate needs, not political freedom (Lozka and Makarychev 2024). This focus on survival was a strategy used by the regime to limit political engagement (Navumau 2016).

Third, citizens began generating ideas and proposing solutions, actively using social media, particularly Telegram, and other digital tools. Liubimau (2023) highlighted how the 2020 Belarusian protests led to platform-based participatory experiments under authoritarian rule. Similarly, Davydzik and Stebur (2023) examined how digital technologies shaped decentralized, horizontal protest dynamics in the 2020 Belarusian uprising. A public opinion survey by Greene (2021) revealed two distinct media ecosystems in Belarus, marked by significant political polarization. Most consumers of independent media followed websites like Tut.by, Onliner.by, and Belsat. Around 53 percent of respondents indicated they had significantly changed their media habits, switching to Telegram and Tut.by since August 2020.

Wijemars and Lokot (2021) found that “Telegram’s performance and practices drive citizens to form affective connections to the platform and perceive Telegram as an ally in their struggle against repressions and digital censorship.” Herasimenka et al. (2020) found that about 90 percent of protesters relied on the Internet for information, and 85 percent viewed Telegram as their most trusted daily news source. This increased citizen engagement in public action and collective deliberation became evident during the revolutionary process. As people gathered to discuss and debate political issues, a strong sense of shared purpose emerged, paving the way for transformative changes in the political landscape (Navumau and Matveieva 2021).

The 2020 protests led to the emergence of numerous civic initiatives and an unprecedented display of civil solidarity. However, studies on Belarussian protest 2020 lack a structured analysis of these initiatives during the period of peak civil society activity. To contribute to fill this gap, the study examines the strands of revolutionary movement and reveals how various strands complemented each other, enhancing Belarusians’ demand for active networking, autonomy, and self-realization through political participation. Additionally, given the lack of previous studies to assess the development and readiness of pre- and post-electoral civil society, this paper critically evaluates arguments about pre-existing civic initiatives and COVID-19 mobilization versus the hypothesis that innovative digital protest activities peaked post-election. This research compares the number, scale, intensity, interconnectedness, and diversification of digital civic initiatives, especially Telegram channels, used for Belarusian activism before and after August 9, 2020.

We argue that this proliferation of civic initiatives, in Arendt’s terms, represents the formation of alternative forms of political participation, or “councils” — spaces for deliberation, collective action, and decision-making. Although many initial spaces (e.g., courtyard chats) were dismantled by brutal repression, other associations, like the Coordination Council, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the “Together”¹ movement, continue their activities from abroad. These initiatives have contributed to the regime’s delegitimization internationally.

2. Methodology

We employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative manual content analysis with quantitative semi-automatic network

1 «Разам».

analysis of selected Telegram channels, launched by civil initiatives (see the selection procedure below).

The qualitative content analysis examined online media reports from the most popular Belarusian independent news portals (Tut.by and Naviny.by) between June 2020 and October 2021 (two months before and after the protests began): this analysis identified and mapped 60 prominent innovative civic initiatives that mobilized citizens before and after the protest. We documented each initiative's creation date, online presence format, and type of activity.

Special focus was given to initiatives launched on or shortly after August 9, 2020, the date of the heavily falsified presidential elections. At least 46 of the 60 initiatives (76.6%) emerged on August 9, with 26 (56.5%) of those starting Telegram channels to reach broader audiences. These initiatives spanned 16 action areas, which were listed chronologically and analysed according to Arendt's concept of revolution.

While qualitative content analysis forms the core of our study, social network analysis offers additional insights into the activity patterns of civil initiatives on Telegram, a crucial communication platform for Belarusian protesters in 2020–2021. This analysis identifies citation patterns (mentions and forwards), capturing the interconnectivity and influence of selected initiatives.

“Honest People,”² and “ByCovid19.” We extracted all messages from these channels for the period June 2020 to October 2020 to track links to other channels via reposts and mentions. Self-loops and links to external sources were removed to focus solely on interactions within Telegram.

The dataset was divided into two periods: June 1 to August 9, 2020 (pre-election) and August 9 to October 1, 2020 (post-election). Network analysis was conducted using Gephi 0.10, creating two directed graphs with edges representing links between source nodes and target nodes. A community search algorithm (Blondel et al. 2008) identified groups of nodes with stronger internal connections.

Limitations include the structural focus of the analysis, which does not reflect the quality or depth of relationships beyond Telegram. Additionally, the study's temporal scope is limited to two months before and after the 2020 elections, excluding later stages of the protest movement in 2021 and 2022.

We completed our analysis before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, and the full-scale invasion was supported by the Lukashenka's regime. Consequently, the events of this period and the associated intensification of repressions against opposition-minded civil society within

2 «Честные люди».

and outside Belarus were not included in the focus of the study. Thus, these findings primarily supplement the detailed chronology of civil activity during the 2020 protests.

3. Results

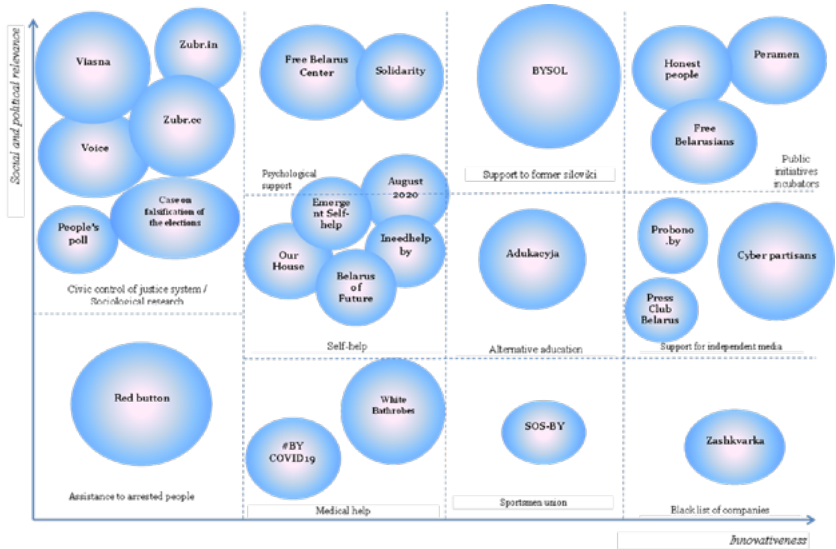
This section presents the empirical findings of our study, based on a combination of qualitative content analysis and network analysis, aimed at mapping the emergence, scope, and interconnectedness of civic initiatives that developed during the 2020 Belarusian protests. Informed by Hannah Arendt's political theory (particularly her concepts of councils, natality, and the interplay between freedom and necessity), we analyze how Belarusian citizens organized themselves in response to harsh repressions. We structurized the results according to three inter-related strands of civic activism: revolutionary, terror-related, and social, reflecting various forms of civic engagement and political engagement. In particular, each strand illustrates how civic actors created new spaces for deliberation, support, and resistance, under the conditions of severe state violence.

3.1. Civic Initiatives in Belarus in 2020

The August 2020 protests in Belarus marked a shift from previous mass actions by being highly decentralized. Unlike the centralized demonstrations between 2000 and 2010, which were easily controlled by authorities, the 2020 protests spread across urban districts due to riot police blocking central squares in Minsk and other cities. This led to a "hyperlocal character," with protests occurring simultaneously in multiple locations (Asmolov 2020). Protesters organized without a central plan (Alexandrovskaya 2021).

Pro-Lukashenka demonstrations were organized but attracted far fewer supporters – about 10,000 compared to the 200,000 to 400,000 protesting against him (Demidova 2020). This shift means many Belarusians become politically active, embarking on a collective movement for their freedom and democratic future through socially and politically relevant actions. Reflecting Arendt's concept of revolution as an aspiration for public freedom (1963: 118), Belarusians initiated civic projects to address new challenges and create "places of freedom" as an environment of mutual support with "digital action arenas" (Matveieva 2025) to help each other in such actions. Key initiatives are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Civil society organizations with developed Telegram channels, divided into 11 thematic groups. Source: authors' representation.



Within Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1963) framework, we classify Belarusian civic initiatives into three main categories:

1. *Spaces for joint action and deliberation*: initiatives aspiring for freedom and creating spaces for collective action, potentially evolving into institutions. Examples include Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the Coordination Council, courtyard chats, strike committees, “Zubr,”³ “Voice,”⁴ and “Honest People.” These initiatives functioned as semi-autonomous political bodies and alternative decision-making bodies (Sitton 1987: 86). Deliberation in these spaces is the emergent, collective act of reasoning together, and also a dynamic process of mutual persuasion and reflection, unfolding in digital and physical arenas, that births new possibilities by confronting authoritarian constraints. These interactions cultivate a fragile yet potent intersubjective realm where citizens reclaim their agency (Navumau, et al. 2025).
2. *Responses to social needs*: Initiatives focused on aiding repressed citizens and addressing immediate social needs. Being public, they engage with “the realm of necessity,” which Arendt argues could undermine the revolutionary process by detracting from broader political engagement (1963: 89). They become a domain for redirecting political activity into the “sphere of necessity,”

3 «Зубр».

4 «Голос».

where survival tasks replace demanded radical measures aimed at achieving freedom under such socio-political conditions. These initiatives, though enacted publicly and essential for maintaining solidarity under authoritarian pressure, may, due to their predominance in the overall ecosystem of emerging civic initiatives, risk weakening the revolutionary project by channeling civic energy toward pragmatic improvements rather than toward intersubjective deliberation necessary for shaping a new, resilient political order. This contradiction reveals a dialectic: while such responses strengthen societal resilience, they may also attach the transformative potential of the movement to immediate human needs, potentially preventing the emergence of a durable, emancipatory public sphere.

3. *Disruptive activities*: Initiatives aimed at challenging the regime through disruptive or illegal means, such as cyber-partisans, the “Black Book of Belarus”, and NEXTA. Disruptions represent the “dark side” of revolution, focusing on undermining the regime through direct actions (Arendt 1963: 57, 79). These initiatives hold the greatest potential for addressing the main task of revolution, and are capable of destabilising authoritarian control while revealing and damaging its mechanisms. However, they risk descending into what is called the “dark side”, where a focus on immediate destruction may undermine the space for deliberation necessary for building a solid political foundation for a critically thinking, free, yet law-abiding communities.

The surge in civic initiatives after August 9, 2020, resulted from a mobilization campaign by political leaders, who encouraged the silent majority to mobilize and act against the repressive regime. Arendt (1963: 18) highlights the role of public action and citizen participation in revolutionary movements, viewing revolutions as collective efforts by ordinary people challenging oppressive regimes. Before August 2020, Belarusian civil society was not as vibrant as in countries like Poland or Ukraine, which had already started post-Soviet transformation, but was far from a blank slate. Approximately 3,000 NGOs and numerous unregistered citizen initiatives existed, addressing various issues from environmental protection to consumer rights. Notable pre-existing organizations, such as “Revera,”⁵ “Viasna,”⁶ and “Our House,”⁷ focused on defending rights and monitoring protests, while “Association of

5 «Ревера».

6 «Вясна».

7 «Наш дом».

Journalists,”⁸ “Press Club Belarus,”⁹ and “By_Help” (established in 2017) played crucial roles in the protests. These organizations initially focused on social issues and rights protection due to the state’s neglect of public demands.

This observation refers to Arendt’s concept of the “spirit of natality” (1963: 211) in social movements, which captures a revolutionary impulse that goes beyond immediate needs to engage civil society in transformative political processes. For instance, “ByCovid19,” initially focused on aiding medical professionals, also aimed to mobilize citizens for political engagement and election transparency. Similarly, “Honest People” supported the formation of “Zubr” and “Voice,” effectively politicizing the movement and rallying hundreds of thousands. To a significant extent, these organizations embody the “spirit of natality,” because they have encouraged active citizen participation against a repressive regime. The launch of “Zubr” and “Voice” in particular allowed channeling the revolutionary impulse into collective action: both initiatives enabled the documentation of the falsifications of presidential elections.

While conceptualising the trajectory of civic activism from August 2020 via the lens of Arendt’s work, we identified three broad strands of civic initiatives:

1. *Revolutionary strand*: This strand is driven by a quest for freedom and transformative change, reflecting Arendt’s spirit of natality (1963: 211). Initiatives here, such as “Zubr” and “Voice,” emerged from a shared desire to escape authoritarian constraints and create new political realities.
2. *Terror strand*: Aligned with Arendt’s view of terror as a danger of revolution (1963: 60), this strand involves intense confrontations where violence is used by both authorities and protesters. This stage reflects the violent resistance faced by activists and the risk of such violence overshadowing the broader goal of achieving justice and democracy in a way of applying force.
3. *Social strand*: This strand addresses immediate needs and practical assistance, focusing on “social questions” rather than revolutionary goals. As the initial fervour wanes, initiatives shift towards building social networks, providing support, and fostering solidarity. Although Arendt warned that focusing on necessity could undermine the revolutionary momentum (1963: 60), this stage represents resilience and sustained efforts through new channels to cover peers’ social needs.

8 «Ассоциация журналистов».

9 «Пресс-клуб Беларусь».

Notably, these strands do not follow a strict chronological order and may overlap or coexist. They evolve synchronously, each influencing the others. Throughout this process, Arendt's "spirit of natality" (1963: 212) remains a uniting driving force, as citizens persistently seek to create new possibilities and challenge oppressive system.

3.2. "Revolution": initiatives of the first strand

Before August 2020, Belarusian resistance against Lukashenka's regime saw the emergence of initiatives that, in Arendt's framework, aspired to freedom. These efforts allowed citizens to engage in political events, enhance political activity, and oversee vote counting amid election falsifications. After the elections, many activists relocated but continued their work from new locations.

Election monitoring initiatives: Platforms like "Voice" and "Zubr," launched by "Honest People," were pivotal in promoting election transparency and holding the government accountable. "Voice" enabled voters to upload photos of their ballots via Telegram or Viber bots, documenting electoral fraud. "Zubr" supported this process by listing electoral committee names and documenting violations, exposing the regime's extensive electoral falsifications.

Strike committees: These initiatives aimed to reset the regime via solidarisation of decentralised efforts during political unrest. By organizing a national strike, they sought to disrupt the economy and weaken the regime's control. Local strike committees became essential in building worker solidarity and pressing for political change. Notable initiatives included the National Strike Committee, which supported those who lost jobs due to their political beliefs, and "You strike – we work," coordinated by the Belarusian diaspora in Germany. Telegram channels like "ZabastovkaBY" and the Centre for Assistance to Strikers provided support for such activity and advocated for reformation of the political system towards decentralisation of power.

Local and international advocacy: Local neighbourhood chats, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the Coordination Council aimed to ensure fair elections. Despite repression, these initiatives persisted, raising international awareness and advocating for sanctions against the regime. They also supported relocated Belarusians, addressing their challenges they face during and after participation in the protest.

Support networks: During and after the protests, relocated civic initiatives focused on providing alternative, people-to-people services and support (Navumau, Gustafsson, and Matveieva 2025). This cooperation, driven by global solidarity and opposition demands for new elections and accountability, played a crucial role in maintaining

resistance momentum amidst repression. In turn, regime's repressions began to rapidly gain strength and expand the range of instruments for physical and digital controlling and suppressing activism (Chulitskaya & Matonyte 2025; Garcia, et. al. 2025; Rudnik 2024).

The authorities saw these networks as especially dangerous, because they enabled the enhancement of solidarity among the civic activists and diaspora. Hence, they aspired to minimize their impact on deliberation and democratic development.

3.3. "Terror": Initiatives of the Second Strand

This strand embraces initiatives aligned with Arendt's concept of "terror" (1963: 112), involving violence or legal violations. Weeks after the rigged elections and crackdown, a group of revolutionary activists began targeting regime foundations like law enforcement and government institutions. While the broader revolution stayed mostly non-violent, IT-activists hacked government databases and exposed law-enforcement data to weaken the regime's authority. This approach grew in professional groups as non-violent methods seemed inadequate to challenge the entrenched regime. However, direct violence from activists was rare.

Initiatives aimed at aiding former law enforcement agents, who switched to the side of the protesters, deserved attention due to the difficulty of changing their position and political views for this category of servants of regime. In Belarus, the military and police have been crucial to Lukashenka's regime, shaping policy and supporting authoritarian rule (Lozka & Makarychev 2025). Many agents, trained in Russia or the USSR, opposed political change and supported a Union State with Russia (Adomeit 2021; Leukavets 2021). Addressing their roles in the post-revolutionary period became crucial as civic activism grew after August 2020.

The revolutionary movement became an ethical and professional dilemma for former regime agents: there is a push to end oppression and seek justice, aligning with Arendt's "terror stage" where demands for retribution emerge. However, as Arendt warns against a cycle of violence that could hinder establishing a just order (1963: 271), the society avoided punitive measures while promoting forgiveness and reconciliation after revolution (1963: 54). At the same time, the "revenge" remained a part of collective consciousness.

One notable initiative from this strand is the "Black Book of Belarus," which emerged early in the 2020 protests. It published personal information of law enforcement agents involved in repressing protesters and called for revenge. Activists, including "cyber-partisans,"

engaged in digital resistance by hacking government websites, displaying protest symbols, and releasing classified data. This novel resistance, blending hacking with activism, allowed the cyber-partisans to stay influential inside and outside Belarus as the main protests waned.

Initiatives aimed at assisting former law enforcement agents played a key role, focusing on reintegrating these individuals into a revolutionary-minded society through retraining programs, psychological support, and opportunities for civic reintegration. These efforts aimed to promote dialogue, responsibility, and accountability among former regime agents, rather than seeking legal violations.

The “Protect Belarus” initiative aimed to persuade law enforcement personnel to resign or join the protesters’ side. Founded by Mikita Mikado, it was linked to the BYSOL fund, which used cryptocurrency crowdfunding to support former agents. BYSOL leveraged blockchain technology to encrypt transfers, evading government restrictions by masking the nature of funds.

Another key initiative, BYPOL, consisted of former law enforcement officers investigating associates of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Founded by ex-investigator Andrey Astapovich, BYPOL conducted criminal investigations and published leaks, such as their inquiry into Raman Bandarenka’s death by a plainclothes officer. The team, including former Investigative Committee and Ministry of Internal Affairs employees, gathered data from internal databases, current and former police, and public projects like “23.34,” which documented administrative detentions, and the “Unified Crime Registration Book,” tracking security force violations.

The Telegram channel NEXTA Live, significant in organizing protests, also fits into the “terror” strand due to its use of hate speech early in the protests. NEXTA coined antagonistic terms for law enforcement, widely adopted in protests and memes, such as “slaboviki”¹⁰ (meaning “sissies,” mocking “silovik”¹¹ or enforcer), “loshki-petushki”¹² (a derogatory term from prison slang), and “karateli”¹³ (punishers, referring to death squads).

These initiatives require balancing justice and accountability for past actions with opportunities for forgiveness, redemption, and transformative change towards creating a more just and open society.

10 «Слабовики».

11 «Силовик».

12 «Лошки-петушки».

13 «Каратели».

3.4. The “Social” strand

The August 2020 protests in Belarus, unlike previous collective movements (Naumov 2014; Navumau 2016), were highly decentralized. Unlike the centralized demonstrations between 2000 and 2010, which were easily controlled by authorities, the 2020 protests spread across urban districts due to riot police blocking central squares in Minsk and other cities. This led to a “hyperlocal character,” with protests occurring simultaneously in multiple locations (Asmolov 2020). Protesters organized without a central plan (Alexandrovskaya 2021).

This strand shifted into a latent state, focusing on society’s survival under repression as authorities forcefully suppressed protests and curtailed civic initiatives. As a result, civic activism moved to safer spaces, providing social support to victims of the crackdown. Initiatives emerged to aid political prisoners, offer psychological support, legal protection, healthcare, and self-help, and raise funds for fines. According to Arendt, the “social question” – when people focus on solving everyday issues – can obscure the revolution’s true aim of achieving public freedom (1963: 137). In Belarus, many activists, after relocating due to severe repression, were unable to continue their activities. This was compounded by the fear of persecution and transnational repression, which further limited the scope of action to the most ‘politically safe’ domains – for instance, offering support to other affected and vulnerable groups, such as pensioners and single mothers.

However, after August 2020, initiatives addressing “social issues,” like assisting people of advanced age and supporting arrested compatriots, remained popular. Supporting arrested protesters was particularly challenging, as many detainees faced “educational activities” “from the state” involving beatings, torture, and isolation without outside communication. To circumvent this, civic activists demonstrated ingenuity through volunteer efforts. They stationed themselves outside pre-trial detention centres and jails, listening and recording names and messages from detainees as they were moved from transport vehicles to isolation wards. This information was digitised, compiled and shared via the Telegram channel “Akrestsina’s Lists”¹⁴ helping people locate missing loved ones and track political arrests.

The organization “Revera”, established in 1998, received the Telegram channel shortly after the protests. It also played a crucial role by assisting detainees and their families through a Telegram channel, sharing memos, contact details for police departments, and creating

14 t.me/spiski_okrestina.

initiatives like the “Panic Button”¹⁵ and “Dapamoga”¹⁶ app to facilitate communication between detainees and lawyers and allow users to report detentions and share locations via GPS immediately.

Broad crowdfunding was a key aspect of civic initiatives. These efforts supported strike committees by raising money for legal fees, supporting families of arrested protesters, assisting with relocation abroad, and aiding victims of beatings, torture, imprisonment, or job loss due to their political views. One prominent example was “Belarus of Future,”¹⁷ founded by Valery Tsapkala in Kyiv, which provided humanitarian, legal, and financial assistance to Belarusians facing political persecution. The fund empowered activists through consultations, job placement, and access to education abroad, while also supporting innovative ideas to unmute and empower citizens’ voices and promote democracy. It launched “Emergent Self-help,” a service connecting those needing assistance due to their push for fair elections with those willing to help. The “By_Help” and “iHelpBelarus” initiatives created a diaspora trust fund or “common wallet” to finance projects by verified Belarusian organizations.

These examples showcase that the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests sparked a surge of social initiatives in response to government election fraud and further repression. Civic activists employed innovative methods to resist authorities, advocate for human rights, and promote their democratic agenda. Various professionals, including lawyers, IT specialists, medical workers, and ex-police officers, launched numerous initiatives to address protest-related issues and support those in need. They also disseminated reliable COVID-19 information and offered financial and organizational support for protesters and detained activists. Despite the challenges faced after August 2020, some activists continued their pursuit of freedom.

Innovations were crucial both for organizing the protests and for coordinating support for repression victims. When authorities attempted to block the Internet in major cities using Sandvine software (Gallagher 2020), protesters used VPNs, proxies, and applications like Psiphon and Bridgefy (Serhan 2020) to circumvent these restrictions and continue sharing content about ongoing protest. Despite the disruptions, social media remained accessible to protesters, allowing communication and coordination. In the absence of reliable national media, Telegram channels became essential for disseminating information, connecting activists, and organizing collective actions. Almost

15 «Паническая кнопка».

16 «Дапамога».

17 «Беларусь Будущего».

every initiative had its own Telegram channel, with some developing specialized apps to address urgent issues. The next section explores Telegram's role in this movement.

3.5. The Role of Telegram in Social Mobilisation and Promoting Civic Initiatives

As the authorities controlled official information sources in Belarus, including the internet and media, there was a strong need for secure communication channels. Telegram emerged as the most popular platform for information exchange and messaging across different groups (Rudnik & Rönnblom 2025).

Two key features contributed to Telegram's popularity among activists: its strict privacy policies for handling personal data and its ability to function even when banned by national regulators (Walker 2020; Urman et al. 2020). These features made Telegram particularly useful for protesters in countries where authorities often repress political opposition, as seen in places like Hong Kong and former Soviet states (Vincent 2019; Urman et al. 2020; Sulzhytski et al. 2024).

In Belarus, Telegram channels were central to organizing the 2020–2021 protests and providing support to victims of repression amid the severe crackdown on civil society (Walker 2020). These channels were effective tools for empowering civilians to facilitate collective action and resist oppressive regime. The risks associated with revolutionary movement under the pressure defined the importance of existence of public spaces and platforms where citizens could unite, engage in open collective action, and mobilize for political change. Telegram was considered as a free virtual public space to gather, share information, and coordinate efforts without censorship. It offered a more secure than physical spaces and anonymous means of communication, enabling participants to coordinate and engage in the initiatives with less risk of immediate identification by authorities. In an environment marked by repression and further digital surveillance, maintaining anonymity was crucial for the safety and sustainability of the protest movement both within Belarus and internationally.

Many civic initiatives launched their own Telegram channels to reach wider audiences (Herasimenka et al. 2020). Telegram allowed Belarusian protesters to form secure groups, exchange messages anonymously, and maintain a high level of privacy (Walker 2020). When the Lukashenka regime attempted to block messenger in August 2020, activists used VPNs to continue accessing Telegram channels (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence 2020: 6). As a result, Telegram's popularity surged dramatically.

Remaining a primary communication platform for activists, Telegram helped to shape public opinion and democratic agenda, mobilize citizens, and foster unity among protesters. It was widely used to disseminate uncensored information during the “revolution” stage of political unrest. Channels like NEXTA and “Belarus of the Brain” were crucial for real-time updates on the protests. Other channels, including “LUXTA,” “My country Belarus,” “Tut.by news,” “Tea with raspberry jam,” and “Onliner,” also grew rapidly as more and more Belarusians joined Telegram. NEXTA’s channel peaked in popularity in August 2020, with two million subscribers, almost a quarter of Belarus’s population (Centre of European Transformation 2020).

Telegram channels run by independent journalists became alternative news sources in a media landscape heavily restricted by censorship. By breaking the state media’s information monopoly, these channels shared uncensored content and firsthand accounts, bringing to the light the realities of the protests to both domestic and international audiences. Mass appearance of independent reporters in Telegram challenged government narratives and provided more accurate portrayals of events, encouraging critical thinking and offering diverse perspectives instead of one-sided narratives of controlled TV channels. Uncensored content motivated users to question the government’s propaganda about defending human rights, challenging the notion that the state-controlled media’s power was unassailable. Telegram channels countered disinformation while providing a space for open discussion, helping to change public perception and enhance political consciousness, especially among conservative users accustomed to trusting state-run media. They facilitated the exchange of informed opinions and encouraged citizens to engage in public discussions and consequent action.

Second, Telegram provided secure public spaces where individuals could unite, communicate, and engage in co-creation of a new political reality. Its security features and technical capabilities empowered people to communicate more freely and coordinate actions, enabling decentralized mobilization online. For example, Dze.chat, a map-based initiative, allowed users to find local chats for organizing and participating in collective actions, connect with neighbours, and form grassroots response networks. This facilitated coordination among activists, helped them to organize local demonstrations and strikes more effectively. While the government tried to cut off communication, Telegram allowed for rapid message dissemination, enabling protesters to quickly adapt to the escalating situation in the streets and government crackdowns. This decentralized approach made the movement more resilient against suppression.

Third, Telegram played an important role in garnering international support for Belarusian protesters during the “revolution strand” of the protests. By sharing information on human rights abuses and government repression, the platform drew global attention, leading to increased diplomatic pressure on the Belarusian government and raising awareness about the protests worldwide. This international focus on the events of 2020 spread the voice of the activists abroad and facilitated global support of their cause. As a result, Belarusians felt they were receiving significant international attention. This was particularly notable in initiatives led by the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the Coordination Council.

Fourth, this decentralized digital facilitation helped to foster unity and solidarity within Belarusian society through visible and more safe collective action. Initiatives like ByCovid19, which supported doctors fighting the coronavirus, and BYSOL, which organized virtual fund-raising campaigns for repressed Belarusians, exemplify this. Telegram channels served as virtual meeting points, connecting people across and beyond Belarus. By uniting individuals under a common cause, these channels helped to overcome the fear and isolation, often associated with participating in street protests.

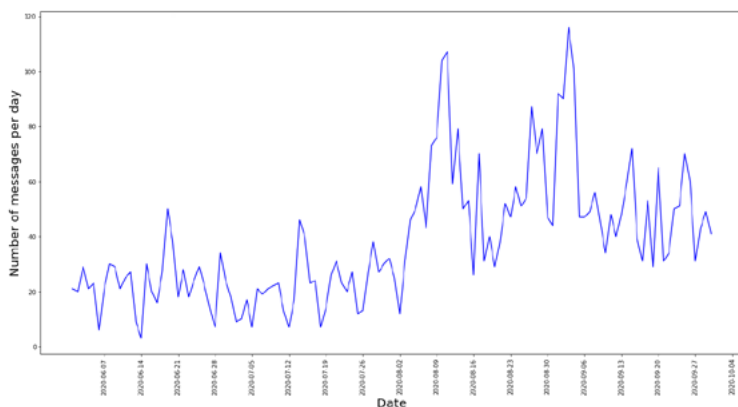
Fifth, Telegram facilitated the plurality of voices and informed opinions, as well as raising political consciousness. For movements towards freedom to succeed, they must create space for political diversity, allowing sharing opinions and further actions. The “Voice” initiative, for example, used Telegram to launch surveys that revealed a wide range of freely expressed political opinions and choices. The platform enabled the exchange of varied viewpoints and discussions on improving “social” initiatives, helping citizens to develop a deeper political awareness about ongoing events. This encouraged opinions that went beyond simple pro- or anti-regime narratives, promoting a more nuanced understanding of political dynamics which led to the subsequent Russo-Ukrainian war, in which the Lukashenka’s regime could not avoid being involved.

Additionally, Telegram played a crucial role in forming grassroots decision-making councils, analogous to the concept described by Arendt (1963: 164). These councils, consisting of ordinary citizens, acted as alternative political structures responsible for collective actions of small groups. During the 2020-2021 Belarusian protests, Telegram channels functioned as virtual councils where citizens discussed and decided on collective actions. These digital councils, such as strike committees and districts’ chats, provided an inclusive and participatory environment, empowering individuals through their involvement.

3.6. Network Analysis of Civic Initiatives in Telegram Before and After August 9, 2020

The authorities' brutal actions provoked unprecedented activity among newly created and existing initiatives, primarily on Telegram. We analysed interactions among these initiatives on Telegram before and after August 9, 2020, to empirically illustrate these changes. To identify the key shifts in activity, we examined publication trends over the two months before (pre-election) and the two months after August 9, 2020 – the date of the disputed Belarusian elections that triggered protests. Publication activity was varied, with notable spikes as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Dynamics of publication activity of civic initiatives in Telegram. Source: authors' representation.



The first spike in activity occurred on June 19, when people formed solidarity chains to protest the arrest of presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka. The second pre-election spike happened on July 14, in response to the non-registration of candidates Viktor Babaryka and Valery Tsapkala. Following August 9, publication activity surged significantly, with messaging more than doubling on August 10–11 compared to previous peaks. Although activity then decreased, it remained higher than during the pre-election period. Another major spike occurred on September 3, driven by the “Belarusian Association of Journalists” covering solidarity actions against the detention of journalists.

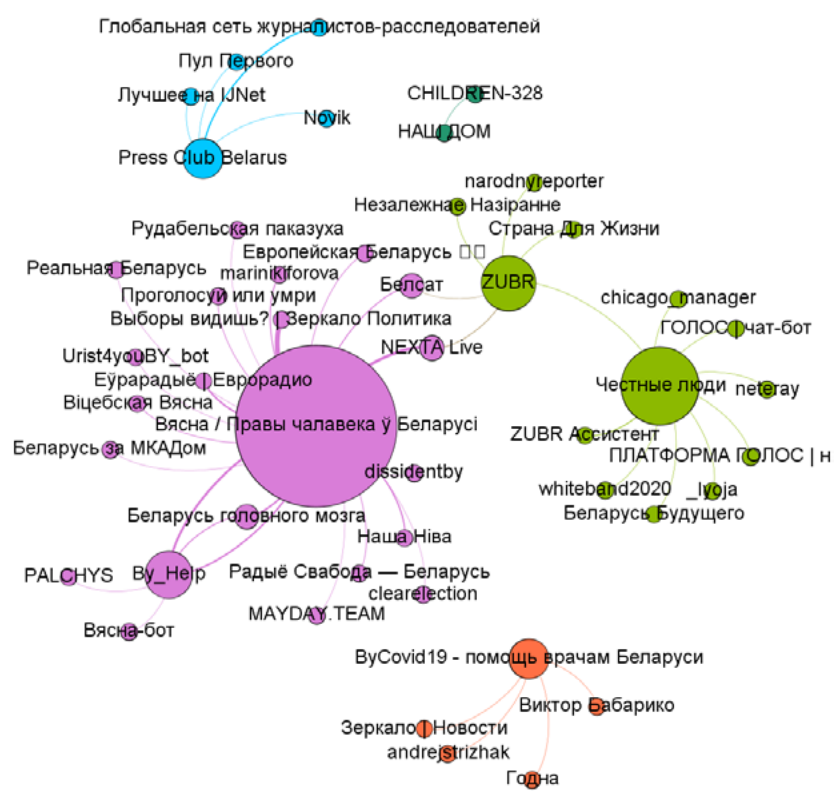
August 10–11 was a critical moment for civic initiatives. The number of publications increased and was paralleled by similar publications in independent media. Following these dates, civic initiatives generally increased their publication activity compared to the pre-election phase. However, publication data alone doesn't reveal if the interaction

patterns among civic initiatives on Telegram changed or if there was merely a rise in message volume. To better understand these interaction patterns, we will use network analysis.

We used identical visualisation settings for both graphs (before and after August 9, 2020). Node size reflected degree centrality (number of links per node), while edge size was normalized (0 to 1). Nodes and edges were grouped by colour using modularity, and the ForceAtlas2 layout emphasized network isolation and connections (Jacomy et al. 2014).

The first graph (Figure 3) maps the citation network of civic initiatives in Belarus on Telegram from June 1 to August 9, prior to the shift observed on August 10–11. This network was dispersed, with smaller initiatives, especially those unrelated to elections or human rights, appearing largely disconnected.

Figure 3. Civic initiatives activity on Telegram from June 1 to August 9, 2020.
Source: authors’ representation.



Several nodes, particularly “Viasna” and “Honest People,” show higher degrees of centrality, revealing their active role in linking with

other nodes and suggesting their significant influence within the network. “Honest People” favoured internal connections within their ecosystem (“Honest People,” “Zubr,” “Platform Voice”), while “Viasna” maintained relatively extensive connections with external Telegram channels, mainly independent media outlets.

The interaction among civic initiatives before August 9, 2020, exhibited the following characteristics.

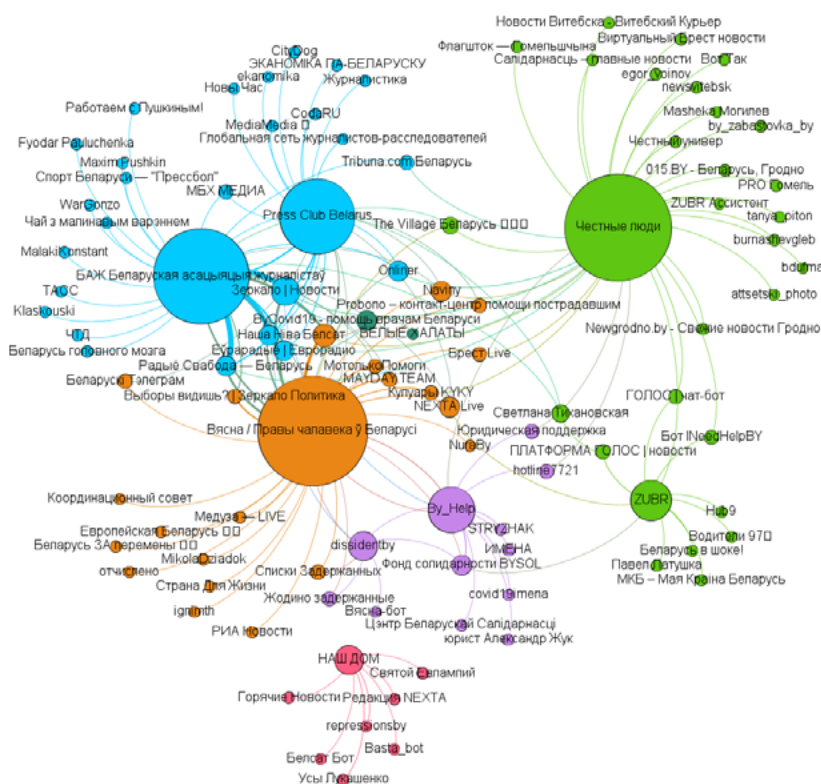
- *Heterogeneity in degree distribution*: The network displayed notable variation in degree distribution. Few initiatives, particularly those focused on human rights (e.g., “By_Help,” “Viasna”) and election monitoring (e.g., “Honest People,” “Zubr,” “Voice”), were highly central and acted as key hubs. In contrast, initiatives like “Our House” had lower centrality, indicating minimal messaging and citing activity. Other nodes, such as “Our House,” demonstrated a much lower degree of centrality, highlighting the low messaging and citing activity among the non-election-related initiatives.
- *Fragmentation*: The network’s topology shows significant fragmentation, with few interconnections among primary civil initiatives. Large independent media channels largely served as intermediaries. Nodes like “Our House,” “Press Club Belarus,” and “ByCovid19” had few external links to other initiatives. Additionally, the “Belarusian Association of Journalists” was connected mainly to external resources, highlighting the network’s insular nature.
- *Intra-ecosystem connectivity*: The network shows substantial homophily, with channels from the same real-life ecosystem being more interconnected. Strong ties are evident within communities of initiatives with similar themes or focus areas. This intra-ecosystem connectivity suggests that shared objectives or operations enhance network ties, reinforcing distinct community structures.

The second graph (Figure 4) illustrates the evolution of civic initiatives’ interconnections on Telegram from August 9 to October 1, 2020, reflecting changes in publication activity patterns after August 10–11.

Several notable changes in network dynamics are observed within this period.

- *Integration*: Major channels for civic initiatives increasingly cited each other or referenced a shared information environment, mainly consisting of prominent media channels common to multiple initiatives. This heightened integration suggests “frame alignment processes” (Snow et al. 1986), indicating that initiatives are aligning their activities and narratives, with a focus on events post-August 9.
- *Diversification*: Citation patterns among initiatives evolved, broadening their specific citation bases and linking more extensively

Figure 4. Civic initiatives activity on Telegram from August 9 to October 1, 2020.
Source: authors' representation.



with the general media field. For example, media-focused channels like “Press Club Belarus” and “Belarusian Association of Journalists” significantly diversified their media sources and Telegram connections. Consequently, the number and diversity of external connections for all initiatives increased markedly compared to the pre-election period.

- **Decentralisation:** The By_Help initiative shifted from the Viasna-centric human rights community to form a new network with DissidentBy, focusing on supporting the repressed. Concurrently, isolated media support initiatives like “Press Club Belarus” and “Belarusian Association of Journalists” merged into a new, active network. Citation activity became more evenly distributed among all channels, indicating the integration of previously isolated initiatives into the broader network of “protest” channels.
- **Multi-functionality:** The functional structure of external links evolved after August 9. Previously, each initiative had a distinct set of links, but the role of independent media channels grew

significantly. This shift suggests that civil initiatives are increasingly representing reality, which, from a social movement theory perspective, may indicate a move towards more political functions and a greater role in independent media, adding a new dimension to traditional civil initiative activities.

Conclusion

The 2020 Belarusian protests, triggered by falsified presidential elections and sustained through the digital architecture of uncensored and unmoderated Telegram, reveal a reconfiguration of political agency under authoritarian pressure. This study, through a mixed-method — content and network analyses, — reveals how Telegram’s virtual infrastructure enabled Belarusian citizens to create virtual “spaces of freedom” understood as arenas of relatively safe actions towards political deliberation, resistance, and solidarity that, in Hannah Arendt’s terms, embody the revolutionary impulse toward nations freedom. By mapping the emergence of decentralized civic initiatives across revolutionary, terror, and social strands, study demonstrates their empirical proliferation and philosophical significance as “embryonic councils”, which challenge the hegemonic closure of authoritarian governance.

The findings describe Telegram’s role as more than a mere communication tool; it emerges as an available and massively used infrastructure in creating a pluralistic public sphere and discourse where citizens transcended fear to contribute to co-creation of new sociopolitical realities through raising voices and taking action. The pre- and post-August 9, 2020, network analyses reveal a measurable shift from fragmented, insular civic ecosystems to a densely interwoven variety of initiatives, marked by integration, diversification, and decentralization. This evolution signifies a rupture with the past, aligning with Arendt’s vision of revolution as a break that births novel forms of political association. Yet, the study also discusses the dialectical tensions Arendt foresaw: the revolutionary strand’s quest for freedom risks dilution by the social strand’s focus on necessity and addressing everyday needs, while the terror strand’s disruptiveness threatens to damage the deliberative fabric essential for providing sociopolitical change.

Theoretically, this research enriches Arendt’s framework by situating her concepts within the digital realm, where virtual platforms like Telegram extend the spatial and temporal boundaries of collective action. It bridges classical political philosophy with contemporary media studies to illustrate how digital affordances, such as privacy,

anonymity, and resilience against censorship, enhances the inter-subjective dynamics of “council of democracy”. By integrating social movement theory’s “frame alignment processes,” the study further explains how Telegram facilitates narrative convergence among diverse initiatives, supporting a collective identity which is shaped by the resistance. This synthesis reframes Belarus’s 2020 protests as a paradigmatic case of digital natality and positions them as a crucible for understanding the global potential of platform-mediated opinions unmuting.

From this perspective, the Belarusian experience of protesting offers critical lessons for the study of digital activism in repressive regimes. While the protests did not overthrow Lukashenka’s regime in 2020, they delegitimized its authority domestically and internationally, sowing seeds for future democratic imaginaries and actions. Telegram’s role in sustaining this movement through real-time coordination, international advocacy, and the unmuting plural voices, suggests that digital communication platforms can serve as resilient alternative public places, capable of withstanding surveillance and censorship. However, we also caution against techno-optimism, recognizing that digital spaces, while emancipatory, are not immune to the risks of fragmentation, co-optation, or descent into retributive violence, as Arendt warned.

Therefore, future research could probe the *longue durée* of these digital councils, examining their sustainability and evolution in the face of transnational repression and geopolitical change, such as Belarus’ entanglement in the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022. Comparative studies on Telegram’s role in other authoritarian contexts, such as Hong Kong, Iran, or Myanmar, could further reveal its universal and context-specific affordances. Scholars could also explore the ethical and political implications of the suppressed attempts of revolution, balancing the imperative of resistance with the need to preserve safe (or rather brave) spaces for deliberation and reconciliation. As media technologies continue to reshape the contours of political action, the Belarusian case invites to reimagine revolution not as a singular event but as a continuous process of global-order-making, where citizens, through shared speech and action, perpetually renew the promise of what we call “freedom”.

In Arendt’s vision, revolutions are not judged by their immediate outcomes but by their capacity to inaugurate new beginnings. The 2020 Belarusian protests, though brutally suppressed, have etched a digital blueprint for resistance, showcasing that even under repression, virtual spaces can nurture the fragile yet, but growing and sustaining spirit of plurality and diverse collective identity. This study

stands for acknowledging the soft power of citizen agency, mediated by technology, which challenges authoritarianism through the development of this agency and envisions, however tentatively, an alternative world or nation – ideally free and diverse.

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