Siarhei Liubimau*

ORCID: 0000-0002-8626-4183
The European Humanities University

PLATFORMIZATION OF POLITICS IN NON-DEMOCRACIES: SPACES OF PARTICIPATORY EXPERIMENTS IN BELARUS IN 2020s

This paper's focus is on the innovations in the urban public political agenda that are due to the interplay between participatory digital platforms, the socio-economic paths of specific urban environments, and long-term policy orientations on the national and urban levels. The context of the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus and the resulting boom of participation in the local and national political agendas is taken here as a particular configuration of the mentioned interplay and its outcomes. The first part of the paper focuses on the role of digital platforms in the studied boom of participation in 2020, the second documents the urban policy developments in Belarus during the period of 2015–2020, and the third reflects on the compatibility of the Belarusian case with wider discussions on the political impact that the spread of digital platforms has on urbanism. It is argued that the repressive state, the gradual marketization of urban development and the accompanying strengthening of urban dwellers' economic autonomy, and the proliferation of commercial digital platforms and civic tech are the factors that have defined the studied politicization and the boom of participation in Belarus. The examined case shows the contours of emerging politics in non-democracies under conditions of ubiquitous digitalization and the pressure on the state's redistributive capacities.

Keywords: platformization of politics, digital platforms, urban politics, participation, housing, experiments, non-democracies

INTRODUCTION

The miraculous massive politicization of Belarusian society in the summer and autumn of 2020 generated a variety of perspectives to consider regarding this change, including nation building, the erosion of the foundations of authoritarianism, gender roles in public politics, protest as creativity, grassroots activism, and mushrooming local communities. In this process, one could observe a significant expansion of the repertoire of participatory practices in political agendas on different levels – from a neighborhood one to the national one. This article emphasizes the critical entanglement of this politicization with two long-term tendencies.

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* Department of Social Sciences, The European Humanities University, 17 Savičiaus Str., 01127 Vilnius, Lithuania; e-mail: siarhei.liubimau@ehu.lt

The first tendency is the expansion of the digital platforms' ecosystem, which has enhanced the society's collective potential to make claims and made it easier to articulate discontent collectively (Krastev, 2014). The second tendency is the partial gradual marketization of urban policies in Belarus and the accompanying growth of citizens' economic self-reliance vis-à-vis the state. Thus, this article aims to examine the profound destabilization of power relationships in Belarus in 2020–2021 as a result of the interplay among digital technologies, market-driven urbanization, and bottom-up participatory politics.

The power of the rapidly emerging new modes of collective action in Belarus in 2020 lay in its location off the grid in relation to the long-established inertial material statehood that was consolidated by Alexander Lukashenko from the 1990s and equally in relation to the long-established oppositional structures and practices. On the one hand, new types of community organizers were organically nurtured in a new job market (the IT and private sectors in general were significant drivers), and they entered the political realm in 2020 to replace the knowledge and communication controllers among the ideologues and welfare-sector workers. On the other hand, Lukashenko's key challengers designed their strategies to be deliberately viral. They revealed almost nothing about themselves in terms of habitual conventions of the political process (their programs, ideologies, structures, already-existing agreements, and networks with other political players). The new tools of empowerment were essentially memetic – relying on visualization and replication rather than on deliberation and representation. At a later stage, the information about state violence triggering the protests was delivered without any montage or mediation by text: the most motivating and touching moments of the protests were captured on streamed videos.

Two major arenas of innovations in the political process in terms of citizen participation were the communities of neighbors (organized within Telegram chats) as well as the platforms that duplicated the functions of the state's Central Election Committee and other state functions that were related to the election process. The result was a breakdown and reconfiguration of the "epistemic infrastructure" of Belarusian politics (Boyer, 2018). The 'infrastructural lens' on this specific political change provides not only notions to dismantle various apparatuses of political power. But it also provides analytical instruments to identify the drivers of political change itself. Infrastructures are political in terms of the resources, alliances, flows, modes of behavior, interactions, claims, representations, and artifacts that they enable. This article exploits the opposition between the logics of infrastructures and those of digital platforms (Plantin et al., 2018) and the ways that this opposition has developed and stood out in Belarus as a case of post-Soviet authoritarianism. It argues that, on a more abstract level, the period of presidential elections in Belarus in the spring, summer, and autumn of 2020 was the moment of destruction of the mode of the infrastructural gridding that Lukashenko's regime had been developing over decades. Already, the inability of the state to properly address the threats of COVID-19 in spring 2020 led to a massive mistrust in its welfare system and in the government in general. This mistrust has created a legitimate niche for critical political stances in society. Some have promoted a lens on it as "a 'permissive condition' for critical juncture," leading to "new expressive forms of […] non-violent 'ludic' resistance" (Kananovich, 2022, pp. 259–260). In the long-term perspective, this disruption threatened not only the dictator

or inefficient bureaucrats but also the prevalent top-down infrastructural gridding in Belarus. There are influential interpretations of the decisive role of energopolitics and its redistributive potential in the consolidation of Lukashenko's regime (Balmaceda, 2014). The massive politicization in 2020 was, in such a perspective, the moment of the disruption of the infrastructure of post-Soviet carbon modernity as the underlying enabler of Lukashenko's system.

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The history of protests in independent Belarus before 2020 can be split into several distinct phases. The first phase in the early 1990s was the continuation of the national response to Perestroika that was triggered by the revelation of late 1930s Soviet mass killings in the Kurapaty outskirts of Minsk as well as by the Chernobyl catastrophe. The Belarusian Popular Front was the main organizer of the activities that made this phase. The second phase started in 1995 and was marked by the consolidation of authoritarianism under Alexander Lukashenko and the beginning of Belarus's widely contested integration with Russian Federation. The protests of this period were directed against undemocratic changes in the constitution in 1996 and against the agreement on the so-called Belarus and Russia Union State in 1999. The third phase was constituted by two failed attempts of Belarusian 'Maidan' against presidential election official results in 2006 and 2010. The fourth phase had two peaks that had a socio-economic background and were not directly connected to the electoral processes. The earlier peak was the so-called 'silent' protests against the state's inability to cope with the economic crisis in 2011. These protests are often referred to as 'revolution through social networks' due to the massive use of the VK social network by the organizers. The later peak was about the so-called social protests against the 'Decree on Parasites' (the decree that introduced the tax on the state of being unemployed). It is possible to recognize the tendency that the numbers of protesters were declining during this course – from circa 200,000 people on the streets in 1991 to 190,000 in 1996, around 90,000 in each 1999 and 2006, around 35,000 in 2010, around 20,000 in highly decentralized protests in 2011, and around 5000 people in different places across the country in 2017. In this regard, more than 800,000 people protesting across the whole country against the falsifications of the election results in 2020 was a big surprise and the breaking point in the existing tendency.

At the same time, the singled-out phases have a dimension of changing means to communicate political claim-making. With the decline of participation in street politics that was mainly controlled by the mainstream institutionalized oppositional political parties and organizations, there was a simultaneous steady growth of internet users in Belarus. There were 16% of the population who were internet users in Belarus in 2006 (at that moment, LiveJournal diaries and reflections by protesters were new features in political campaigns); in 2010, 32% were internet users (Facebook was the main interactive medium of the campaign, with politicians as active users; and then in 2011, VK was the main medium of de-centralized protests against the economic crisis); in 2017, 74% were internet users (this was the first case of video streams during the protests); and finally, 85% were internet users in 2020 (massive video streams were leading to the user-generated growth of political agenda, with Telegram and YouTube as

the main politicized shareable media).[1] Video streams as a communication technology were central in both the 2020 revolution and the currently ongoing counter-revolution in Belarus. In today's law-enforcement practice, streams are qualified as the organization of mass protests, not as coverage of mass protests. This means that user-generated content that covers activities that are related to political claim-making is not distinguished from organizing or promoting political claim-making. As an example, journalists who stream protests are brought to court as co-organizers of the protests. This is a suddenly revealed fragility that stems from the combination of shareable media and a repressive regime.

Since the independence of Belarus, it is possible to recognize a combination of the declining intensiveness of street politics and the growing number of internet users over time. The questions are as follows: what are the political impacts of this combination? Is it possible to talk about the gradual emergence of platform politics during the analyzed period? The definition of a digital platform that is adhered to here is a "programmable architecture designed to organize interactions between users" (van Dijck et al., 2018). From this perspective, we can talk about Belarus in the 2020s as one of the articulations of platform politics with its specific political path of civic participation and civic innovations on both the local and national levels. This platform politics was shaped by the use of commercial shareable media and the creation of civic tech products with the purpose of undergirding and steering political change in the country. As for the commercial shareable media, one could recognize the equal popularity of YouTube, Facebook, and VKontakte in the election periods of July and August 2020. According to StatCounter, these three platforms attracted 14.84 to 17.2% of all of the online traffic among social media uses in Belarus (excluding Telegram).[2] At the same time, the most popular platform in Belarus during this period was Pinterest (41.6% and 38.13% in July and August 2020, respectively). Both the leadership of Pinterest and the equal popularity of YouTube, Facebook, and Vkontakte is making social media consumption in Belarusian society significantly different from the neighboring countries. It is equally different from the tendencies in Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (where Facebook is a distinct leader), and it is different from Russia (where Pinterest is not the most popular among the shareable media).

In addition to the massive use of commercial shareable media that has enabled the large-scale participation in politics, one could document the rise of civic tech, which was created specifically for the context of the 2020 presidential elections. These newly created digital platforms were massively instrumentalized to target state institutions as constraints for the democratic political process. The targeting mainly implied the digital duplication of existing state functions by their platform twins. "Golos,"[3] one of the most recognizable and discussed platforms, was designed and used as the citizens' driven digital twin of the state Central Election Committee. This has made it possible to organize an alternative bottom-up process

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[1] According to the World Bank, internet users are the individuals who have used the Internet (from any location) during the last three months, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=BY [2.05.2022].

[2] Social Media Stats Belarus (January–December 2020) at StatCounter, https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/belarus/2020 [2.05.2022].

[3] Eng. "voice," https://belarus2020.org/home [2.05.2022].

to count votes. "Golos" instructed users to register their phone numbers on the platform and then report their ballots (preferably with a confirmation photo). As a result, 1,049,344 unique votes (around 15% of all voters) were registered on the platform on the day of the elections (August 9, 2020). This platform innovation worked as a reconfiguration of the relationships between anonymous voting and a representative democracy. As "Golos" connected the ballot to an individual phone number (in contrast to the prevalent practice and conventions), it cultivated the relationship between de-anonymization and a representative democracy.

Two similar examples are the "Honest People"[4] and "Zubr"[5] platforms, which were designed and used to organize alternative election observations, document violations, and deanonymize; by means of this, the members of the territorial election committees were made to feel accountable. After the elections, "Honest People" launched a massive campaign (with around 50,000 citizens participating) in order to put pressure on and force those parliament members that failed to represent the overwhelming popular discontent with the election results to resign. A fourth example of undergirding political process by a digital platform's tools is the "Skhod"[6] project. It was launched after the elections and the massive state violence to shut down the protest. This platform's purpose was to use the momentum of the popular discontent with authoritarian politics and organize the upcoming local elections in the format of open online dialogue among voters, candidates, and the state. However, these local elections were postponed by the Central Elections Committee as a result and have not taken place as of yet. All of the four introduced platforms were recognized as "extremist" by the state; thus, their managers and volunteers have been massively persecuted by state security services. After the criminalization of these platforms, they went dormant; i.e., have at least temporarily lost their initially intended functions.

All of these platforms are characterized by a cross-platform ecosystem that functions as a mash-up of various already-existing commercial platform services.[7] The major features of all of these digital platform innovations were the enhancement of transparency through deanonymization (both of individual bureaucrats and of votes) as well as a duplication of state functions. Both features implied the greater agency of citizens vis-à-vis the repressive and opaque state. At the same time, the strategies behind these features are not specific only to the authoritarian context of Belarus but characterize the platformization tendency at large. As an example, it is possible to observe the current trend of creating digital twins for infrastructures and institutions with the purpose of increasing their predictive capacities and efficiency. Such twins of infrastructures and institutions provoke new practices and new notions of spatiality. These are the relationships between the originals and the copies, where the copies are usually a means to better control the originals. Today, this practice is mainly inherent in such sectors as energy engineering, production and infrastructure maintenance, and the management

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[4] https://honest-people.by/en [2.05.2022].
[5] Eng. "bison", https://zubr.in/ [2.05.2022].
[6] Eng. "gathering", https://www.shodbelarus.org/ [2.05.2022].
[7] VK, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, and Viber in the case of "Golos"; Facebook, VK, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, Telegram, Viber, and TikTok in the case of "Honest People"; YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, and VK in the case of "Zubr"; and Viber, Telegram, and YouTube in the case of "Skhod."

of business processes. However, one could expect the application of this practice in public administration and civil society matters (Eom, 2022). In this vein, the Belarus case shows that digital twinning is potentially a plane for developing procedures and tools to enhance citizens' control in the course of progressing digitalization.

Furthermore, the digital platforms acted as enablers of new political careers beyond the routine of mainstream institutionalized politics. Digital profiles made it possible for the 2020 presidential election campaign's major challengers to scale-up their immediate experiences to the arena of national politics. The user-generated growth of a political agenda instead of deliberation and representation was the novelty that was introduced by the so called 'new opposition' to dictator Alexander Lukashenko. This novelty was about a focus on personal experience or a certain embedded lifestyle instead of a focus on the presentation and discussion of procedures and future policies that was typical of Belarus political opposition campaigns before 2020. In the winter of 2020 (seven months before the elections), leaders of oppositional parties organized 'primary elections' (taking an analogy from the US politics) as the procedure to decide who will be the jointly negotiated candidate for the presidency on behalf of the democratic opposition. The idea was that such a [mainstream electoral] transparent procedure would make it possible to attract supporters, gain added legitimacy, and subsequently challenge the dictator. However, the actual role in the elections of the politicians and parties that took part in such a 'primary' turned out to be very modest. The main challengers to the dictator were people without any prior political careers. Instead of relying on mainstream political institutions and procedures such as parties or primary elections, they focused on creating new spaces for political claims.[8]

The strategies of two such presidential candidates who efficiently used the new spaces and tools to challenge the dictator required special attention. In the 2020 campaign, Sergei Tikhanovsky played the role of an experience blogger in Belarusian politics. He started as a storyteller on YouTube, addressing the theme of difficulties of being an entrepreneur in Belarus. He bought a manor in rural Belarus and wanted to create a hospitality business; during this process, however, he was distressed by the state bureaucracy's requirements to the building's renovation. He subsequently managed to create a political agenda out of these very local site-specific constraints that he had faced. From here, he started his career criticizing the state's approach to business and entrepreneurship and by making other small entrepreneurs (mainly from small peripheral towns) and their challenges visible. In addition to this, he was organizing video streams with other political bloggers and oppositional politicians. As a result, he became successful in a new genre of political claim-making in Belarus – a video stream from a site where the protagonist would talk to an interlocutor and would have a critical conversation about the state's corruption, over-bureaucratization, incompetence, arbitrary uses of power, etc. Such a format of streaming from a site (usually an

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[8] To check the list of current (May 2022) political prisoners (more than 1200) who were the most harshly punished (from 13 to 22 years in prison), there was only 1 person with a prior political career in the top 14 (Mikola Statkevich). At the same time, there were 6 bloggers of different kinds among these 14. Besides, 5 out of the 14 were convicted of terrorist attacks. In addition, there were one military member who leaked a secret document and one top manager who decided to run for president.

open square or the surroundings of a market place) turned out to have big virality potential in May 2020, when the possibility of collecting signatures for the candidates for presidency was opened. Sergei Tikhanovsky himself was arrested during one of these streams when collecting signatures for the candidacy of his wife (Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya) in Hrodna on May 29, 2020. His career could be regarded in the context of existing research on YouTube political style (Finlayson, 2022).

Another major challenger of dictator Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election campaign was Viktar Babaryka – Director of Belarus Gazprom Bank and a patron of arts, theatre, and crowdfunding. His presidential campaign relied on the ecosystem that was created by Belgazprombank's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) project called "OK16," a creative cluster in the building of the former Minsk Factory of Machine Building.[9] This CSR project included an exhibition space, theatre stage, crowdfunding platforms "Bee Hive" and "MolaMola," and fintech start-ups. It accentuated a certain lifestyle that was related to a certain way of doing business. A few years before the elections (after the launch of this CSR project), there was a cliché about the space as 'the most European site/street in Minsk' in terms of cultural consumption and the approaches to entrepreneurialism. In the spring of 2020, this ecosystem turned out to be a virality base of Viktar Babaryka – the key people of "OK16" became the key people in his presidential campaign from day one. It turned out to be the fastest-growing citizen initiative group in the history of presidential elections in independent Belarus. Similar to Tsikhanouski's campaign, one could recognize the strategy of scaling-up daily routines to the level of national political claims here. The CSR background and the creative cluster function opens the question of to what extent this was political or post-political mobilization (Swyngedouw, 2007).

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The described digital platform innovations in the political process were embedded into the larger context of new structural challenges to the infrastructural gridding in Belarus. The first challenge was the result of growing tensions in Belarus's economic and political relationships with Russia during the course of reviewing the principles of integration between the two states; the second challenge was the result of the global crisis of economic production and social re-production that were related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These two challenges threatened centralized 'state vertical'[10] as the power scaffolding for the socio-spatial development of Belarus and the centralized resource re-distribution as the 'state vertical's' main instrument for development. As a result, the period before the 2020 presidential elections witnessed the

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[9] Being a Belgazprombank Corporate Social Responsibility project, "OK16" and Viktar Babaryka's presidential campaign turned out to be a contentious issue due to their direct relationship to Gazprom in Russia. During the period of 2018–2020, there was an open disagreement concerning the terms and conditions of the economic integration between Russia and Belarus where the topic of gas prices was one of the key ones. In this context (on the level of identity politics), this period was marked by the emphasis in official state rhetoric that Belarus was sovereign vis-à-vis Russia. Even after the jail sentence to the former Belgazprombank director and the candidate for presidency (Viktar Babaryka), this continued to be a contentious issue.

[10] Regional and sectoral bureaucracy, appointed and controlled directly by the President.

massive discontent of the Belarus population with the local and national political and socio-economic course. This discontent was targeted at the long-lasting state's inability to increase the quantity and quality of workplaces in the state sector. This was amplified by the closed borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered work migration to neighboring countries as a strategy of survival and dealing with the discontent individually. Thus, this revealed the limit of the 'state vertical' to efficiently proletarianize and pacify the population. This was especially vivid in small and medium-sized towns, which were not politicized for decades before the 2020 presidential elections. Another significant element of this discontent was the growing momentum of the green agenda, with the protests against the project of the "Accumulator Plant LLC IPower" in Brest as the iconic case. This accumulator plant was expected to be highly polluting by environmental experts; therefore, its construction attracted a lot of attention from civil society and the independent media in the entire country.

Both the massive contestation of the 'state's vertical' socio-economic model and its local outcomes and the popularization of the localized green agenda showed that, just before the 2020 elections, citizens were increasingly keen to negotiate the rights and obligations of individuals, state bodies, and businesses in the urban development and planning context. This context was gradually turning into less of an arena for undisputed technocratic decisions and more of an arena of discussion and advocacy. The societal request of the de-technocratization of local politics as well as the gradual introduction of participatory consumer-oriented practices to the sphere of urban governance and planning were gaining momentum after the economic crisis and the GDP's fall of 2015–2016. Viktar Babaryka's previously mentioned "OK16" CSR project was launched in 2017 and was one of the flagship experimental urban-development projects in the whole country. Although this was very unusual in terms of institutional organization and the urban function for the Belarusian context, it was very much a part of the bigger tendency in the urban policy in Belarus. This tendency was about the controlled partial marketization of urban development as a response to the economic crisis; it combined the increase of the state's reliance on financial sources that were external to the state budget, the growing expectations of individual consumers, and the attempt of the state to retain full control over the process of the planning, construction, and provision of urban services (even under these crisis conditions).

A similar case to "OK16" within the outlined tendency was the range of the housing projects that were fully realized on a commercial basis. Such housing projects addressed the expanding milieu of the economically self-reliant consumers that were nurtured in the private sector. During the period of the 2020 presidential elections and their aftermath, such housing projects made a similar impact as that which the digital platforms made. They created a foundation for the new degree of intensiveness of the participation of its dwellers in local and national politics and, thus, a foundation for challenging the prevalent mode of the top-down gridding constitutive for the political regime in Belarus. The biggest and most recognizable private developer that worked for this new type of consumers was "A-100 DEVELOPMENT." In 2020, most of the media's attention was directed toward the protests and the spectacular community's self-organization in this developer's "New Borovaya" housing estate project (just beyond the border of Minsk). This is one of the most vivid cases of enclosed housing estates for the group of the new young middle class – typically related to the IT sector in Belarus,

which has enjoyed significant tax benefits since 2018. As a rule, this new type of home owner consisted of young families with good jobs who, therefore, expected an international standard of middle-class urban living. Under these circumstances, "A-100 DEVELOPMENT" was not only a construction business that was responding to the requests of this consumer group – it also took responsibility to actively facilitate such a participatory neighborly way of living. The company's community managers continued to work with the "New Borovaya" housing estate community after it was already built – organizing the neighbors' festivals and other events.

Such an intended and unintended creation of strong ties in the new commercial housing estates (distanced from the state in socio-economic terms) also had political consequences. These types of communities, which were rather homogeneous is terms of age, socio-economic status, and cultural preferences, has turned out to also be homogeneous in terms of political values. During the period of 2020–2021, "New Borovaya" (like other new commercial housing estates) was one of the most intensively protesting neighborhoods in Minsk. And, it was actively promoted in the news during the 2020 post-election political mobilization as one of the most intensive protest enclaves. In November 2020, the whole estate was cut off from its water supply and heating for several days. This incident was publicly interpreted as the Minsk City Executive Committee's leverage to force local residents to remove protest symbols from the neighborhood's public spaces and stop gathering in the yards. Telegram chats, YouTube channels, and campaigning in the yards were undergirding this and many other local communities in Belarus; thus, it would be justified to regard this type of community as an entanglement between an enclave of marketized urban policy and digital platforms' sociality in repressive political context. The other cases of new housing projects as the centers of political discontent and resistance that were widely covered in the media were the enclosed "Minipolis Kaskad" and the so-called "Square of Changes" (consisting of separate unenclosed buildings). In such new housing projects, communities of neighbors had the experience of negotiations and joint activities (as a rule with the active use of chats) already before the elections.

The rise of the commercial housing estates coincided with the decline of the state's redistributive capacities in the housing sector and with the slowdown of housing construction in general. This tended to make housing increasingly an arena of pro-active economic behavior of citizens/consumers and, simultaneously, an arena of challenging the state's image as a welfare provider. The election period was the final stage of the "Construction of Housing for 2016–2020" program. In contrast to the previous programs for housing construction, almost three quarters of the funding was driven from extra-budgetary sources in the 2016–2020 case. In 2019, 52% of the program's financing was taken from the population, while 17.3% came from external loans, 12.9% – local budgets, 9.6% – organizational budgets, and 8.2% – the national state budget.[11] The growing re-orientation to private sector sources (instead of the state's budgetary sources) starting from 2016 had two backgrounds. This was a response to the 2015–2016 economic crisis (and the respective fall in the GDP). As a result, the rate of housing construction in square meters had been declining since 2014. In 2019, the population declined in every region of Belarus with two exceptions – the Minsk region, and the city of Minsk.

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[11] Report by the Ministry of Architecture and Construction – http://mas.gov.by/ru/koncec_zhilischn_politiki/ [2.05.2022].

In addition, the re-orientation to private sector sources in urban development was the result of an attempt to follow expert recommendations on behalf of international organizations. During this period, the state was intensifying its relations with the West after partial political liberalization and the release of political prisoners in 2015. It is relevant that most of the EU-funded projects in Belarus were directly related to urban or rural infrastructures or to the social services of cities and towns.[12] As an example, the European Investment Bank provided a 90 million euros loan to Belarus at the end of 2019 to perform thermal renovations of multi-apartment housing together with modernizing the district heating system (500,000 square meters of housing) as well as implementing biomass-based heat generators. This was especially relevant in light of the dependence of Belarus on Russian energy sources and the low energy efficiency of the Belarusian housing stock (especially those circa 60% of residential buildings that were constructed before 1993). Thermal modernization was not included in the residential buildings' capital renovation projects and had to be supported from external sources. Strategically, this was also connected to the gradual reorientation of electricity to be used for heating, hot water, cooking, and mobility since the launch of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant. Such investment projects were canceled after the state repression in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections.

Although one can recognize the rise of fully commercial urban projects before the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus (with "A-100 DEVELOPMENT" and "OK16" as the most recognizable flagship cases), the construction market was at the same time still clearly dominated by state companies over private companies. The housing tended to be built primarily with prefabricated large-panel houses. The management of multi-apartment buildings (including capital renovation) was equally dominated by state-owned companies and was funded from local budgets. The state remained a monopoly in the context of urban services provision despite the economic crisis. Although the share of the state budgetary sources in housing construction was declining, the policies reproduced a largely egalitarian urban environment. As a result, the urban environment was not much differentiated due to the economic opportunities of different income groups; this makes Belarus rather different among its neighboring countries. This combination created a potential for conflict. On the one hand, marketization tended to prioritize citizens as economic participants of urban development, but on the other hand, their possibilities to have a say in urban development and planning as consumers and citizens remained narrow. This resulting conflict was most vivid precisely in the context of the new housing estates in Minsk, which were planned and built with only minimal state involvement. This was the case of the previously mentioned "New Borovaya," "Minipolis Kaskad," or the widely-covered-in-the-international-media "The Square of Changes" courtyard.

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The tendencies in Belarus that are documented above suggest that political participation, digital platforms, and urban environments are not autonomous from each other but are entangled. In other words, they generate a new reality that is undergirded by both digital

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[12] https://euprojects.by/ [2.05.2022].

platforms and the new digitally enabled practices of belonging to a wider community (of neighbors in a smaller locality or a whole country's citizenry). This new reality poses new dilemmas and challenges for political representation, common public good creation, and statehood at large. These new practices of belonging are characterized by highly personalized and performative participation. Sarah Barnes talks about the current socio-technological conditions in terms of momentum in the relationships between corporeality, code, and commerce (2020). As a non-democratic context, Belarus is distinct due to the lack of a state agenda to politically institutionalize the boom of digitally enabled participation in local and national politics. Bottom-up projects that are aimed at such institutionalization (like the mentioned "Skhod") have been criminalized by the state. During the conditions of the severe crisis of political representation, however, such projects have shown the potential for innovative formats to organize the political process from the neighborhood to national levels. Despite the fact that the case that is examined in this article belongs to a non-democratic context, it is not disconnected from the worldwide tendency of the reconfiguration of the relationships among states, societies, and spaces due to digitalization. This reconfiguration entails new forms of practicing urban and national citizenship.

There are experimental Belarusian digital platforms that are devoted to urban politics that continue to operate despite the massive state repression on local activists and the closure of the majority of the neighbors' Telegram chats in the country. This niche is now mainly being cultivated by the "Robim Good"[13] platform; it specializes in consulting citizens regarding procedural and technical possibilities for realizing urban projects as well as managing actual realizations of urban projects. In practice, these projects are about the design of public spaces in most cases. The "Robim Good" platform's team is thoroughly anonymized – some of its members that organize the consultation process and the management itself might not know each other. Although security-related risks make this platform rather special in an international context, it is part of the wider tendency of platformizing urban planning with the goal to intensify participation.

Online participation tools such as Nextdoor or MindMixer serve as instruments of stabilization via the wider transparency and societal control of public issues (Afzalan and Muller, 2018). On one hand, they promote a culture of deliberation among communities; on the other hand, they make planners' access to local knowledge possible and, thus, amplify sensitivity to local problems. Furthermore, a combination of synchronized and desynchronized communication allows for more-diverse formats to which community members can contribute. In this context, it is noted that, in the course of digitalization, urban planning is increasingly becoming about the co-creation and self-organization of citizens that used to be considered 'silent' beforehand (Boland et al., 2021). This makes a new degree of awareness possible and opens access to those modes of knowledge that were not normally accessible to planners or politicians (Norkunaite and Kunkel, 2019). It thus harvests the gains of participatory action research whose feature is to "disrupt expert (power) hierarchies in the production and circulation of knowledge" (Susskind et al., 2018, p. 130) and, thus, contribute to creating closer ties among research, knowledge, and democracy.

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[13] "Robim Good", https://robimgood.org/ [2.05.2022].

In this regard, it is crucial that digital platforms are essentially participatory ecosystems (as noticed by Sarah Barns in 2019). They are participatory both from the perspective of users who are supposed to constantly generate content and be hyperresponsive to the innovations and tech entrepreneurs who are to develop their own products so that they fit the already-existing platform ecosystem with its technical, legal, and business principles. Barns suggests that digital platforms and the resulting 'platform business models,' 'platform economy,' and 'platform urbanism' raise a set of complex questions concerning 'platform governance' (2020). As platforms create an ecosystem in an engineering perspective, the questions are which political implications do this ecosystem generate, and which measures are needed to ensure public awareness of the platform ecosystem's political consequences? In public discourse, it is often emphasized that city-as-a-platform rests on the requirement of the availability of open data, open governance, services, etc. (Repette, 2021, p. 9). From such perspective, it is justified to expect that the pro-democratic platformization of politics agenda should include a strategy of municipalizing data. In light of these questions, the participatory nature of digital platforms is also reconfiguring citizen-sovereignty relationships. This provokes a range of critical perspectives for examining this shift.

The most direct critical perspective on power here is the knowledge asymmetry between the digital platforms' owners and users. This asymmetry provokes the use of the 'black box' metaphor (Fields, 2019; Fields et al., 2020; Pasquale, 2015). As a platform economy entails turning digital urban data into a commodity, the question about distributing accumulated data beyond the 'black box' is acute. Barns interprets the smartphone as an "extractive agent of data-harvesting" (2019, p. 8). On a higher abstract level of political analysis, Pasquale talks about the tension between territorial sovereignty and functional sovereignty that results from the ubiquitous spread of digital platforms and their economic logic (2018). In Pasquale, companies like Amazon (by means of outsourcing, accumulating data, and becoming arbitration authorities) in effect strengthen their functional sovereignty and, thus, challenge the territorial sovereignty of modern statehood. These conditions require new narrative strategies on behalf of critical researchers. Some show how ethnographic writing makes it possible to reveal and discuss the relational power of urban platforms such as Uber beyond only the digital realm (Pollio, 2020). Such writing de-hermitizes the 'black box' of 'platform urbanism.' The very phenomenon of a flexibilized and informalized urban service becomes the major source of data-creation, agglomeration, and valuation. In this respect, the smartphone is also the basis of a user's spatial experience of functional sovereignty relationships. A tragic and bitter ironic illustration of the tension between territorial and functional sovereignty in Belarus is the fact that the most common way for security services to gain access to the data from dissidents' mobile phones (participations in chats, contacts, subscriptions, and photos from protests) is through physical torture. Belarus security services are indeed largely deprived of leverage in relation to the functional sovereignty of commercial digital products. At the same time, the fact that a Telegram profile is connected to a specific mobile phone number entails a range of risks for dissidents that use Telegram in Belarus.[14]

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[14] In Belarus, one needs to register one's passport data in order to buy a sim card. This creates the grounds for the de-anonymization of Telegram users.

The factors of the repressive state in Belarus, of the gradual and enclave-like marketization of urban policy and the concomitant strengthening of urban dwellers' economic autonomy, and of the participatory attitude that is driven by digital platforms lead to the country-specific configuration of both urban and national politics. The severe crisis of political representation in 2020 has shown that this configuration is highly conflictual. It has also shown that there is a significant potential of experimentation in terms of political claim-making and organizing the political process in the niche that is created by the three factors that are mentioned. Under these circumstances, experiments could be defined in a variety of ways – from a narrow understanding as a research method to a broad understanding of a means of governance (Huitema et al., 2018). McDermott discusses the use of experiments in political science and shows that, thematically, it is most often focused on issues of voting and elections, committee and jury decision-making, and issues of coordination and cooperation (2002). The context of specifically urban policy with participation principles that are not fixed and are highly dependent on a distinct spatial context (and the paths of politicization that it provokes) often inevitably requires experimental measures. This is especially relevant as the complexity of the spatial justice that is at stake is increasing. Usually, experimentation in urbanism is regarded today in the view of city labs tackling the complexities of urban issues (Scholl and de Kraker, 2021). Scholl and Kemp interpret city labs as the "management of boundaries" or a "boundary work," "mediating organizations between urban-development projects and the policy system" (2016, p. 94). These experiments could aim to create a new "material product" and a new social practice (Scholl and Kemp, 2016, p. 93). The main questions regarding the relationships between digitalization and democratization (relevant in both the democratic and non-democratic contexts) are who drives and facilitates such experimental collaborative efforts and who sets the criteria for deliberated decisions? Such an angle on the 'planning-technology nexus' especially concerns the use of algorithms in urban planning in a democratic context (Boland, 2021, p. 10) and a combination of the use of algorithms and the use of arbitrary power in a non-democratic context.

CONCLUSION

In the studies of the massive political mobilization in Belarus in the course of the 2020 presidential elections and their aftermath, the factor of a 'platform society,' 'platform urbanism,' and a 'platform economy' is not narrativized as of yet. As a rule, the meaning of digital platforms in the political process is reduced to mere tools. This article has suggested an explanation of the profound destabilization of the power relations in Belarus during the period of 2020–2021 as an entanglement of the spread of digital platforms, the gradual marketization of urban development, and the boom of bottom-up participatory politics. This entanglement evolved in the context of the long-lasting top-down infrastructural gridding as the foundation of the non-democratic political regime in Belarus. The result was large-scale societal conflict and a severe crisis of the state's legitimacy. Two major niches of innovations in the political process in terms of citizen participation were communities of neighbors (organized within Telegram chats) and the platforms that twinned the state's functions connected to the

process of elections (mainly, the functions of the Central Election Committee). Both niches significantly enhanced citizens' (hybrid online-offline) participation in both the local and national political processes. These innovations coincided with the tendency of the gradual marketization of urban policy and the decrease of the state's redistributive capacities (especially in the construction of housing) due to the economic crisis of 2015–2016. Despite the decreases of state budgets in housing construction, the state remained an urban-development, planning, and design monopoly. The growth of economically self-reliant citizens/consumers led to a conflict with such a top-down monopoly state. The most organized, active, and long-lasting protests took place in the new fully commercial housing estates where communities of neighbors already experienced joint activities and negotiations (enabled by digitalization and shared socio-economic experiences and statuses). The documented tendencies suggest that the Belarusian case of experimental platformized politics has gained a new dimension when discussed in light of the world-wide political effects of ubiquitous platform eco-systems.

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