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Community Resilience in Belarus and the EU response

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> The search for a 'better lens' is exactly what is needed anywhere where polities ... and societies are democratically challenged (Sadiki, 2015, p. 709).

Introduction

The presidential election held on 9 August 2020 and the subsequent popular mobilization marked the end of an era in the history of post-Soviet Belarus. Cautious and apolitical for three decades, Belarusian society seems to have awakened (Petrova and Korosteleva, 2021), in a short space of time observing a profound transformation of state-society relations taking them to a qualitatively new level of self-awareness and self-organization.

The 2020 presidential election, following fraudulent practices of the past (Potocki, 2011; Ash, 2015; Bedford, 2017; OSCE, 2020a), aimed to suppress opposition at all stages. Popular opposition figures, Viktor Babariko, Sergey Tikhanovskiy, Pavel Severinets and Nikolai Statkevich were arrested during canvassing, while Valeriy Tsepkalo was forced to flee the country. In their stead three female leaders emerged, led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as a newly registered candidate to replace her husband (Korosteleva, 2020a). On the election day, massive administrative resources were mobilized to provide a high level of support for the incumbent president (Ioffe, 2020; Shraibman, 2020). The official results accounted for 80.1 per cent (4,661,075 votes) for Alexander Lukashenko and 10.1 per cent (588,622 votes) for Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (Venkina, 2020). The sheer discrepancy between the official and alternative figures registered by digital platforms Golos, Zubr and Chestnye Lyudi[1] was so stark that it caused massive backlash throughout the country with the hundreds of thousands of Belarusians gathering for peaceful protests in Minsk and other major cities.

The authorities responded with the unprecedented levels of violence which shocked the nation (Auseyushkin and Roth, 2020; Walker, 2020). Numerous videos shared on social and independent media recorded OMON's (state security forces) appalling brutality beating up thousands of people, including children and elderly (Chernyshova, 2020). Six months on, around 45,000 people have been detained, fined and sentenced for up to several years in prison; while some key opposition figures are facing trial and death sentence (Viasna, 2021).

[Correction added on 8 October 2021, after first online publication: 'Societal' has been changed to 'Community' in the article title.]

[1]Golos: https://belarus2020.org/homeZubr: https://zubr.in/elections/aboutChestnye lyudi: https://honest-people.by/

Belarusian society, however, responded with a remarkable feat of tenacity and creativity. Next to the regular Sunday protest marches, attracting hundreds of thousands of people in Minsk,[2] the pensioner protests on Mondays with Nina Baginskaya as their figurehead became an instructive phenomenon on its own as the elderly were always seen as a safe base of Lukashenko's electorate. Separately, women's chains of solidarity dressed in white-red-white colours of the Belarusian historic flag carrying flowers, aimed to convey a peaceful "stop the violence" message. Memorials emerging on the site of protesters' murder (for example A. Taraikovsky, R. Bondarenko), spontaneous flash mobs, festivities with music, chants and flags, graffiti art, tea-drinking meetups in apartment blocks' public spaces (*dvory*) and many other forms of solidarity and protest emerged in the first months of the election. While some observers argued that these protests would dry out in the space of a few months, they instead transformed into less visible, yet still powerful local forms of resistance and self-help, united by a shared feeling that 'we will never be the same' (BBC, 2020). Previously unseen degrees of solidarity, activism and mobilization among the Belarusians, despite the OMON brutality and fears over job losses signal the emergence of the new and unprecedented *spirit of societal ownership*. Observing this development, the article asks how to understand these new social dynamics in Belarus. Relatedly, given the European Union's (EU) commitment to democracy support in its neighbourhood, we analyse what the implications of these developments for the EU are, and what the EU's response should be.

These new dynamics have been often referred to in the mainstream literature, as the processes of Belarusian nation-building and/or as delayed democratization (Kulakevich, 2020; Kazharski, 2021; Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2021). While this categorization may explain some aspects of the occurring change, we argue that there is more to this process. A detailed understanding of what is currently unfolding requires 'a better lens' (Sadiki, 2015, p. 709) to understand the role of societal relations and resilience, in the context of complex life. Hence, we believe that applying Complex IR (Kavalski, 2007, 2016), may be more suitable here. This approach covers aspects of identity, nation-building and democratization, but also allows us to make sense of the key processes of emergence, self-organization and relationality, which are at the heart of the new social dynamics in Belarus. In addition, by looking through 'the local lens' on the process of change, it helps us avoid the Western-centric bias normally associated with the transition paradigm and democracy promotion agenda (Kukri and Hobson, 2009). Complex IR explicitly highlights the need for the full decentring of external democracy support to the level of the local communities and their self-governing initiatives as is demonstrated below. Furthermore, this approach also accommodates uncertainty and impossibility to plan and control the developments in a complex world, which the above theories struggle to explain.

We argue elsewhere (Korosteleva and Petrova, 2021) that unlike the mainstream IR or social identity and transition theories, Complex IR shifts away from the Newtonian principles of linearity and causality, whereby it seems possible to expect that, for example, certain levels of economic well-being, education or external investment may inevitably result in some form of democratic progress and anticipated institutional settings necessary for the endurance of democracy. Instead, Complex IR argues that the world should be seen as an open system, unpredictable and uncontrollable, made of entanglements in

[2]For additional information see: https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/27/belarus-protests-how-did-we-get-here

constant dynamics, which alter the very nature of objects depending on their positionality, relations and changes in the system. This perspective on the world, also described as a 'mesh' (Morton, 2010, 2013; Kurki, 2020), is characterised by nonlinearity, meaning that an input is not directly or causally-related to an output. The famous butterfly effect is perhaps the best illustration of nonlinearity, which essentially signifies the principle of unknowability, taking root in natural sciences and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (1927) in particular. Unpredictability and hence uncontrollability are therefore inherent in a complex world, to which current dynamics observed in Belarus, fully testify: for example despite massive and persistent protests that had united almost every strata of the population, the Lukashenko regime still stands, and yet, at the same time, there is a clear sense of its finality which could not be forecast, or controlled, but change is clearly underway.

The mesh/entanglement view of the world emphasises that ongoing processes are essentially *processual* and *relational* (Bousquet and Curtis, 2011). Relations here are not just '"interactions" of individuals or things…they are not to be thought of as existing against an 'empty background'. Instead, relations precede things and relations are "the mesh" from which, in which and of which "things" are made' (Kurki, 2020, p.107). This perspective repositions our understanding of relations as being equally intra- and inter-active processes simultaneously constituting political actors and the world, inside-out and around us (Kavalski, 2016). Such understanding of relationality is directly linked to another principal feature of a complex world – *emergence*. As the term of natural sciences, it means self-organization when individual actions with no central control respond to a changing environment at a macro-level. Emergence can be understood as a formation of the whole, where the whole is qualitatively more than just a sum of its parts (Kauffman, 1995). In the context of Complex IR, it would also imply self-reference and self-reliance which through feedback loops may lead to the emergence of a new order, building on a shared vision, inherent strength, capacities and resources of a system, thus making it resilient (Korosteleva and Petrova, 2021). These tenets of complexity-thinking naturally lead us to the principal conceptual frame of this article – *societal resilience as a process of self-organization* – which encapsulates and explains the gist of the recent developments in Belarus, and helps us understand why *the rise of peoplehood* as a process of emergence in the country may result in irreversible change.

I. Peoplehood in Belarus as a Process of Emergence and Resilience

Resilience entered the EU policy discourse in the 2010s, being defined as 'the inherent strength of an entity – an individual, a household, a community or a larger structure – to better resist stress and shock, and the capacity of this entity to bounce back rapidly from the impact' (European Commission, 2012, p. 5). The principle is further articulated in various policies and EU official documents (European Commission, 2017; European External Action Service, 2018). It nevertheless carried the same principal limitations: while 'the local' communities indeed were seen as critical beneficiaries and 'keepers' of resilience, their development was conceived as externally rendered, for example via EU risk-management and definition of 'vulnerabilities'; top-down implemented via 'nationally embedded programmes' and 'capacity-building' plans to prepare for adversity; and

narrowly conceived as 'bouncing back' and simply adapting to, rather than *transforming with change* (Korosteleva, 2018; Anholt and Sinatti, 2020; Petrova and Delcour, 2020).

In this article, and elsewhere (Korosteleva and Flockhart, 2020; Petrova and Korosteleva, 2021), we argue that not only must resilience be 'home-grown', inside-out and relational, it is also 'always more' (Bargués-Pedreny, 2020) – a way of thinking, living and governing – which in the context of complex life posited above, should be seen both as *a quality of a system* (for example the human community in Belarus impressing the world with its incredible tenacity, creativity, stamina and perseverance). Additionally, it is also *a process of self-organization* demonstrating a system's ability not just to adapt and survive, but most crucially, to transform with, and *learn from change*, which a prominent democracy scholar Larbi Sadiki (2015, 2021) refers to as 'democratic knowing' by doing when examining the Arab Spring. One of the reasons why external templates and top-down preparedness may not work in the face of adversity, and why what is emerging as a societal response to change, may be seen as irreversible, is because societal resilience works in different ways, via bottom-up and horizontal relations. These relations are premised on the intergenerational knowledge system imbued in public memory and traditions (which Sadiki described as *makhzun* in Arabic), and socio-cultural imaginary of the future (*al-mikhyal*) helping people to 'make sense of the world in the quest for self-conception' (Taylor, 2004, p. 23, in Sadiki, 2015, p. 704). This means that *resilience* is all about people, and how they think, intra- and inter-act with their community of relations, which, once mobilized, can demonstrate remarkable tenacity and commitment to their shared vision of 'the good life', that glues and makes them stronger *together* in the face of adversity or crisis. This cross-fertilization of *makhzun* and *mikhyal*, or intergenerational knowledge and visions of the future, as Sadiki argues, is 'closely tied to a society's biggest project of creation of all: "self-creation"' (Castoriadis, 1994, p. 149 in Sadiki, 2015, p. 704). Once 'activated', it takes societal resilience to a new level, triggering a chain reaction towards 'self-creation', sweeping and irreversible, even if seemingly slow or temporarily impeded by authorities, as is presently the case in Belarus.

Societal resilience, in the context of a complex life, therefore, embodies an *emergent*, *relational* and very much *local*, mesh/entanglement of *identity* 'as manifested through the future [vision]' (Berenskoetter, 2011, p.652) in the pursuit of *the 'good life'* – for example through the imaginaries of dignity and freedom; symbols of belonging and suffering; as well as cultural poetics against injustice. This is further supplemented by *communal support and resource infrastructures* (from immediate neighbourhoods or *supol'nasts* in Belarusian*,* to the social movement or *hramada* in Belarusian)*,* and even, in some cases, involving the rise of *peoplehood* (*lyudzmi zvatstsa)* as a 'bottom-up ground swell of activism accompanied by openings for potential cultural, political and social transformation. Or, in the absence of transformation, a novel revolutionary or rebellious impulse, taking peaceful or violent forms, to exert pressure for change bottom-up' (Sadiki, 2015, p. 703). We can see here many parallels with the Arab Spring again, which is a still ongoing process of learning democracy, by doing and trying. Belarus' year-long protests embody just that, a commingling of an emergent community's vision for a just and dignified future. Additionally, it is also characterised by 'unruliness' forged in public squares, *dvory*, universities, factories, hospitals, media platforms and even prisons as a shared space for spontaneous *civic apprenticeship*. This movement signals to Lukashenko's regime of its inevitable demise. Just like in the Arab Spring, it may not

result in immediate change, but democratic learning has already endued, triggering long but inevitable transformation, as a bottom-up relational process of self(−re)organization:

> 'In the quest for dignity and freedom, unruliness is society's agential deployment against the 'occupiers' of the authoritarian state. Central to this unruliness, apart from informally engendering bottom-up notions of sovereign identities and participatory citizenship in the public squares of protest, is *the people's coming together* to ephemerally substitute the authoritarian regimes' practice.., with their own conceptions of political practice, thought and terminology (Sadiki, 2015, p. 715).

This 'people's coming together' to even ephemerally challenge the *status quo* is very powerful and instructive: it symbolises a rare and palpable moment of *becoming with*, and is deeply political. It is both spontaneous and long-coming, building on a dream of the 'good life', free and fair, and identity as representation of *otherness to the regime* reinforced via protest symbols (for example white-red-white flag in Belarus – see Scollon, 2020), music, language (Belsat TV Channel in Belarusian with half-a-million subscribers), humour (see for example Komissarenko, 2021; Luxta Telegram channel), and imageries of art (Norris, 2021) and poetry (PEN/opp, 2020), fuelled by an acute sense of injustice and pain. It is also more than a society: it turns into a transformative political entity, encapsulating the pain of crisis, and the fragility of life – of Alexander Taraikovskiy, Roman Bondarenko and many more, martyred for freedom in Belarus. It is exactly this '*al-hirak*' or *swell of indignation* (Sadiki, 2015) that is currently happening a year on, past the August 2020 election in the country, in a variety of forms, including student protests; women's marches; doctors, artists, journalists, workers, pensioners' remonstrations; mass rallies for dignity and solidarity; astounding creativity and the mushrooming of neighbourhood enclaves of resistance in response to the brutality, and lies of Lukashenko's regime, that have turned people's resilience into a transformational force.

The moment of *becoming with*, a *Belarusian peoplehood* has not emerged overnight. It has been brewing for years, if not centuries, premised on the past imaginaries of intense suffering (especially during World War II), subjugation, abuse and the suppressed identity of the future, powerfully expressed by a Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala in 'We, the People' [*Lyudzmi zvatstsa*], 1905–07:

> And, say, who goes there? And, say, who goes there? In such a mighty throng assembled,
> O declare? Belarusians! And what is it, then, for which so long they pined, Scorned throughout the years, they, the deaf, the blind? To be called PEOPLE!

This seemingly sudden mobilization *en-masse* was not at all unexpected: while long-coming, it was a public response to 'the viciousness with which their vision [for better life] was attacked… break[ing] the Belarusian camel's back' (Chernyshova, 2020, p. 2). With over 45,000 arrested, and 'the sickening torture of detainees in custody [where] many, including minors, were forced to kneel for hours, beaten, deprived of water and food, verbally abused, and raped' that galvanized even those Belarusians 'who had previously kept away from politics' (Chernyshova, 2020, p. 2). The vision of the future, mundanely associated with leading 'your own quiet little life' (female, 51 years old, Vitebsk), 'avoiding any change on a daily basis' (Male, 65 years old, Gomel); 'feeling safe, stable and protected' (student, 23 years old, Minsk) and having 'a sense of moral

satisfaction with life' (female, 45 years old, Grodno)[3] in the country previously decimated by war, unquestionably gave way to the powerful ground swell of indignation which mobilized everyone, in their fight to be called 'people' – '*lyudzmi zvatstsa'*. This sense of 'the good life' suddenly became crystal clear and unifying no matter what age, nationality or profession: to be justly treated as 'people', rather than *'narodets'* (derogatory notion of people), '*bydlo*' (animals), *'ovtsy'* (sheep), *'narkomany i prostitutki*' (drug-addicts and whores), which Lukashenko's administration repetitively used towards Belarusians (see for example Kryzhanovskaya, 2020). The emergence of this acute sense of injustice meant the realisation of the single truth which seems to matter to everyone representing a moment of unity – *the dignity to be human*. This single moment, however, meant moving well beyond adaptation and endurance, to a new transformative force of becoming 'peoplehood' (*al-hirak*), with no turning back.

This moment of becoming was also facilitated by communal *support infrastructures* which seemingly emerged from out of nowhere, in a society thought to be fully atomized and devoid of community networks. Yet, these support infrastructures resurfaced, being first triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which the state failed to recognise and respond to. These hitherto dormant structures range from *supol'nasts*, *talaka* (togetherness), to *hramada* and a sense of *tuteishyya* ('the people who live here'). When the force of the regime was unleashed on the peaceful protesters in August 2020, these communal networks literally metamorphozed into a ground swell of *self-organization* across the entire country (Astapenia and Marin, 2020; Chernyshova, 2020; Douglas, 2020; Shraibman, 2020). These protests were physically leaderless, and yet they seemed well-concerted; they were sporadic and dotted, yet powerful and undermining of authorities; they were creative and peaceful, yet confronted by rubber bullets and stun grenades; and *they were fearless*, united by people's shared experience of grief and pain which 'cannot be undone in Belarus' (Minchenia and Husakouskaya, 2020) reaching a moment of 'actioned resilience' – *becoming a 'peoplehood'*. It was simply mesmerising to watch hundreds of thousand-strong crowds every Sunday coming from different corners of a city to merge into a unifying *hramada;* demonstrations of the disabled, sportsmen, medics, students, and the elderly; the memorials and festivities organized to raise the spirits up – with music, food banks and cheering; unstoppable graffiti art, and thematic resistance on a daily basis fuelled by the intoxicating sense of the lost lives of Roman Bondarenko and his last words: 'I am coming out!'.

These essentialized *makhzun* of the past and the new memories of repression and injustice, have now become interwoven with *mikhyal,* powerful and mobilizing socio-cultural imaginaries of what the Belarusians want to be – *to be called people* – thus turning them into a permanent (even when clandestine) feature of the changing political landscape. Imaginaries of Belarusian *vyshyvanka* (traditional clothes), giant hand-made models of a cockroach (aka Lukashenko), coffin and death, murals and signs of heart, fist and victory made famous by now imprisoned Maria Kolesnikova, fled Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and Veronica Tsepkalo – they all became enduring symbols of Belarusian resistance and resilience (Kazharski, 2021; Petrova and Korosteleva, 2021). The songs of

[3]These are some excerpts of the six focus groups conducted in Belarus during May–June 2019 as part of the GCRF COMPASS project (ES/P010849/1). They were conducted in all regional centres of Belarus, including Brest, Gomel, Grodno, Minsk, Mogilev and Vitebsk. Each focus group involved up to 11 participants, totalling 54 respondents representing all the socio-demographic groups (by gender, age and level of education) in equal proportions.

Victor Tsoi 'Peremen' (Changes), Belarusian songs 'Mury' (Walls) and 'Three Tortoises', and even a Russian song 'They beat us up, but we are flying' by Alla Pugacheva became like an anthem to the Belarusians, every Sunday continuingly drawing bigger crowds until the regime's repression hardened eight months into the protests (Abdurasulov, 2020).

It is worth noting a particular role of digital means of communication and resistance including platforms such as telegram, facebook, twitter, instagram, whatsapp, viber and more. The telegram communities Golos, Chestnye Lyudi, Byson, Nexta, Lukhta, etc. – grew from a few thousand subscribers to over several millions by the end of August 2020, whose influence for a country of 9,5 million is hard to underestimate (VOA, 2020). Furthermore, beside large online communities listed above, self-organization was also facilitated by micro-chats arranged by many apartment blocks (for example Borovaya; Kamennaya Gorka; Serebryanka; Novinki), allowing for the communities of neighbours to form, keep together and coordinate their activities (Herasimenka *et al*., 2020).

This new sense of *togetherness*, accelerated by digital means and solidarity of the Belarusian diaspora around the world, as well as an enduring feeling of pain and injustice that have snowballed into an enormous burden that only a peoplehood could carry - all of these not only made the Belarusians instantaneously more resilient and mobilized. It turned them into a truly transformational and transformative force, which will be difficult to contain even with ever-hardening measures of repression by Lukashenko's regime.

II. The EU's Response and how to Rethink Resilience

How did the EU respond to these inconceivable levels of state brutality and unprecedented popular mobilization in this neighbouring state, geographically situated in the heart of Europe? The EU's engagement has been slow and timid, failing to promptly engage with the unfolding crisis in Belarus, which by then, saw many lives threatened, disappeared, beaten, intimidated and abused. Perhaps cautious not to repeat the mistakes of Ukraine's crisis (2013–14), and eager to maintain balance between its support for civil society and official dialogue with Lukashenko, being aware of the need to take Russia's position into account, who pledged its support to Lukashenko's regime, the EU has truly struggled to develop a coordinated response, manifest in the delayed actions and indeterminate statements. The Baltic officials, led by Lithuania (Rettman, 2020), had to issue their own measures by early September, together with Poland (Pempel and Plucinska, 2020), urgently calling on the EU to offer a unified response. The EU adoption of sanctions was further delayed by Cyprus using the Belarusian crisis for their internal bargaining vis-à-vis the EU to introduce restrictive measures against Turkey. As a result, the UK and Canada were the first Western powers to adopt sanctions (including travel bans and asset freezes) against eight Belarusian officials in late September 2020, in a Magnitsky Act style (Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, 2020). On 2 October, the EU agreed to impose a travel ban and an asset freeze on 44 Belarusian officials failing to include Lukashenko (European Union, 2020). The latter together with another 14 Belarusian officials was added by mid-November, and in December, the EU imposed a third round (European Council, 2021) of sanctions targeting economic actors, and prominent businessmen and companies which directly benefited Lukashenko's regime.

The effect of sanctions however has been widely debated, and was openly derogated by the Belarusian officials (Lukashenko, 2021). In response, two months into the crisis,

the EU outlined a 'four lines of action' – a semblance of strategy promising, in addition to the list of restrictive measures, to support the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in facilitating the national dialogue; to organize a full review of EU–Belarus relations by scaling them down; and to continue supporting the Belarusian population (Borrell, 2020). Notably, support included a special measure 'The EU4Belarus: Solidarity with the People of Belarus' (European Commission, 2020a), which put forward a €24 million assistance package to support civil society, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), youth and health sectors in Belarus. Additional €1 million and €6 million were allocated respectively to support independent media and SMEs outside of the 'EU4Belarus' measure. Around €2.7 million were also targeted to support victims of repression (European Commission, 2020b). This came as part of the overall €53 million support announced by the European Commission in August, and in addition to the COVID-19 tailor-made measures worth €980 million for the Eastern Partnership and €60 for Belarus in particular (Council of the EU, 2020), mobilized earlier to tackle the immediate needs of the pandemic crisis, including support for Belarus' medical staff with PPE, training and equipment; support for vulnerable citizens, the elderly and children; and national and local administrations to cope with negative effects of the pandemic and provide support for economic recovery.[4]

All the above measures were also supplemented[5] by the Lithuanian prosecutors' initiative to launch the first pre-trial investigation into crimes against humanity by Lukashenko's regime under the universal jurisdiction (European External Action Service, 2020); the US Treasury sanctions against nine state-owned entities (US Department of Treasury, 2020) and later a Belarus Democracy Act signed by the US President Biden in December 2020 (US Congress, 2020), as well as the OSCE invocation of the 'Moscow Mechanism' (OSCE, 2020b) to trigger expert mission to report on the human rights situation in the country, which due to the rejection by the Belarusian authorities to participate, was conducted online and published in November 2020, outlining a pathway towards a possible dialogue for mediation, to resolve the gridlock. In the meantime, Russia put its own pressure on the incumbent, forcing him to start drafting a new Constitution, and to complete negotiations on the Russia-Belarus Union State Integration roadmap, in return for its financial and military support to ensure the country's stability.

The EU's protracted engagement with Belarus in the time of crisis has been instructive in many different ways. On the one hand, its actions failed to support its own declaration of becoming more geopolitical under the von der Leyen Commission, which aimed to revive 'the EU's role as a relevant international actor, and to shape a better global order through reinforcing multilateralism' (Bassot, 2020). Not only has this intention fallen short of real action in Belarus to stand up to Russia as another geopolitical player there; it was also further undermined by its limited presence in resolving the escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Turkey and Russia's influences once more explicitly prevailed. On the other hand, the EU also demonstrated its limitations in putting to practice its 'resilience agenda' initiated as part of the Global Security Strategy (2016)

[4]It is worth noting that €30 million of this support given to the national authorities were recalled to be reprofiled by the Commission for the civil society, but this was never fully recovered under the new sanction measures - from private conversations of the authors with EU officials.

[5]For account of other measures see https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/divers/Chronology_of_revolution_in_Belarus.pdf

(Tocci, 2020). The resilience strategy aimed to increase preparedness for potential challenges by diversifying resources and strengthening local ownership, this way trying to enhance societal capacities of developing countries to withstand the pressure of autocratic regimes. The traditional instruments offered by the EU to support the societal fight against repression to increase resilience were not only rigid in their accessibility especially in the time of crisis; they were also inadequate and unable to respond to the immediate needs of societal resilience having premeditated thematic priorities, pre-planned objectives, and benchmarks for assessing the outcomes.[6] This shows that the EU's understanding of resilience remains superficial, deeply rooted in positivist epistemology, which, as argued above, does not work in a world of nonlinearity and complexity. The analysis of the EU's handling of the Belarusian crisis calls for a profound revision of the EU's conceptualization of resilience to account for the mesh ontology premised on relations.

Resilience as an analytic of (self-)governance focusing on unlocking local resources and communal capacities for transformation in the face of crisis or adversity, has an enormous potential for people who wish to build a life they have reason to value. Notably, by enhancing local ownership and changing the top-down patterns of governance and outside-in democracy promotion tools, this could unlock self-organization and self-reliance, or what we call resilience elsewhere (Korosteleva and Petrova, 2021). For example, whereas some initiatives, such as the complementary support measures 'in favour of civil society' (European Commission, 2017) aiming to enable local communities to be creative about tackling their respective needs and priorities, as part of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) programming (Korosteleva, 2020b), are more in line with complexity-thinking and supporting the local emergence, the EU still struggles to understand how resilience as self-governance, especially in crisis, could work in practice, to give an empowering sense of ownership and freedom to communities to fend for themselves. Current programmes carrying a sizeable monetary value do not yet form a 'democratic/learning loop' (Sadiki, 2015, 2021) required for forging democratic knowledge (*makhzun*) by communities themselves, to fully connect with the socio-cultural imaginaries of the future (*mikhyal*), in order to activate people's resilience proper, in their own project of self-creation.

Conclusion

The Belarusian crisis of 2020–21, echoing the Arab Spring and the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, we argue, is more than just a process of identity- and nation-building, or indeed that of transition and democratization. It is a moment of '*becoming with*' - emergence and self-organization of local communities - which, while drawing on their identity and collective sense of the good life, local support infrastructures, resources and networks, make them more resilient in the face of adversity turning them into peoplehood to transform with change. Premised on Complex IR, we argue that rather than seeing this process as a top-down or bottom-up, outside-in or inside-out, it is more instructive to think of it as a mesh made of the totality of all relations. Resilience as the ability to transform with change, comes from intra- and interactions within that mesh, it is therefore

[6]See, for instance, the recent EUROPAID emergency calls to support civil society in Belarus: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?ADSSChck=1619012759472&do=publi.detPUB&aoref=171256&nbPubliList=15&orderbyad=Desc&page=1&searchtype=QS&orderby=upd&userlanguage=en

local, emergent and *relational,* which cannot be built on external templates or financial injections. Suffering the unprecedented state pressure, Belarusian society has risen anew, hardly resembling its feeble self only three decades ago: its new quality was forged due to the spirits of ownership and solidarity, being connected by pain and indignation, to bring about the moment of peoplehood thus forming a new and tangible order of tomorrow.

In order to effectively support this locally-grown and outward dynamic, external actors, and the EU in particular, need to rethink their strategies to co-creatively engage in the mesh of relations and the 'environment around' (Kavalski, 2016). This is where Sadiki's concept of a democratic learning loop gives an important insight into how cooperation could work in practice. An important task is sensing (Chandler, 2018) the local dynamic and engaging in continuous inter- and intra-actions in order to understand what the local visions, strengths, capacities, and needs are to support the initiatives of self-organization, rather than trying to categorize and benchmark them the pre-set objectives and straightjacket them into the known evaluation criteria. Such approach envisages genuinely flexible mechanisms of interaction - not the EU's usual understanding of flexibility as giving partners an opportunity to choose from a list of predefined options, but rather following the local dynamics and building agile partnerships.

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