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# The People against State Populism

## Belarusian Protests against the “Social Parasite Law”

VOLODYMYR ARTIUKH

### Abstract

“The main parasite is our dear president!” was one of the slogans people chanted on the streets of Belarusian cities and towns in February and March 2017. The demonstrations against the so-called “social parasite law” was the largest wave of social unrest in Belarus since the country’s populist president Lukashenka came to power in 1994. This article analyzes the government’s “anti-parasite” campaign as a reflection of the pro-market shift of Belarusian populism and uncovers the “hidden transcript” of the protests as articulated by the unaffiliated participants. Relying on the interviews and the analysis of media coverage, the author concludes that the government justified the new pro-market policies by the “dramaturgy of populism” rooted in the division between the entrepreneurial people and the undeserving parasites, while the protesters responded with their own version of populism based on an alternative identity of the people-producer.

*Keywords: populism, welfare, social protest, Belarus*

### Introduction

In February 2017, a 60-year-old man from a Belarusian provincial town threw himself out of his window. In his suicide note, he wrote that he “was never a loafer, a rapist, a robber, but worked honestly for the whole life”.<sup>1</sup> The man left this note beside a receipt proving that he had paid the new tax, popularly known as the “parasites’ tax” (*nalog na tuneiadstvo*). The tax was introduced in 2015 by the presidential decree no. 3 entitled “On Prevention of Social Parasitism (Dependency)”

1 Reported by By24 news portal, 21. 1. 2017, [by24.org/2017/01/21/one\\_more\\_suicide\\_because\\_of\\_parasite\\_tax\\_in\\_belarus](https://by24.org/2017/01/21/one_more_suicide_because_of_parasite_tax_in_belarus), 6. 2. 2020.

and applied to the citizens who were not legally employed or registered as unemployed for 183 days in a year. Tax notices started arriving in people's mailboxes in the beginning of 2017, and one of them was at the root of this suicide.<sup>2</sup> Almost half a million Belarusians received such notices, and an unprecedented wave of street protests against the "parasites' law" followed in February and March 2017, exceeding anything of the kind in Belarusian history since the establishment of the super-presidential regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in 1996.

This article is an anthropological exploration of the popular indignation against the "law on social dependency" as a case of a Polanyi-type protest<sup>3</sup> against the pro-market shift of the Belarusian authoritarian populist regime that grounded its legitimacy in the self-declared "socially-oriented market economy". This exploration aims to decipher the "hidden transcript"<sup>4</sup> of this popular moral economy as it surfaced during the government's crisis of legitimacy.

The tragic episode cited above encapsulates the sentiments that drove people to the streets of Belarusian cities and towns. Firstly, the discontent with the social consequences of the economic recession: the deceased man had lost his job before his retirement age, and, like many of the newly unemployed, could not find a new one. Secondly, a sense of bureaucratic injustice: the man was already retired<sup>5</sup> and had received the notification by mistake, like thousands of other suspected "social parasites", due to the bureaucrats' negligence. Thirdly, the insult of stigmatization: the man stressed that he is not a social parasite (*tuneyadets*), but an honest citizen, which he had demonstrated by paying the tax. This idiom of "honest workers" as opposed to social parasites would become crucial for the protesters who would proclaim themselves "non-parasites" (*netuneiadtsy*) and articulate this self-designation with the idiom of "the people".

I argue that it was the idiom of "the people" around which other claims of the "non-parasites' protests" were structured. More precisely, this unrest was a struggle between the main actors of the protests and the state propaganda that sought to define "the people" during the crisis of legitimacy of the Belarusian populism. Thus, my approach differs from a proposed Maussian interpretation of these protests,<sup>6</sup> according to which Belarusians perceive themselves as "subjects" of a paternalist rule and rebelled after their "gift" of obedience was not reciprocated by the sovereign, as well as from an interpretation that treats the "parasites' tax" as a relapse into the Soviet past.<sup>7</sup>

2 At least one more suicide, by a long-term unemployed woman, was reported by a local Rohachau news portal, 17. 1. 2017, [vrogacheve.ru/12551-zhitelnica-rogacheva-povesilas-posle-polucheniya-pisma-schastya-ot-nalogovoy-s-trebovaniem-zaplatit-nalog.html](http://vrogacheve.ru/12551-zhitelnica-rogacheva-povesilas-posle-polucheniya-pisma-schastya-ot-nalogovoy-s-trebovaniem-zaplatit-nalog.html), 6. 2. 2020.

3 Silver, Beverly: *Forces of Labor. Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870*. Cambridge 2003, p. 20.

4 Scott, James: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. Yale 1990.

5 According to media reports, this man was fired from a local factory in 2014, but he reached the pension age in 2016 and was retired by the time he received the tax notice.

6 Merzlou, Mikita: Entfaltet der belarussische "sozial orientierte Staat" eine demokratiehemmende Wirkung? In: *Belarus-Analysen* 43 (2019), p. 2–7.

7 Gray, Natallia; Cameron, David: Fighting Unemployment the Soviet Way. Belarus' Law against Social Parasites. In: *Eastern European Economics* 57/6 (2019), p. 504–506.

This framing of the “parasites’ protests” situates my research in the anthropological field of populism.<sup>8</sup> In complement to recent research on populism, which focuses on the rising right-wing movements in Western and Central-Eastern Europe,<sup>9</sup> this article deals with an established populist regime in a post-Soviet state and addresses the less explored topics of the dynamics of a populist regime and its contestation by social movements. Although most authors agree that the Belarusian regime is a populist one,<sup>10</sup> there have been few attempts to apply the contemporary conceptual apparatus of populism studies to the case of Belarus.

Since the task of this article is to understand how the people imagine themselves against the populist leadership, I build on the discursive approach<sup>11</sup> to populism and offer the notion of the “dramaturgy of populism” as a dynamic model of the populist ideology and its challengers. The main actors of this model are the “pure people”, the “corrupt elite”, and the “non-people”. Populism constructs a morally elevated image of “the people” which is not identifiable with the empirically given population<sup>12</sup> and rhetorically opposes it to the negatively charged trope of “the elite”, against which a populist leader protects “the people”.<sup>13</sup> Although the opposition between the people and the elite is central to the populist discourse, the latter often also has a vertical dimension that sets “the people” against its “other”: the morally degraded parasitical remainder.<sup>14</sup>

A populist leader acquires legitimacy by “extracting the people from within the people”<sup>15</sup> and presenting the extracted image to the subaltern population. This procedure may either succeed, and lead to a stable period of a populist governance, or fail altogether. Its success or failure depends on whether the target audience identifies with the projected image of “the people”. This “extraction of the peo-

8 Hann, Chris: *Anthropology and Populism*. In: *Anthropology Today* 35/1 (2019), p. 1 f.

9 Kalb, Don: “Worthless Poles” and Other Disposessions. In: Sharryn Kasmir, August Carbonella (eds.): *Blood and Fire. Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor*. New York 2014, p. 250–287; Kalb, Don; Halmaï, Gábor (eds.): *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class. Working-Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe*. New York 2011; Kalb, Don: *Post-Socialist Contradictions. The Social Question in Central and Eastern Europe and the Making of the Illiberal Right*. In: Jan Breman et al. (eds.): *The Social Question in the Twenty-First Century. A Global View*. Oakland 2019, p. 208–226; Makovicky, Nicolette: “Work Pays.” Slovak Neoliberalism as “Authoritarian Populism”. In: Focaal (2013), p. 77–90; Friedman, Jonathan: A Note on Populism and Global Systemic Crisis. In: *Economic Anthropology* 5/1 (2018), p. 135–137; Szombati, Kristof: *The Revolt of the Provinces. Anti-Gypsyism and Right-Wing Politics in Hungary*. New York 2018.

10 Goujon, Alexandra: *Révolution Politiques et Identitaires En Ukraine et Biélorussie*. Brussels 2010 (Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles); Eke, Steven, Taras Kuzio: *Sultanism in Eastern Europe. The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus*. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 52/3 (2000), p. 523–547; March, Luke: *Populism in the Post-Soviet States*. In: Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford 2017.

11 Brubaker, Rogers: *Why Populism?* In: *Theory and Society* 46/5 (2017), p. 360.

12 Müller, Jan-Werner: “The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People”. *Reflections on Populism*. In: *Constellations* 21/4 (2014), p. 485.

13 Mudde, Cas, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser: *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*. New York 2017, p. 5 f.

14 Friedman, A Note (see note 9), p. 135–137; Kalb, *Post-Socialist Contradictions* (see note 9), p. 208–226; Rajaram, Prem: *Refugees as Surplus Population: Race, Migration and Capitalist Value Regimes*. In: *New Political Economy* 23/5 (2018), p. 627–639.

15 Lefort, Claude: *Democracy and Political Theory*. Cambridge 1988, p. 88.

ple” is a dynamic process contingent on extra-rhetorical context and, as a “thin-centered” rhetorical repertoire, may be filled with varying “thick” ideologies.<sup>16</sup> The content of the main categories of populism, or the clothing of the main characters of the populist dramaturgy, changes depending on these “thick” ideologies: developmentalist nationalism (Juan Peron), socialism (Chavez, Correa) or neoliberalism (Fujimori, Menem).<sup>17</sup>

A regime that uses a populist rhetorical repertoire does not have to be static: this drama may have several acts, and a populist leader may “extract the people from within the people” several times. In this article I argue that this was the case with the Belarusian populist president Lukashenka, as he attempted to impose a new image of the people. The population’s refusal to identify with it, however, and its willingness to even identify with the “other” motivated the protest mobilization.

This article relies on my fieldwork among a network of inter-sectoral labor organizations united into the Congress of the Democratic Trade-Unions, which I conducted between 2015 and the summer of 2017. This network was a privileged site to observe the mass demonstrations, as the labor unions were among the main organizers of the protests. Specifically, I interviewed activists of the Radio-Electronics Workers’ Union (REWU) who were active in mobilizing people for the protests, and unaffiliated Belarusians who were vulnerable to the “law on social parasites”. Additionally, I analyzed the content of the videos from the main protest events<sup>18</sup> and coded the messages of the protesters, who did not identify themselves with any established political organization.

The rest of the article consists of three sections. In the next section, I sketch out the post-crisis conjuncture of the Belarusian authoritarian populism; in the following section, I analyze the dynamic of the protest mobilization and its main actors; and in the last section, I show how the claims of the protesters interacted with the state’s political and ideological response.

## The crisis of the “Belarusian model”

The scene for the government’s “anti-parasite” campaign was set in the middle of the crisis of the “Belarusian economic model”. After Lukashenka consolidated his power around 1996, Belarus stood out among its neighbors as a developmental state capitalism with a self-declared socially-oriented market economy,<sup>19</sup> demonstrating a record economic growth of 8% on average between 2000–2008 and a

16 Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism* (see note 13), p. 6.

17 Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal: *Latin American Populism. Some Conceptual and Normative Lessons*. In: *Constellations* 21/4 (2014), p. 494–504; Weyland, Kurt: *Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe*. In: *Comparative Politics* 31/4 (1999), p. 379.

18 In total, I have analyzed 15 videos with a full-length coverage of 12 protest events with over 500 participants. The videos were produced by the reporters of Belsat (<https://belsat.eu>), Radyio Svaboda ([www.svaboda.org](http://www.svaboda.org)), Nasha Niva (<https://nn.by>), tut.by, and the Homel vlogger Maksim Filipovich ([www.youtube.com/channel/UCDBgSA\\_DZONNMtf2\\_COzQXA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDBgSA_DZONNMtf2_COzQXA)).

19 Becker, Joachim: *Divergent Political-Economic Trajectories – Russia, Ukraine, Belarus*. In: Felix Jaitner,

reduction in poverty and inequality unprecedented among post-Soviet countries.<sup>20</sup> This fuelled the populist president's legitimacy, who declared himself protector of the simple working people against the corrupt business and bureaucratic elites.

Having barely recovered from the crises of 2009 and 2011, the Belarusian economy was hit by a ricochet from the war in the East of Ukraine and the ensuing sanctions against Russia, its main trading partner. In 2015 and 2016, Belarusian GDP shrank for the first time since the early nineties, and the government focused on an effort to stabilize the finances and the prices, while putting on hold the interests of the workers and pensioners. The real wages stagnated in 2014 and went down in 2015 and 2016 for the first time since the '90s.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence, real income fell by 7.2 % over these two years, and poverty rates went up, especially in the industrial East of the country,<sup>22</sup> additionally hit hard by the unemployment affecting 3 % of the population.<sup>23</sup> Large state-owned enterprises with relatively stable jobs, high wages and welfare infrastructure had been firing more than hiring:<sup>24</sup> starting from 2014, the ten largest employers (with 8000 to 10000 employees) in the country had been shedding labor force. Thus, between 2014 and 2016 the two largest employers in Minsk, the Tractor Plant and the Automobile Plant, lost 10 % and 12 % of their workers or over 2000 people. The same applies to the state-owned enterprises in the regions where some of the most numerous protests would take place: the tire plant in Babruysk lost almost 1400 people and the largest oil refinery in the northern city of Navapolatsk sacked around 1700 employees. Meanwhile other large regional employers in the Minsk and Homel regions had virtually stopped hiring.

Adding to the unemployment growth, many Belarusian migrant workers either returned home or had to look for unofficial employment in Russia.<sup>25</sup> This hit especially hard the regions of Homel, Mahiliou and Vitsebsk with already the lowest average per capita incomes and the highest poverty rates, where people tend to be involved in the "grey" economy of trans-border peddling and unregistered labor migration.<sup>26</sup> This geographical distribution of the population vulnerable to the "parasite law" was reflected in the geographical spread of the protests.

Tina Olteanu, and Tobias Spöri (eds.): *Crises in the Post-Soviet Space. From the Dissolution of the Soviet Union to the Conflict in Ukraine*. Abingdon 2018, p. 61–80.

20 EBRD. *Transition Report 2016-17. Transition for All: Equal Opportunities in an Unequal World*, 2017.

21 Author's calculation based on official statistics of the Belarusian National Statistical Committee, belstat.gov.by.

22 Mazol, Aleh: *Determinants of Poverty with and without Economic Growth. Explaining Belarus's Poverty Dynamics during 2009–2016*. BERO Working Paper Series 2017, p. 24–25.

23 Mazol O., Tsiulia, E.: *Otsenka chislennosti trudosposobnogo naseleniya, ne zaniatogo v ekonomike, i ekonomicheskoe razvitie regionov Belarusi za 2007–2015 gody*. BERO Policy Paper Series 2018, p. 6–8.

24 The following calculations are made by the author based on the quarterly reports by the enterprises on the website of the Ministry of Finance, [www.minfin.gov.by/ru/securities\\_department/results/results\\_oao](http://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/securities_department/results/results_oao), 6. 2. 2020.

25 Ivanovich, Dmitriy: *Snizhenie dollarovykh zarplat v Rossii – osnovnoy faktory sokrashcheniya trudovoy migratsii grazhdan Belarusi v 2015 godu*. In: *Nashe Mnieinie*, [nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5945.html](http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5945.html), 6. 2. 2020.

26 Mazol and Tsiulia, *Otsenka* (see note 23), p. 10.



In a pro-market gesture, the government broadened the range of the patented activities for the self-employed and simplified the regulations for individual entrepreneurs. Consequently, the number of the self-employed increased as did the number of those employed by individual entrepreneurs,<sup>27</sup> drawing those who lost industrial jobs into the precarious self-employed market or low-paid jobs in the private sector. This seems to have been the aim of the Belarusian Ministry of Labor, which started discussing the “parasite tax” in the late 2013. It set the target of around 450 000 potential “parasites”, but the government found it difficult to identify them, and the project law was postponed.<sup>28</sup> In October 2014, president Lukashenko returned to this topic during the conference on labor and migration: “We need to stop this parasitism, 400 000 should be involved in labor activities ...”.<sup>29</sup>

The frantic search for parasites that ensued from his call led to numerous mistakes in issuing the tax notifications that would incite people’s anger. According to calculations based on official statistics, the employable population that was not active in the economy in the end of 2015 amounted to 266 400 people.<sup>30</sup> The discrepancy between the desirable number of the “parasites” and the officially registered figure presented a puzzle for the local executive authorities. In the beginning of 2017, they eventually found 470 000 “parasites” (10% of the employable population), but less than one in ten paid the tax. According to my informants and the press, the notifications had been sent to everyone without much scruple, even to the dead and the disabled.

Thus, the lack of coordination between various state agencies led to a voluntarist implementation of the “parasite law”. Combined with regional inequality and falling incomes, the scarcity of well-paid jobs and the growing precarization of the existing workplaces, this created structural conditions for the popular discontent that would later erupt. The state’s withdrawal from direct violence and the agitation of the trade-unions and opposition groups lead to the mass protests against the decree.

## The unfolding of the protest and its main actors

Two types of organized actors tried to articulate and mobilize this popular discontent: the extra-parliamentary political opposition and the labor unions outside of the state-controlled Federation of Trade Unions. Opposition activists started campaigning already in 2013 and by 2015 gathered over 20 000 signatures under their petition to withdraw the “law on parasites”. In late 2016 the Radio-Electronics Workers’ Union (REWU) initiated a campaign against the said law by convening a

27 Dubina, Yuras: Balykin. Samyie slabyie ukhodiat pervymi. In: *Belarusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 27. 9. 2016.

28 Tuneyadtsy mogut spat spokojno: naloga poka ne budet. In: *Belarusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 12. 12. 2013.

29 Melnichuk, Tatiana: V Belorussii namereny lovit tuneyadtsev. In: *BBC Russian*, [www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/10/141022\\_belarus\\_unemployed\\_hunt](http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/10/141022_belarus_unemployed_hunt), 22. 8. 2014.

30 Mazol and Tsiulia, Otsenka (see note 23), p. 2.

Table 1: Unfolding of the protests against the decree no. 3 (February–May 2017)

Phase of the protests	Date (2017)	Cities (number of participants)	Organizers/ participants	Response of the state
“The march of enraged Belarusians”	February 17	Minsk (2000–2500)	Opposition organizations/dominated by political activists	Unauthorized; detentions after the event
First wave of regional protests	February 19	Homel (2000–3000), Mahiliou (200–400), Hrodna (50–100), Brest (100), Vitsebsk (250)	Opposition organizations, trade unions, social networks/predominantly unaffiliated people	Authorized and unauthorized demonstrations, sporadic detentions and fines
	February 26	Vitsebsk (1750–2000), Brest (300), Babruysk (400–1500), Baranavichy (300)	Opposition organizations, trade unions, social networks/predominantly unaffiliated people	Authorized and unauthorized demonstrations, sporadic detentions and fines
Second wave of regional protests	March 5–19	Brest (1000–2000), Maladzechna (500–1000), Pinsk (350–400), Rahachou (300), Vorsha (1000), Babruisk (650–1000), Minsk (1750–4000), Hrodna (1000), Slonim (300–500), Baranavichy (50–60)	Opposition organizations and trade unions/predominantly unaffiliated people	A mix of detentions and dialogue with representatives of local authorities
Opposition “calendar protests” with an anti-decree theme	Freedom Day (March 25–26)	Minsk (1000–3000), Brest (200), Hrodna (150), Homel (500), Vitsebsk (100), Vorsha (100), Pinsk (150), Mahiliou (50)	Organized by political organizations/activist participation	Mass detentions
	Chernobyl Way (April 26)	Minsk (450–500)	Political organizations/predominantly activists	Authorized
	International Labor Day (May 1)	Minsk (200–300) <sup>1</sup> , Homel (100–200)	Parallel May Day-themed demonstrations by trade unions and political organizations	Authorized

1 Does not include the participants of the celebrations organized by the Federation of Trade Unions, where the topic of the decree was not raised.



meeting in REWU's Minsk office with the lawyers and activists of the opposition political movements, which initially did not imply street protests.

While opposition politicians stressed the agenda of regime change and economic liberalization, labor unions addressed the issues of work precarity and shrinking welfare. Trade unions were also more cautious about the protest mobilization, but under the pressure from both their membership and their political allies, took active part in the protests. The bulk of the protest events happened between February 17 and May 1, 2017, with most of them taking place between February 19 and March 19 in regional centers and smaller towns. As it is evident from table 1,<sup>31</sup> the wave of the protests starts and ends with the events dominated by the political activists and focused in the capital city, but the majority of the protests, often spontaneous and with a large participation of politically unaffiliated people, happened in between mostly in provincial cities and towns.

The wave started with "The March of Enraged Belarussians": it was the largest public event since the 2010 post-election protests and was led by the politicians who lost those elections. According to my informants and the media, this event attracted mostly the activists and sympathizers of the opposition political organizations. Although it was framed as a protest against the "law on parasites", the organizers put forward a demand to hold free elections and gave the authorities a month to react, which set the time frame for further mobilizations. The trade union's leader announced in the rally that they had gathered 45 000 signatures in three weeks, ending his speech with the nationalist slogan "Long live Belarus!", a marker of the political opposition.

Within two days, protests in five regional centers followed. Homel, the country's second largest city with a large but stagnant industry and rather loyal political climate, stood out with around 2000 protesters on the streets according to most media reports, although my informants in the town mentioned 3000. Subsequently, this city would provide the second largest mobilization numbers throughout the whole period of the protests signaling their social-economic import.

If the first protest in Minsk attracted mostly the traditional supporters of the opposition political organizations and was dominated by political slogans, the following regional protests were often spontaneous gatherings that revealed social grievances that exceeded the demand to repeal the "the parasites law". The provincial towns of Baranovichi, Babruysk, Vorsha, and Maladzechna joined the wave. Up to 2000 protested in Vitsebsk: similar to Homel, a regional center with a sizable Russian population that lacked previous protest experience or strong support for the opposition. The trend of articulating broader social grievances along with the demand to repeal the "anti-parasite law" continued.

The spreading of regional protests prompted local authorities to react. The first attempt to engage in a dialogue with the protesters happened in Brest in early March, although there had already been cases of detentions and trials. The protest in Vorsha with 1000 people attending was the most populous event among district

31 Author's calculations based on media coverage of the protests.



Fig. 1: Regional spread of the protests. Stars mark protest locations; the map is adopted from D-Maps, <https://d-maps.com/m/europa/bielorussie/bielorus-sie56.gif>, 6. 2. 2020.

centers and the largest in this town since the fall of the Soviet Union. The deputy head of the local government had to come out to the protesters and accept their list of demands<sup>32</sup> that concerned the “parasites law” and low living standards. Three weeks into the protests, on March 9, the president announced that the law would be suspended until the end of the year and the register of the “parasites” would be corrected; local authorities were to provide jobs for everyone in need until May 1.<sup>33</sup>

Targeted repressions, economic concessions and dialogue between the protesters and representatives of the government seemed to have discouraged further popular demonstrations in the provinces. The rest of the rallies against the law would happen on the occasions of the anniversaries<sup>34</sup> observed by the followers of the political opposition and would be largely concentrated in Minsk with fewer participants in the regions.

Many analyses of the unrest coming both from the liberal opposition and the pro-government sides portray the protest as a mechanical combination of the spontaneous expression of people’s anger and the superimposed liberal-nationalist op-

32 Reported by REWU’s website, 13. 4. 2017, [praca-by.info/all-news/item/4014-narod-prevratilsya-v-kulak-kak-proshel-marsh-netuneyadtsev-v-orshe](http://praca-by.info/all-news/item/4014-narod-prevratilsya-v-kulak-kak-proshel-marsh-netuneyadtsev-v-orshe), 6. 2. 2020.

33 Tut.by, 9. 3. 2017, [finance.tut.by/news534609.html](http://finance.tut.by/news534609.html), 6. 2. 2020.

34 Freedom Day (March 25); Chernobyl Way (April 26); International Labor Day (May 1).

position agenda. However, as my fieldwork showed, the independent trade-unions to a large extent determined the mobilization numbers and the demands of the protesters. Their role was contradictory though, as they succeeded in mobilizing the indignant masses but failed to transform the popular “passion-feeling”<sup>35</sup> into a political program capable of competing with the dominant populist ideology, borrowing instead the liberal-nationalist agenda.

The Radio-Electronic Workers’ Union (REWU) entered year 2017 with 170 new members countrywide, thus reaching a membership of 2235, and provided 1500 free legal consultations winning court cases worth \$55 000.<sup>36</sup> This signaled a good dynamic of the union achieved by its service-oriented strategy. Barred from the shop floor for many years, REWU cooperated with human rights groups and opposition parties, attracting a new generation of young liberal-minded activists from a broader opposition milieu. One of the most dynamic organizations in this respect was the Homel regional organization, famous for its legal and public resistance against the “parasite decree”. In February REWU’s lawyer defended a resident of Homel in the first and only case against the “parasite tax”, trying to challenge the legitimacy of the decree. The court ruled the case to be outside of its competence, but the claimant was offered work and relieved of the tax by the local authorities. Another evidence of the success of REWU’s community strategy is facilitating a dialogue with, and concessions from local authorities. The case of Vorsha is interesting in this respect, since after the protests the president urged the authorities to “raise the town from ashes” and Vorsha’s district executive committee organized a “round table” with five representatives of the protesters, elected during the meeting.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the authorities allowed demonstrations in various sites within the city.<sup>38</sup>

My informant from a Homel organization of REWU sounded proud of his abilities to organize the gathering of signatures under a protest petition and to persuade people to attend the demonstration, as well as of the resulting increase in the union’s membership. During our conversation about the protests, he pointed at the table and said that at this table they had gathered around 5500 signatures against the “parasite decree”: “When the people came here, we would ask: ‘Are you coming to the square?’; they responded: ‘We will’”. This gives a glimpse into the importance of a traditional face-to-face agitation as opposed to the claims of the extraordinary efficiency of the social-networks in mobilizing the protests.<sup>39</sup> REWU activists gathered 24,000 paper signatures and 22,500 under the online petition. The campaigners faced almost no aggression from the people they approached and in

35 Crehan, Kate: Gramsci’s Common Sense. Inequality and Its Narratives. Durham 2016, p. 121.

36 Fedynich, Hennadiy: V 2017 godu stoit zadacha organizatsii ludey dlia zashchity svoikh prav. In: Praca-by.info, 29. 12. 2016.

37 Beresnev, Vasiliy: Ne zria vykhodili: posle “marshey tuneiaditsev” Orsha poluchit 62 milliona dollarov. In: Praca-by.info, 16. 4. 2017.

38 REWU’s website, 21. 7. 2017, praca-by.info/all-news/item/4502-fedynich-ob-otkaze-v-registratsii-orskanskoj-pervichki-eto-oshibka-vlasti, 6. 2. 2020.

39 Herasimenka, Aliaksandr: 2017. Ein Jahr der Proteste in Belarus. In: Belarus-Analysen 34 (2017), p. 2–7.

some cases people unrelated to the trade-union initiated the signature gathering: a couple from Homel collected signatures from their bloc of flats; a woman collected 750 signatures in her hometown and refused to hand them in to the opposition activists, bringing the sheets directly to the Homel REWU office.<sup>40</sup> Police detained a REWU activist in Babruysk and took away the thousand signatures she gathered, but upon checking the validity of the signatures by contacting the signees, gave them back.

My analysis of the REWU's petition campaign allows to assume that it was one of the significant predictors of the geographical spread, turnout numbers and framing of the protest mobilization. Almost all of the protest locations had REWU groups involved in campaigning, while the four protest events on March 18 in towns without REWU representation were less numerous (up to 30 people) and organized in response to the police violence against anarchists. The number of signatures gathered in a particular region correlates with the number of protest participants in that region. Minsk and Maladziechna mobilizations are disproportionately numerous in relation to the signatures gathered in the Minsk region, since these protest events had been mostly organized by the political organizations ("half of my facebook friends were in Maladziechna", according to a liberal opposition intellectual)<sup>41</sup>.

The period of concessions from the government continued throughout the summer but on August 3 Lukashenka declared that the decree would not be cancelled but reformed, and announced a version of the law for October, the same deadline as for a business liberalization package. This happened a day after REWU's Minsk office was searched and its two leaders arrested. The aftermath was the year's peak of political repressions: 700 people were detained, 149 received administrative punishments, and three opposition organizations received warnings.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the wave of unrest was partially successful in eliciting concessions from the local authorities and postponing the decree, as well as increasing the membership of opposition unions. The decree, however, would return in a more neoliberal form, while the repressions, although milder than in 2010, quelled the protest mood and tarnished the reputation of REWU. Regardless of the criminal case against its leadership, REWU did not manage to form a sustainable protest-ready organized network akin to strike committees of the early 1990s. The net balance of REWU's participation in unrest can be called a better failure, as it was determined by ambiguous political and ideological choices made by the union's leadership and activists.

40 Personal communication by L. Sudalenka, 5. 7. 2017.

41 Melyantsov, Denis: "Professionalnyie protestuyushchie" sostavliaiut znachitel'nyu chast demonstrantov, a prichina massovaia beznakazannost. In: *Nasha Niva*, nn.by/?c=ar&i=187077&lang=ru, 14. 4. 2017.

42 Chausov, Yuri: Civil Society: Spring Shocks Unable to Reverse Past Trends. In: *Belarusian Yearbook* 2018. Vilnius 2018, p. 96.

## "We are not cattle": dramaturgy of populism and its protest reading

As the above analysis shows, the "non-parasites' protests" were shaped by a contradictory interaction between the political activists striving to lead them and the mass of the participants, mediated by trade unionists. This section focuses on the ideologies of these protest actors formed in opposition to the government's justification of the "anti-parasite" policies. In accordance with the theoretical framework laid out in the introduction, I will trace the government's neoliberal inflection of state populism and tease out the contrasting popular self-image mobilized in the protest.

The official rhetoric that surrounded the "anti-parasite" campaign marked a new development in the Belarusian populist ideology. A year after the "law on parasites" the president's (possibly misheard) call to "undress and work" became viral among Minsk hipsters who literally undressed in their offices in an ironic flash-mob.<sup>43</sup> Lukashenka reacted to this gesture with a paternalist re-appropriation: "As you joke on the internet, undress and work!", but finished his speech with a menacing question: "Honestly, does everybody really want it?"<sup>44</sup> This grotesque episode reveals a new quality of Belarusian populism with the re-defined category of "the pure people."

Although some researchers<sup>45</sup> and the liberal-nationalist opposition compared the "law on parasites" to the Soviet practice of punishing the "loafers" (*tunieiadtsy*) or "parasites" (*parazity*), it is worth pointing out that Belarusian officials initially avoided phrasing this campaign in Soviet parlance. They did not use the moralistic language of the "parasitic way of life", stressing instead labor productivity and the fiscal responsibility of the population: "the obligation to contribute to the financing of the state", as the president put it.<sup>46</sup> If the Soviet laws had targeted marginals and black-market entrepreneurs living off the "non-labor revenue",<sup>47</sup> the current policies aimed, on the contrary, at legalizing the shadow entrepreneurial economy while simultaneously relaxing the rules for the small and middle-scale businesses.

The reasoning behind this policy was clearly presented in a journal issued by the Presidential Administration: a timely article with a commentary on the president's speech points out the imbalances in the labor market, the inefficient use of labor force and labor time which leads to higher commodity prices and lower competitiveness of Belarusian enterprises.<sup>48</sup> In response to the March wave of regional

43 Lindh, Clara: Why Belarusians Are Getting Naked at Work. In: CNN, [edition.cnn.com/2016/06/30/europe/belarus-naked-workers-trnd/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/30/europe/belarus-naked-workers-trnd/index.html), 1. 7. 2016.

44 Rabochaya poezdka v Mogilevskuyu oblast. In: Ofitsialnyi Internet-portan Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus, 2016, [president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/rabochaya-poezdka-v-mogilevskuyu-oblast-14073](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/rabochaya-poezdka-v-mogilevskuyu-oblast-14073), 22. 12. 2018.

45 Gray and Cameron, *Fighting* (see note 7), p. 4–6.

46 Melnichuk, V *Belorussii* (see note 29).

47 Lastovka, T.: *Tunieiadstvo v SSSR (1961–1991): iuridicheskaya teoriya i sotsialnaia praktika*. In: *Antropologicheskii forum* 14 (2011), p. 212–229.

48 Prus, E.: *K sotsial'noy spravedlivosti. Kak sdelat' tuneiadtsa nalogoplatil'shchikom?* In: *Belaruskaja dumka* 11 (2014), p. 6.



protests, the president reiterated: “If you do not support your state financially, do not participate in those measures [state subsidized services: healthcare, education etc.], you should go and pay [the full price]”.<sup>49</sup>

Introducing changes to his decree, the president returned to a quasi-Soviet rhetoric, mentioning “the unemployed class” and “the socially useful labor”, but the minister of labor and social protection promptly clarified: there will be a list of services that are subsidized by the state but will come in full price for the “parasites”.<sup>50</sup> Thus, under the quasi-Soviet rhetoric and together with business liberalization policy, the government proceeded with even more explicit anti-welfare measures. In January 2018, the president signed the updated decree which came into force in a year.

The “anti-parasite” campaign fits neatly into the pro-market re-orientation of the Belarusian government. The promises of the \$500 average wage disappeared, together with the image of the hard-working Belarusian people under the watchful eye of the leader. The dichotomy of the good hard-working people and the evil profiteers kept at bay by the state was gradually replaced by the new imagery of the frugal entrepreneurial workers and businesspeople versus the undeserving parasites, who incidentally came mostly from the ranks of former industrial employees.

The opposition groups, most of whom rely on pro-market and nationalist ideology, tried to stress the Soviet provenance of the decree rather than its economic content, and represent it as yet another threat to the liberty of the Belarusian nation while articulating their messages with the popular grievances. An expert at the liberal Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies noted the paradox: “This is a curious situation when the right-centrists try to lead a left-wing protest”.<sup>51</sup> A REWU member and an active organizer of the protests in Homel expressed it in the following terms: “[In general, the protesters] wanted to maintain things as they were ... there was clearly a demand for the populist slogans and simple solutions for complex problems. This was not a wave that would bring an understanding in society that one must take the responsibility for the processes in the country, that there is a need for radical reforms”.<sup>52</sup> Although the protests were visibly dominated by liberal-nationalist symbols and demands, most of the grass-root participants did not share the opposition agenda but rather wanted their welfare entitlement back.

My conversations with Belarusians affected by the “parasites law”<sup>53</sup> and my analysis of the videos featuring interviews with the protesters show that they were primarily concerned with the dismantling of the welfare state and frame their indignation in a populist language. The slogan “No to the decree number three!” was chanted most enthusiastically in the rallies, but when asked about personal reasons for coming to the demonstration, the participants mentioned restructuring or

49 Official website of the president of the Republic of Belarus, 9. 4. 2017, [president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/soveschanie-ob-aktualnyx-voprosax-razvitiya-belarusi-15736](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschanie-ob-aktualnyx-voprosax-razvitiya-belarusi-15736), 6. 2. 2020.

50 “My vychlenim liudey po personaliyam”: prezident o Dekrete #3’. In: *Belarusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 11. 8. 2017.

51 Melyantsov, “Professionalnyie protestuyushchie” (see note 42).

52 Cited in Herasimenka, *Proteste in Belarus* (see note 40), p. 6.

53 Corroborated by the organizers of the two protests in Homel, whom I interviewed in July 2017.



privatizing of the state-owned enterprises, low and delayed wages, difficulty with finding decent jobs or any jobs at all, arrogance of their bosses and the precarity of work conditions, low pensions and commodification of education and healthcare. These grievances condensed in the rejection of the “parasites law”, which was perceived as “the spit in the face of the people”.<sup>54</sup> Many talks of the participants ended in an assertion of “the people’s” dignity: “[W]e are the people, we are not parasites!”

The two most important rhetorical mechanisms that the protesters used were the rejection to divide Belarusians into “the pure people” and “the parasites” and the redefinitions of the category of “the parasites”. Most of the protesters I talked to or seen in recordings were not directly affected by the “parasites law”, they were either pensioners or (self-)employed. However, as one of them said, the law affected “every Belarusian family ... if not wife, then husband, if not brother, then sister”.<sup>55</sup> The pensioners complained that their unemployed children and grandchildren would have to pay the “parasite” tax out of their pensions,<sup>56</sup> and those who had jobs admitted that the system of short-term contracts meant that they could lose jobs at any moment.<sup>57</sup> Jokingly, they addressed each other with a line from a Soviet comedy – “citizens alcoholics, hooligans, loafers!”<sup>58</sup> – thus creating an ironic community that refuses to eject some of its members.

The second rhetorical device was the redefinition of who “the parasites” are. The “true parasites”, according to the protesters, were the government, the police, and the president. Thus, if Lukashenka tried to rhetorically link “the parasites” with the “corrupt elite”, the protesters inscribed him into this category of populist ideology.<sup>59</sup> One of the slogans “non-parasites” chanted was “The real parasite is our dear president!”.<sup>60</sup> This logic was grounded in the self-definition of the protesters as the producers of wealth, while the state with its government and bureaucracy apparatus was perceived as a collective exploiter. As a proof, some protesters brought up the flat income tax and the conspicuous consumption of the bureaucracy. This

54 Most succinctly formulated by a male worker from Maladzechna during a protest on March 13, 2017: “This decree concerns us all: to call us parasites is to spit on our hard-working people. He told us: I made the decree to force us to work. We don’t need to be forced, we work well enough”; in the video blog of M. Fillipovich, 38:00, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSbgwa7Ano](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSbgwa7Ano), 6. 2. 2020.

55 A female protester in Brest on March 7, 2017, Videoblog of M. Fillipovich, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E-FaMyQ-7E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E-FaMyQ-7E), 6. 2. 2020.

56 A female protester in Babruysk, in Videoblog of M. Fillipovich, February 27, 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrOnBNO6iDo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrOnBNO6iDo), 6. 2. 202.

57 A male construction worker, at a protest in Brest, March 7, 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E-FaMyQ-7E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E-FaMyQ-7E), 6. 2. 2020.

58 A male protester in Homel, February 19, 2017, Video blog of M. Fillipovich, 11:35, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4PVUAWe-ds](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4PVUAWe-ds), 6. 2. 2020.

59 Distancing of the president from the people is signaled by a female pensioner at the protest in Vitebsk: “they told us they are from the people ... [but then] raise the pension age, don’t give jobs” (from a video by Nasha Niva, February 26, 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy6udw1-b7w&feature=emb\\_logo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy6udw1-b7w&feature=emb_logo), 6. 2. 2020).

60 The slogan first appeared on the March of Enraged Belarusians in Minsk, February 17, on a banned unfolded by anarchists visible in the streamed video by Charter 97, [charter97.org/ru/news/2017/2/17/241220](http://charter97.org/ru/news/2017/2/17/241220), 6. 2. 2020. It was chanted in Homel on February 19 and on several subsequent protests.

message was reinforced by the reasoning offered by the organizers: even if a citizen did not pay contributions from the salary, he or she paid the value-added tax.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the common message of the protesters was that of self-assertion as “the people” as a moral and economic community whose dignity is inextricably linked to the fair distribution of the national wealth. This was symbolically expressed in the phrase “we are not cattle,<sup>62</sup> we are the people” which goes back to a poem by an early twentieth-century Belarusian author Yanka Kupala.<sup>63</sup> Although the feature of this protest was an inclusive interpretation of the notion of “the people” as opposed to the government’s attempt to split it, some participants exposed xenophobic sentiments: “He destroys us to bring the Chinese”, “there are a lot of Ukrainians, Syrians, and we don’t have work”, “the gypsies are taken care of”,<sup>64</sup> a reference to Lukashenka’s supposed Roma ancestry.

## Limits of Populism, Deficiencies of Solidarity

The presidential decree on the “Prevention of Social Dependency” adopted 2015 was a response of the Belarusian authorities to the economic stagnation that started in 2009 and worsened after the crisis of 2014–2016. It was part of the state policies aiming at the reinvigoration of the market element in Belarus’ mostly state-owned economy, provision of additional budget funds and the pushing of the population into low paid jobs or self-employment. This pro-market drive was accompanied by the changes in the “dramaturgy of populism”, whereby the formerly unified “pure people”, entitled to the president’s protection against the corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen, were split into the self-responsible entrepreneurial “deserving people” and the despicable “parasites”.

Although following the global trend of populist politics, the Belarusian pro-market version of authoritarian populism did not resort to nativism and “othering” of ethnic minorities. The newly introduced category of “social parasites” the cut across the families and the personal trajectories of the formerly loyal supporters of Lukashenka. They expressed their indignation in a wave of protests in February–March 2017, comparable in geographic span and the numbers of participants to the labor unrest of the early 1990s. Organized by the labor unions that provided a link to the long tradition of social protests, the protesters resorted to their own “dramaturgy of populism”, re-assigning the role of the “pure people” to themselves,

61 This was the argument developed by the REWU and human rights activists (personal communication by L. Sudalenka, 5. 7. 2017).

62 “Cattle” (*skot*) was a social slur which denoted disenfranchised peasants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Empire.

63 The poem is well known to Belarusians, and the song based on it was played during a march in Minsk. “Brutto”, the band that recorded this song, combines the elements of the working class, nationalist and anarchist aesthetics, providing a perfect soundtrack to the failed alliance of these three groups on the streets of Minsk, Homel and other cities.

64 During Homel protest, February 19, 2017; videoblog of M. Fillipovich, at 4:40 and 1:07:24, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4PVUAWe-ds](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4PVUAWe-ds), 6. 2. 2020.

while merging the idioms of the “parasites” and the “corrupt elites” and projecting them onto the government. The anti-populist opposition politicians, who attempted to lead the protest, failed to establish a durable alliance with the protesters. The independent unions managed to organize the popular discontent and channel some of the basic spontaneous demands, working on the level of immediate popular political passions. The task in front of them, however, was essentially to formulate an alternative populist agenda, an alternative “thin ideology” that would be powerful enough to challenge the dominant (although not hegemonic) state populism. Compromising with the liberal-nationalist political allies prevented them from doing so, thus limiting their ability to form a long-lasting political representation based on their broad popular support. This shows the limits of the REWU’s efforts to engage in social movement unionism.

In the end, the government started a dialogue with the protesters while punishing the selected organizers. The law that caused the protests took a more subtle neoliberal form without an accent on the concept of social dependency.