

BEARUSTIAN UPRISING REVISITED...

THE FINAL STRAW RADIO

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This week on The Final Straw, we spoke with Vasili and Maria, two Belarusian anarchists living abroad about the aftermath of the 2020 Uprising in their country of birth, lessons learned, the current political prisoners and the Lukashenko regime's attempts to attack dissidents abroad. Maria is also a member of Belarus Anarchist Black Cross, which does anti-repression education and prisoner and legal support for anarchists in or from that country. More on that group and these topics can be found at **ABC-Belarus.Org**, including a form to send letters to prisoners in Belarus from the website and a link to a brand new fundraising campaign to help BABC to support their anti-repression efforts.

Search for this interview title at **<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/>** to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode. Thanks to Toljue for the lettering on the cover!

TFSR: Would you please introduce yourself so the audience with whatever names, gender pronouns, locations, affiliation, or other info that could be useful for this conversation?

Maria: I might go first. I'm Maria, I go by she her pronouns, and I am speaking on behalf of the anarchist black cross Belarus chapter here. So I can't expose my location at the moment. But at the moment, I'm outside of the country.

Vasili: And my name is Vasili, an activist from Belarus, who is not in Belarus right now. He him, and I'm involved in some anarchist organizations from Belarus.

TFSR: And Maria, can you tell us a little bit about Anarchist Black Cross Belarus, the kind of work that you all do and some of your history?

Maria: Right, the Anarchist Black Cross Belarus started, I think, around 2009. in Minsk, which is the capital. First, it was like, rather an informal kind of network of people who would just make random donations, just not really doing anything other than collecting money. And back then, before 2010, when the first wave of repression hit the anarchist movement in Belarus, the group was not really needed, because the state didn't look so much at the anarchists as the enemies let's say, but after 2010, the group was formed and you and now it has membership. And it's a collective that has been running since then. And over time, we've evolved into a stable group that is doing fundraisers for us and supports anarchist and anti fascist prisoners in Belarus, and sometimes also people who have Belarusian citizenship, who have problems in other countries, because of their anti-authoritarian activity. We're also trying to expand the support not just for material side of providing financial support, but also psychological support, not that we are providing that but we are like, open to pay for that or to look for either professionals or like self help groups and so on. Because we see like activist trauma, like post-repression trauma as like as a consequence of repression that needs to be dealt with, especially also after release from prisons. Yeah, so we're trying to work on that.

And we're also quite interested, and I think we were quite successful, in creating a new security culture in the movement, like trying to agitate

for like not talking to the cops and giving a lot of trainings and seminars, producing brochures, about what you should expect once you get caught. And what's the best way to behave and also showing some light at how the police is preparing themselves for psychological pressure, like what methods they use in order to actually make you speak. So this is what we've been doing. And I think this last year was a catastrophe for the collective because previously, we had to deal with like, let's say, 3-6 prisoners a year, let's say, and maybe also throughout the years would be like the same people who would just be in prison for longer terms, but this year, at the moment, there's already like 26 people who are either behind bars or have already been convicted after the protests. And a lot of people had to flee the country, and this is also like our Congress that we will we need to help with like migration issues and also like settlement support and stuff like that. So yeah, this is why at the moment we have a lot of work and we also need a lot of support from the outside of the country as well.

TFSR: It feels like, we can also go back and touch on this in later questions too, but since we are talking about ABC Belarus right now, could you tell us of any ways people can find out about your work and any sort of like international organizations or movements that you participate in, like the week of solidarity or the Anarchist Defense Fund. Like that sort of stuff?

Maria: Right. I mean, ABC Belarus is like part of this probably shrinking network of ABC groups here in Europe. We have some connections to also ABC groups in the US, but not so much. But in general, we try to participate in any effort of solidarity here in this continent. And basically, you can find information about the group and also the news on like Belarussian prisoners, or general repression in the country on our website, which is ABC-belarus.org. And we are now trying to publish monthly updates on repression in the country in English. So it's not only about fundraising, but also like you can forward or like repost, share messages from there, if you have an English-speaking website somewhere. Yeah, so basically, that's it.

TFSR: Last year, I spoke with a comrade around November of 2020, about a year ago, about the uprising in Belarus, which had already been going for some months at this point. For listeners who somehow missed it, could one of you give a really brief overview of the uprising,

at least up until that point and just sort of bring us up to date so that we can, we can move on from there?

Vasili: So, if you missed what was happening in Belarus in 2020... In August, after the elections of the president, pretty much the biggest uprising in the modern history of the country happened with first, dozens of 1000s of people go into the streets, and afterwards, hundreds of 1000s of people are going to protest against the dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko. This lasted for several months. One of main the reasons that actually this whole thing was possible was the Corona-virus, but also dissatisfaction with the economical problems of the country and so on. And the protests had different momentums. Like in first days, it was really intensive and with a lot of clashes with the police and with a lot of repressions, and at least several people killed by the police. Later on, transformed in some kind of peaceful demonstrations marches every Sunday, however it never managed to grow to the extent that would destroy the governmental power and eventually put an end to Lukashenko's rule in the country. By the end of 2020, most of the protests were over all around the country, a lot of people were repressed. I think, in this four months from August to December, over 30,000 people were prosecuted. 30,000 people in the frame of 9.5 million people living in Belarus, which was like super big amount of people. That means that everybody knew someone who was eventually repressed. Apart from that, over 1000 people were detained and put on holds for prosecution. 30,000 people were prosecuted through administrative codes, which was like a smaller violation of the public disorder, which would give you like 15 days in prison or fines. And this over 1000 people were arrested and are now awaiting or were prosecuted or waiting for trial for the criminal offenses, which would be, I don't know, one year in prison up to 25 years in prison.

So the protests were crushed. And at some point, we thought that maybe the Belarusian government would go crazy for the next couple of months, and will calm down as it was happening normally, through the history that if there would be like a protest, there would be some repressions, but then the government would stop. Over one year, since the protests, the repressions are still going on and people are still getting arrested. The police are still processing the videos and photos that they made during the protests. And they are still like catching the protesters and charging them with the more serious charges than they were doing in autumn 2020.

Also, apart from that, there is a big wave of migration that started with the mass repressions. Depending on the country, there are also dozens of 1000s of people left, mostly in direction of Ukraine and Poland, which are the nearest countries and some parts went into this mania. And the others went all around the world basically. But the biggest diaspora is right now are concentrated in Ukraine and Poland and trying to organize politically there in any way to undermine the Belarusian government's politics in the region.

Right. So, at this point, right now, most of the political organizing is actually smashed so all the political organizations were destroyed. Most of the media that is not affiliated with the government is banned or got their license revoked, and journalists actually massively left the country because of the threat of prosecution. The human rights organizations are also en masse leaving the country. And there are several human rights defenders, like big ones in the political sphere, who are sitting in prison. And most of also non governmental NGOs not affiliated with the Belarusian government, are also getting shut down and people who are working for those NGOs are leaving the country to go abroad, under threat of prosecution as well. Yeah, so everything looks pretty dire.

Apart from that, it's also worth mentioning that when we came to the elections in 2020, Lukashenko was quite close to the Western countries, to European Union, but also to US, and he was getting funding from those countries. But as the protests escalated, and as Lukashenko was making more and more political mistakes, the European Union was kind of cornered into reacting to his bullshit. And now, the regime is under sanctions of the European Union and the US, and that kind forced Lukashenko to the search for another allies. And now his main ally is Putin who, well, doesn't care about that people are blood flowing on the streets, as long as you are loyal to him. So Lukashenko's regime is now heavily based on Russian support. And this was happening historically. All in all, Lukashenko managed to survive, because Putin or Yeltsin back then were supporting him economically, but also politically, on the bigger political arena.

TFSR: Are people going to those two countries, in particular, because of those country's current relationship with the Russian regime of Putin? Or is there other reasons?

Maria: Yeah, I think the reasons are so simple. Just because for Ukraine, you don't need a visa. So basically, you can just get out as quickly as possible, even if you don't have any documents. And you can stay there up to 90 days without any reason. This is what people actually did. And also in Ukraine, people speak Russian. And this is like this kind of post USSR, mentality or culture that people are sharing. For those who don't really speak English or other languages, is the best way to just change the surroundings without actually changing the context, let's say. Also, because people are feeling more secure than, for example, going to Russia because Russian and Belarusian authorities and the police have like unified databases of people who are like dissidents, let's say, and they actually can arrest you. And this has been done massively in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where they have face recognition surveillance system in the streets. So people do not feel safe in Russia. That's why they flee somewhere else. So, for Ukraine, it's like that. If you speak about Poland and Lithuania, these are the two countries that were the first to react. I think, in October or November, they said they're going to provide any assistance to people who have to flee the country and they started giving that so-called humanitarian visas. So that's basically a National Visa that allows you to stay longer than a tourist visa, and you don't need grounds, like having to work or like some studies and so on. So you can just basically get proof that you have been repressed and you're going to be issued this visa and you can stay in the country and later apply for like a refugee status or production status. And also because the EU now, I think it's effectively denying extradition requests from Belarus even via Interpol. So basically, this is where people feel more safe, in terms of not getting extradited. The I think these are the easiest options for people to go to.

Vasili: I would like to point as well that although Poland and Lithuania are giving this humanitarian visas and they're openly accepting Belarusian refugees, the other EU countries are not that open, although they're condemning the violation of human rights. It is way more complicated to move to other European Union countries like going to Germany or going to France, Spain, wherever you want to go. It is quite complicated. So for the people who want to, well, leave Belarus and have a secure, safe place, those are like the easiest places to go like you were in within the European Union. Poland and Lithuania in that case.

TFSR: Yeah, so **Lukashenko is still in power, people are still having**

to go abroad, and still organizing resistance against the regime from abroad. If it's... this is a strange way to put it, but this is like common parlance in the US, at least in English... There was a lot that seemed to come out in the uprising that my understanding and having spoken to a few people from Belarus, there were parts of the movement that seemed kind of unprecedented and sort of unexpected, like, for instance, the running battles with the police, the extreme violence that the police and the jails enacted on individuals when they arrested them from sexual assaults to like literal torture. I think there were some disappearances of people. And this is the thing that police do wherever because they're police to, you know, at different times. But this is exceptionally cruel and concentrated, the apparent attempt to infect as many people with COVID as possible by cramming them into cells in the middle of the pandemic. And it seems like elements of the Belarusians nation were chipping away from what had been a sort of toleration of the administration to actually... You know, police quitting their jobs in instances, people targeting where police lived to try to pressure them to leave... Workers threatening strikes... This was a massive, massive moment.

And I guess the English term that I was going to point to is called a “post-mortem”. What sort of lessons do you take from that like, what worked, what seemed not to and why the administration has continued to be able to stay in power.

Maria: My idea is that, actually it went the way it was supposed to go, let's say. I mean, of course, all all the things you've mentioned, like the new expressions of like solidarity and new ways of protests, and actually like attracting masses of people to the protest was something new. And this was new for all of us. And for the people also, what I mean that it was supposed to end like this is because the state knows best tactics on how to suppress the protest. Because you have to understand that for many people in Belarus, it was the first time that they were actually politically interested, and were trying to promote or like, defend their rights, or let's say, whatever, or a protest against anything. So these people have never been detained. These people have never seen an aggressive policeman beating up someone else in the street. These people have never been arrested, or detained at their workplace. These people have never been harassed, and threatened with taking their kids out of their family if they're going to

continue protesting. So these people have never experienced, like, cunning repressive mechanisms that the state has. And like, for example, for me, they're not new, because I'm in the movement for 15 years. And like many of them have been used against me or against comrades or against like other people, just because I'm involved. And so many of them didn't work for me. But people who went to the street in August and September, were in the streets it's as long as it was safe for them. Like, as long as they could just be in the streets think that they're going to change something peacefully... And here comes also the question of lacking the political analysis, or like the political history of let's say, revolutions or like successful protests, or coup d'état's so and so on. So people like really thought and they believed that they even if they're going to be a lot in the street for some time, Lukashenko will just leave. And this has never happened in in history. But for them it was the first time and they didn't listen to anyone, that it should be like, okay, more offensive, let's say. At the same time, there was also no one powerful enough in the media, who would actually call them to be offensive. Like everybody in the political sphere, was speaking about the fucking peaceful protest, like this protest was going on because it was supported and promoted.

So when I was under arrest in October, I had a few women and myself who were at their door, taken to like a car with a black bag on their head, just to be arrested for 15 days. For me, it was clear that the police is just using this as a threatening mechanism. Like before it was really safe, you just go to the protest, you go home, nothing happens. And suddenly, you've realized that they know where you live, they come for you, and they bring you like as a hostage, in I don't know, Afghan movies, or something like that. And they take like 1000 people like that. And these 1000 people is telling their neighbors, what's what's happening, and the neighbors starting to be afraid that they're going to be the next. So like, for me, I knew that they were using it just for that to intimidate the population, and they were really successful in that. So, having this as a picture of like repression, or some kind of exemplary cases, it worked for people. And many people just left the streets as soon as they realized that they can't post pictures of them in peaceful protests on Instagram, because now police is looking at the Instagrams and checking out the people.

Yeah, so basically, people were quite active, as long as they felt that they could be supported by others. In the first days, like you said, a lot of peo-

ple quit the state managed jobs, the police, the national television, and so on and so on, like the athletes who are supported by Lukashenko and so and so on. So as long as people saw that everybody else is doing this, they were doing it as well. And they were also like, seeing a lot of solidarity coming. But then when they saw that, actually, nobody else is doing it anymore, and it's just kind of you against the system, basically, or you and like crazy people like you who are still brave enough to show, this is when people started realizing that, okay, like, I'm just ruining my life because of that.

The solidarity structures were crushed. Because special solidarity structures were installed outside of the country to collect, I think they collected like 8 million bucks for solidarity from all sorts of businesses and like from individuals. So basically, they were promising that people are going to have that. If you are going to be repressed, you're going to have it, for sure, if you're going to be fired, you're going to have like money, or salary, like in three months or something like that. At first it worked, but then also these solidarity structures couldn't actually process so many requests. So it ended up being super slow, like people who were fired would not get support, like in two months. And these are people with families, you know. Then, of course, everybody's talking about that they are sharing that, "Okay, this solidarity is just bullshit, I asked for the money, but they're like, verifying me for ages. I'm being arrested, I'm asking for the lawyers fees. They're verifying me for ages. Like, my mother needs the money to get the food parcel to the prison today, but the money is going to be there after like half a year." Also the more people got arrested and put behind bars, the more money they needed, right? Also, what they did is basically trying to transfer money in cash inside the country, and there were specific people who would like process tons of cash to pay for fines and to pay for lawyers fees, and so on.

These people were persecuted, they're now in jail. So that's why when, when other people who did the same saw that, okay, just for helping out others, I can get in jail, I'm going to stop doing it, you know? Like, I'm going to run out of the country. They weren't showing some exemplary cases of how something you're doing could ruin your life. And people were just thinking, Okay, so when we believed in victory, we could do that, but now, we're doubting victory, now we don't really believe in it anymore. So I think this is how it works like this, let's say the morale it was destroyed. It

was like really effectively destroyed. This is why now people do not believe that there's going to be at any moment a critical mass so they can join. A lot of people wants to join, but they feel like they're alone in this.

Vasili: And I think, for me, the Western politics or, let's say, Western Liberal politics played an important role in the way the protest develops. And it started not in August 2020, but historically if we look at the development of the liberal opposition in Belarus, we can see that through the money through like political support, Western liberal powers can control the narrative inside of the country. So, if you would have like really militant opposition leaders in the 90's, who would be, you know, rioting or calling for riots participate, really confronted with demonstrations... Slowly this narrative change to a peaceful demonstrations, peaceful change of power, peaceful, peaceful, peaceful. And this became like a dogma that it was not possible to change anymore, that it should be always peaceful. And when we came to 2020, the people who were participating in the protests and people who were, let's say, a political leadership of this whole mobilization, were still insisting on the peaceful protests for the first days, but also like afterwards. Although some of the people had clear understanding of the clear possibilities of clashes with the police. Like there were leaks for example of Tikhonovskaya talking to some allies in the smaller towns where they would be talking about possible clashes and what should be done and so on and so forth. But this cannot be publicly done, as if you start calling for riots, if you start calling for like a militant overthrow of the dictatorship, then you will have issues with those people who are eventually supporting you and do not support this kind of narrative. As the revolutionary agenda is spreading that if you if you start calling for revolution in Belarus, people start asking like "oh, we will so when changes so what are we going to do?" And I think for a lot of liberals in Western European Union or in US right now this narrative is really dangerous taking account the Corona-virus, dissatisfaction and all this stuff.

Of course, a lot of media that is in opposition to Lukashenko is still financed by some grants from the European Union or by some foundations that are also not accepting this kind of narrative, this kind of idea of a revolution happening. No, there could be a peaceful protests and like it was I don't know when in their heads, and that's it. And this played a really important role in during the mobilizations. Like a week since the protests started, there was this peaceful march that mobilized hundreds

of 1000s of people and this was like a moment of euphoria, where we thought “okay, now the whole thing is over.” And there were a lot of people who were reproducing that narrative. So there were so many people that Lukashenko is like a political corpse, right? And I think like within maybe a German political context, he would be gone, like this is not what you do in a democratic country. But for dictatorship, killing a couple of people, sentencing or arresting 6000 people, this is not a problem. So Lukashenko was going on. But people started getting this idea of, okay, peaceful protest, everything is fine, we are winning. So nothing should be changed. We keep on going with this peaceful marches, and that was a certain moment of blocking. As the bigger crowds started, like doing only that, just Sunday marches.

The people who were doing the mobilization had the problem that they cannot say to this bigger crowds, “Hey, let’s go and take over the fucking police station, or the City Council,” and stuff like that. And this was done because of the financing. We had as organized anarchists in Belarus, conversations with the media activists or bloggers who would say “We need like anarchists, we need some radicals who would call for radical actions.” But this was already like happening a month too late or something like that. And they started, like there were situations where anarchist calls for actions would be reproduced by the bigger media channels. But this was like too late because the repressions were hitting so hard that there was no mobilisational potential anymore, outside of the Sunday demonstrations. So I think this is the thing that was really important for Lukashenko to maintain his power that the Liberal thought is incapable of overthrowing the dictatorship not only conceptually, like bringing alternatives and saying, “Hey, this is a great idea, maybe jeans and bananas are not selling so well anymore.” But physically, like they cannot call in their liberal ideas for revolution for revolutionary changes. So liberals became a shadow of the liberal movement of the 19th century they were they were like, “Fuck yeah, we are going to free the population and so on and so forth.”

Yeah, so this was like it should show that was somehow happening inside of the country, but also happening outside of the country. And I think like, with what Maria said, people didn’t have experience in protests, people didn’t have experience with all this repressions. And they were searching a lot from outside as well. Like, “Who can help us who can explain this thing happening to us?” And who was explaining things were those liberal

bloggers from Russia, or from some other countries that also didn't have any fucking clue. But they would be so convincing that everybody will be like, "Oh, yeah, that person knows what he's talking about, or she's talking about" and so on. Yeah.

Maria: Can I add something?

TFSR: Totally.

Maria: I think also, like another part... I'm in two minds about what I'm going to say, but I'm just gonna mention it. I think one problem or like, one obstacle towards this kind of, like more radical revolution was also in the way that people didn't know radical methods, like they didn't know how to implement them, let's say. And it was the first time people saw smoke grenades or tear gas exploding around them or something. And like basically people, the biggest like bloggers, or like telegram channels with like a massive readership, were advertising all the time "clenching hands." Like "Clench hands, every time you see the police, because the police is going to take your comrades away, and you shouldn't let them detain you." So people were trained to just be in a row clenched hands and like what I saw in the first days of like, post election protests, people like would just clench hands in front of the police trying to I don't know, tear gas them or shooting them or something. People like really didn't understand it's, it's a different method now, and you don't protect yourself against detention, but it's like a street fight, in a way, you know. Like, this kind of urban guerrilla is not something that people were familiar with. I think those who understood were a minority group, it's people who actually either participated in protests demonstrations in Europe, for example, like football hooligans, or some anarchists, and maybe people who just saw it in the media before. So they kind of knew how it should look like, but not really, what exactly they need to achieve with that. Like what would be the strategy with cops.

I think that is one thing. People really didn't understand. They wanted to hold a position. But why? They didn't understand if they wanted to move cops away, or like to be offensive towards cops, they just wanted to be in one place. And that's it. And of course, that doesn't change anything, like okay, paralyzes the city for some time, but not really moving you towards a coup d'etat. And, on the other hand, a lot of people like you mentioned,

the bloggers who are calling people to kind of go and smash policemen's houses and, I don't know, ruin their cars... And this is what people did. Like, they basically went there with their faces uncovered, disregarding the surveillance cameras, disregarding the fact that they were already other cops waiting for them there on the spot, because they were expecting attacks. So people were just doing like really stupid things without thinking about any security culture connected to the radical action or direct action. They needed to know that but the bloggers didn't care, like they would just call people do something really stupid, or like maybe smart, but you should be smart in all spheres with direct action. And people would just do it, because they were very emotional. And then they were put in jail and then they would realize that there's not actually any solidarity because all the human rights organizations are supporting only the peaceful demonstrators and not recognizing political prisoners, those who have, I don't know, smashed cops' cars or smashed cops' faces. So, that was a real kind of contradiction. Because on the one hand, people are getting a lot of information about the fact that they should be more offensive, but they were not explained how and they didn't have any support after that.

So I think that was also like the biggest mistake and a lot of people after this, the change of the narrative that Vasili was mentioning, this kind of peaceful narrative when it came in... A lot of radical groups just left the streets because there was no place for them anymore. Like, because these groups knew they have to be in their neighborhoods, they know exactly. Together with people they know, instead of going and showing your face on a Sunday morning march, or something like that. So this audience was kind of lost, or it was waiting for some action, you know, like, was waiting for a good moment to step in.

Another problem was that at the same time, there was this split between like radical and peaceful. And the radical ones, or people who just wanted to use them, started organizing online in open chats. So they were basically forming chats, calling them "I want to smash cop cars in the street," or whatever. Just discussing it online, without actually protecting their accounts. It was really easy to identify people behind those accounts. This was what is what cops used. So they were effectively identified a bunch of participants of these chats, and they just punished them, or they were just actually trying to organize actions together, and they would detain

them in this in the scene, you know. So basically, people who wanted to be radical did really stupid things. And of course, I mean, anarchists is tried to change this narrative, tried to explain that you should only do a direct action with a person you really know, not just your neighbor you've seen for the first time or not that person from online. But anarchists didn't have this kind of wide influence. We couldn't spread the message as wide as possible.

So I think that was also something that people saw. Like, "Okay, I'm peaceful, a peaceful demonstrator, maybe I would like to use something else or like use another tactic, but I don't know how, I don't know, with whom, because these connections are not built. I know, some neighbors who are protesting, but I'm not sure they are up for it, you know? And I see that what happens with people who try." So either they are getting caught by the cops, or they are just I don't know, and then yeah.

But at the same time, why I said, I'm in two minds about that, because I don't think that revolutions should be like, prepared and people like 100,000 people have to, like really be good at security culture and direct actions. Because usually, successful protests happen, like everywhere, where people are emotional enough, angry enough just to go and smash it. And, of course, in the Arab Spring, people also didn't know how to do it. But somehow it worked in some cases. So, what I'm saying is that that was totally an obstacle, but I'm not sure that it's a matter of just learning, and then it's going to be successful. No.

TFSR: It's fair to note that, that the Belarusian state had, like 25 to 30 years to figure out, not that they came out of nowhere, but they had decades to figure out how to repress public uprisings. And like y'all had been saying, if people are just suddenly coming to the like, if they're getting this information, pumped at them, these images of what a revolution looks like, you know, or what's acceptable, then it seems pretty hard to expand your imagination past that.

Vasili: I think that what is also important in terms of imagination as well, is that the internet is not as it used to be [laughs]. And that means that all the regulations that are passed in, let's say the US or in some European Council, or whatever, are actually to regulate the internet to prevent terrorism or extremism distribution or whatever shit they have in their

hands are affecting what is happening in the other countries. And a lot of bloggers and a lot of people with like media power had fear that if they, you know, start posting pictures of burning police cars, or they would put how to make Molotov cocktails on their channels, the channels would be blocked, because there are regulations that can be like, you know, activated to block this kind of terrorist content. And this was happening, like there were channels, there were groups all around the internet that were blocked by that. This was like the result of not what we were doing in Belarus rather than what the legislators were doing outside of the country, and this is like a fucking circus. Imagine, you know, like the Soviet Union invades Finland, and then Molotov cocktail distribution is banned by the German state or by some crazy fucker sitting in US and saying like, “No, no, this is really bad what you’re making, like, try to stop the Soviets with your bodies and with your mind.” And this was what was happening in Belarus a lot. And this was, I really find it really problematic and most probably it will shoot back in coming years for sure.

TFSR: I was hoping to put opinion that the discussion of Telegram and the mass usage of it and the fact that both of you pointed to people’s anonymity being compromised in the way that they were organizing. Because there were people from the uprising after the execution- er the police killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in, I want to say 2015 in the US, there were people- youth using snap chat and Instagram and all these other apps to document what they were doing and that came back to bite them afterwards. In Hong Kong, people were using a lot of online apps to communicate back and forth that also, I don’t know how much that came back to bite people but Telegram... You know going back to the Arab Spring Uprisings, Youtube or Facebook and Twitter were things that the media at least has pointed to as being important tools for organizing, Vasili, the point is well taken that the internet is not what it used to be and all of these regulations, but there’s also... We now have micro computers in our pockets that are often registered to our names and that can track our movements around and data capture is a really easy thing. And I wonder if you could talk about any sort of lessons learned about Telegram, in particular, as a platform that was used so widely and efforts that people have made once they’ve seen the danger of that platform in particular being used to organize potentially illegal activities. What sort of educational or cultural interjections that people have made?

Vasili: I think the whole thing is a huge topic with Telegram, right? Because you can start with the person this who started Telegram, Durov. He's like Russian businessman who went to US, who actually before that started VK and which was like an alternative to facebook for Eastern Europe. And he was selling his app as the security solution for all the activists, everybody. This was marketed great and he was really aggressive. He has money, he was advertising that, and one of his main audiences is like Eastern Europe to see him say "Oh, I'm so great, I'm going to stop actually any work with Russia over with Belarus. I am really together with people fighting for freedom." And I think people started buying that and the further you go, the more this narrative is actually getting sold really, how would you say, successfully. And forgetting the fact that VK for really long time, under Durov as well, was cooperating with the Russian government in also repressing the anti-Putin movements in Russia. So Durov is not like an evangelist of freedom, who's going to give voice to everybody, doesn't matter who, and this is something that's just a commercial application, which doesn't earn a lot of money to the person who made it.

Telegram is really hardly connected with the phone number, which is a horrible idea, as in some countries, I think in US you can still buy sim cards without registration to your passport. In Belarus you can't do that, in Russia you can't do that, and this is basically like you get an ID that is connected with to your passport, to your ID, to your name, to everything that is attached to that. This is an incredibly horrible thing, because it is also something that you can't just drop out of. It's like your whole contact list is connected to that. Your whole social network is connected to it. Imagine Facebook is doing that from time to time that you need your passport to prove blah blah blah. But imagine you have to register with the Facebook by just sending them your passport and sending your phone and all the shit. Then the phone connected to all of the geo-location data. That's what happens with Telegram and that's what happened exactly with Telegram during the protests. All the phones that were used to register people who were protesting were connected with it to their IDs, to their passports.

Of course, if you're like a turbo anarchist, you could find a way to register a Telegram without using a sim card with your name, but most of the people aren't turbo anarchists. So most of the people had their like passports already speaking into Telegram to get arrested. And some people

had can hide and there is this thing and this thing, but at the end of the day there is there's dozens of ways to figure out the people's ID's and that's what happened. People were prosecuted for the fucking stupidest shit that can happen. Like there is news of a police officer and when he is home and what he did in the last like two months and then someone writes out "this fucking bastard is a swine dog!", right? "He's a pig dog!" That's what happened to one of the people I know. And he got like two years in, ah, I dunno, house arrest or something like that, right? And this was connected with the fact that this person couldn't be anonymous to write that that cop is a fucking pig, or pig-dog or whatever he wanted to say in his creative mind.

So the infrastructure of Telegram played an important role in repressing the movement through giving this kind of a platform at the beginning, but also in the long run played an important role for the state to repress people. And I think this is also like a, you know, a poisoned apple that you're like jumping on it and really eager to eat, but then you're ending up with I dunno, like diarrhea or five years in prison. And as we see right now, what is happening is that Telegram blocked in Russia, we're not talking about Belarus just jumping to right now, yesterday, the elections in Russia and Telegram blocked the bot for smart voting that the opposition was trying to organize in Russia. Basically, by signing up with the Russian state in repressing this opposition attempts to create some, I dunno, some system that would give people possibility to vote in a different way than Putin organized. Telegram is already giving their, let's say, open mind to helping repressive apparatus to destroy the efforts in bringing down the dictatorship, and this is going to go further and further. Mmm, yeah. I mean it's a it's a huge problem that we are still facing and we have no fucking clue how this will be in the next years. For sure people will switch to another app in, like, three or four or five years, but right now it still goes on and there are people still getting arrested constantly because of their phones once having been connected to their Telegram and Telegram exposing their phones to police and shit like that. Yeah.

Maria: I got to just answer their primary question [laughs] about what people did. Because Vasili didn't mention that one other thing is that not only identifying people by their phone, but also trying to break in, like hacking the accounts by just cloning sim cards. Because the authorities have the right... well they don't have that right, but they can. So basically

cloning the sim card receiving the SMS with a code, like putting it on their computer and, I don't know voila, they found an admin of the chat, they found an admin of another channel, of a protest channel. And this is what has been done a lot. And I think, of course, Telegram offers now all layers of whatever security. But the thing is that these layers are not switched on automatically when the person is logging in for the first time, everything is open. And like you need to go through all smallest details until you're kind of protected. Like if, say nothing of the number, but just to switch on this two-factor identification and la la la everything is so that it's actually not so easy for the people. We have to also realize that a lot of elderly people like people over 40, 50 and so on, they are not so good with apps. Like they can't just go, and I don't know, like manage the VPN and connect to the Telegram in a way that always works when the Telegram is on. I don't know, like track their traffic, check their IP's...

So, basically, you can provide some security with Telegram but you're like needing to be like knowledgeable about this. People weren't... It's too much for a Belarusian person who does the protest for the first time. They need to learn about the security, they need to learn about the facial recognition system cameras, need to know how to speak to cops. Now they need to know how to use Telegram. Everything we had to learn like in ten years of political organizing, they now have to learn in like two months or even less. So, I think answering your question about what was done to education was done by also bigger bloggers, or owners of Telegram channels that were calling people to make the [messages] less unsafe, let's say. But the problem with Telegram that hasn't been solved is that people still use it. I think one of the reasons why it's popular is because it combines a messenger and the news. So, if you want to read the news feed, it's really easy for you to just change the tab and go and chat with someone.

I think all the options like, let's say Signal or whatever, that could be a little bit more secure, did not offer you this opportunity. So you, like can't really read news on Signal or like Facebook is not at all protected in this way. I think there were calls for people using something like Briar or some apps that would be be not tracking the IP or like, but they are quite marginal like that people yeah, it doesn't catch. Like, people would still use something that is easy to install that their friends are using because everybody's communicating to each other, where it's easy to create a chat and so on. So I think yeah, like I said, I agree that this problem has not been solved.

I think now, just more people know how to make their settings a bit more secure, that's it. But people still continue communicating on Telegram.

I think one of the things they're trying to do now is like spreading bots. Pretending that they're making secure bots that are not logging anything but again like how can people check it? If I don't have knowledge, I can't really trust it. If my friend is not like an IT specialist or whatever, we don't know what the servers are and there have already been cases when some oppositional structures were gathering some information from people by bots, and then this information was hacked and like the cops have like all the numbers and all the users who submitted information. And I just wanted to mention that one of the, let's say, hopes of the protest at the moment is the creation of a bot that is called "Victory Bot" and it was started by Tikhanovskaya and by Pol, which is Belarus police in exile. So, they have created the bot, where you are supposed to register, provide information, including where you're living, like basically the actual location, where you work, like what is your profession, in which way you would like to help the revolution? Are you ready to be like more radical or not and so on? And so basically they say as soon as they get like enough users, they would later use the bot to send instructions. Like, let's say they collect five hundred people in one factory who are using the bot and are ready to act, they would just send them the instruction to like block the production or something. But these are promises. I think they started the bought in May and I don't think there are enough people there to for them to start using it. So yeah. I think, for the moment this problem has not been solved.

TFSR: I can't imagine what could go wrong?

Maria: Yeah yeah?

Vasili: Actually, the cops already created a bot that has kind of the same name, having just one letter different and people mistakenly would go to that like Belarusian cop bot and they would register there and the data will go to the police and the police would go and arrest people who just wanted to join the Victory bot, but the wrong Victory.

But I think what I forgot as well is the comparison to Hong Kong. And I think for a lot of us was there was kind of a moment of hope that we

knew experience from Hong Kong, where people were using Telegram and they were using this kind of chatting, quite intensively, to organize for Belarus, it didn't work out at all. Like if we would have a chat with five ten thousand people, this is just the garbage like you can talk to people there. It's just basically like a flow of thought, everybody's just writing what they think but nobody's reading what is going on. This is a complete chaos. As for going on the streets with Telegram, the internet works when there is internet. You know this is like a really simple rule, and what Belarusian government was doing is that it was fencing, basically, the zone of demonstration and switching off the internet there, like mobile internet and stuff. This was playing an important role in actually like preventing this, you know, fast communication that Telegram or Signal app or other apps. And it was working pretty well, and people were sometimes quite confused because they were counting on this kind of like coordination through Telegram, they would end up on the street and they wouldn't have any idea what to do next, like "Okay, we didn't read the Telegram what are the next steps, so we are not going to self-organize and do some stuff. Rather, we are going to be searching for the internet for next half an hour somewhere where there is no internet."

TFSR: We've talked a bit about what repression has look like with, after the fact, people are being surveilled or having their prior images being put into databases and then they're getting arrested for stuff that they were videoed participating in months before. Or joining up on, apps like the victory bought and kind of turning themselves in. But there are a few instances of the international reach of repression of the Belarusian state that I wanted to point to and see if there are other things... Because, obviously, this is an international concern, this is why I wanted to and very happy to have you both on on the phone, because we resistance struggles in different countries against repression and against capitalism and and hierarchies have to be able to learn from each other, and we also have to be able to offer support to each other. We have an understanding like there's so many people, as has been mentioned, who have who are now living in exile in Poland or in Ukraine or in other places. So, it's not just an issue for Belarus and the same repressive apparatuses that are used in all these different places like in Hong Kong or in Belarus are similar they're controlled from outside. They there's a lot to learn anyway, blah blah blah. You get the point!

Two examples of the kind of international reach of the Belarusian regime in trying to grab back Belarusian rebels that I can think of that sort of caught my eye: the downing of the Ryan Air flight over Belarus when the plane was forced to land by the Belarusian government, basically saying that there was a bomb on board which resulted in the whisking away of Roman Protasevich, a blogger who ran some of these Telegram channels. And there was also, in the recent past of the last couple of months, the attempted arrest of Alexei Bolenkov in Ukraine. Can you talk about these and other examples that the international audience might want to know about?

Vasili: So the plane story was one of the major mistakes of Lukashenko and what happened there was that for Protasevich was coming from Athens to Lithuania and when you fly back then from Athens to Lithuania, you would pass Belarus if you fly directly. For Lukashenko, somehow he got this awesome idea, or maybe his KGB or maybe his analyst or maybe his fucking dog got this idea “Hey, let’s arrest this guy!” Although his main enemy, Tikhanovskaya, was actually flying on the same flight the day before, which they do didn’t do any kind of arrest. But they decided that they’re going to do him like they’re, going to arrest him. And what happened was this idea that the bomb and then the Belarusian state [started] trying to play the stupid face with [saying] “Oh, this was actually organized by... Hamas” and they showed the email [claiming to be from Hamas]. And for them, it was a thing from one side [of the Belarusian state saying] “Oh, we are going to show all the position that we have control over your body over your freedom and we can snatch you at any point we want!” But at the same time, what they did here is their they actually attacked the power of the European Union in in the world politics. Because Ryan Air is part of the European influence, European property. Let’s say like that. And that arrest pushed quite a lot of action from the European Union, like the the biggest sanctions and the biggest pressure started happening actually after this airplane action of Lukashenko’s. This is not something that happens quite a lot. I think this was the first and only time when Lukashenko did this kind of crazy action. But they are trying to use the, for example, InterPol databases quite often to get the people back or to try to build up pressure. And that was happening as well with the case of an anarchist from Belarus, Bolenkov, about whom Maria will be talking.

Maria: Alright, but don't you want to the consequences of this downing of the plane?

Vasili: In the sense of what happened to Protasevich, you mean?

Maria: No, no, like in general for the country, politically. It basically was the beginning of all the sanctions that were imposed and also the prohibition on flights from European countries and to European countries? So, basically at the moment, you can't fly out of Belarus, I think, apart from Russia or like Kazakhstan, something like that. And all the tourist planes have to make a curve around Belarus to even go there or land there.

I think if we speak about anarchists who are persecuted by the State...So, in Belarus at the moment, a lot of anarchist have been arrested because of some prior actions or there prior affiliations, let's say. Only a few anarchists were arrested just after the protests and in connection with the protests and there's a case of an international anarchist criminal organization. And it's international because they have found one anarchist organization, it's called Revolutionary Action, that existed in Belarus. Then I think they opened a chapter in Ukraine and they [the Belarusian State] also claimed that ABC-Belarus is also a part of this network according to the police, because the Anarchist Black Cross is supposed to kind of finance all this criminal activity Basically, probably providing solidarity means financing criminal activity. What happened is that they arrested a few groups of people in different cities and, at the moment, they're all in one big case of this "criminal organization." And they face think up to 10-12 years, I don't remember exactly. They are accused of participating in anarchist actions in previous years, so like not really connected with the protests, but they just use the protest and the use the momentum of repression to persecute everyone who could be at some point active in anything in the future.

The cops also issued a list, I think it was like a 25-person-list, with names of people who are potentially involved in this case or need to be questioned as witnesses and Bolenkov was one of them. He lived in Ukraine for like 7 years now, and basically the local security services came to him and tried to give him the special document that they issued (not the court, but they just issued it from their office) saying that he has to leave the country. So, they didn't really extracted him, but there it was clear that they have like cooperation with the security service in Belarus and they

don't want these kind of person in Ukraine. They offered him to just leave the country voluntarily. Basically, now, he's been like trying to appeal it for 4 months. Recently he got the court decision that didn't up happy did not uphold this order, so he can stay in Ukraine, but the cops appealed again. So now he's gonna go to the Supreme Court, so the case is not closed. And here we see, like when I was talking previously about safety of Ukraine for people who flee the country, it is safe as long as you're not an anarchist are not someone who is also being persecuted by the Ukrainian State. So I think the example of Bolenkov is clear about that. This is basically how instrumental cooperation can be between different security services and that you can't really run away from the State, can't really run away from the capitalism or from cop's view. I'm not sure how the case is gonna end, because the pressure from the NGOs and all this kind of concerned public, this is not useful for their Ukrainian police. Probably he's gonna stay but, anyway, I wouldn't imagine my life if I was Bolenkov. It would be really weird to just continue living somewhere where you know the [security] services are interested in you and following you and following what you're doing. It's it's a bit hard.

And also, like you said about the other examples... I was already mentioning a few examples of arresting people in Moscow and Russia, so that's like a kind of the clenches of the regime are there and one of the antifascists from a regional city [Brest], he was persecuted in Belarus for mass riots and he ran away to Moscow. Now he's been in jail for like half a year. The decision was to extradite him, but his lawyer appealed to the European Court of Human Rights and the court said that Russia can't do that because he could face threats to life or health. So, basically for the moment he still is in Moscow, but we don't know like what will happen because Russia can also disobey and doesn't give a shit about this European court decisions.

TFSR: Please correct me if I'm wrong about this, but I think I recall that last July, the [Belarusian] administration released a bunch of long-standing political prisoners that they were that they were holding onto...

Maria: When you said last year, July, I think you mixing it up in with 2015. There were a lot of people arrested in 2010, anarchists included, and also people who protested the 2010 presidential elections. And, back then,

the last pack of people was pardoned in 2015, including Mikola Dziadok, and Igor Oliněvič, who are anarchists and who are in jail again at this time. They were arrested in November of last year.

So, what's happening now, just to mention the pardoning tendencies, Lukashenko is trying to do it again. Although it's really, really, weird because what's happening is that he has a person who was previously a political prisoner and then he was set free, probably on the pretext of cooperation. So now he has formed like, kind of a party or a movement for like democratic change or something like that, and his organization is sending out letters to all the political prisoners and asking them to write a petition for mercy, and some people do [this]. I think it has now about twenty people who has been pardoned starting from March, but either it means that not so many political prisoners are actually writing these petitions for mercy or it means that not all of them get pardoned.

Getting back to prisoners that ABC supports, at the moment, like I said, there is the group of the "international criminal organization", around 9 people I think. [There are] 4 people from that is called "Anarcho-Partisans". These are people there who were arrested in the forests on the border between Belarus and Ukraine, and they are accused of setting fire of cop cars or or some prosecutors offices or police stations in the region, in the provinces. And Mikola Dziadok, he turned out to be a blogger recently. So he had a anarchist Youtube channel or something, and he was decided to stay in the country and he was arrested in a [supposedly] "safe flat" (safe house). They found him by surveillance cameras and face recognition system. And there's a few groups of former football hooligans of the antifascist football clubs that were also participating in the mass riots or attacking cops and stuff like that. So, there are some more individual people who were arrested really recently, because in the late July and August, cops actually attacked like everyone they had on a list or everybody who was even like in contact with anarchists. And some of the people were arrested for fifteen or thirty days, but some actually got to criminally charged for just being in the streets participating in marches. Not really mass riots, but just having a picture of you standing on the roadway is already blocking the traffic or something like that. These are people who now come to my mind but, like I said it's about like it's a little bit less than 30 people.

And just to mention it, there're up to 4,000 people that day prosecution reports about as being prosecuted for mass riots, all for offending the State, offending the president, offending cops online. And a little bit over 1,000 of them are behind bars. So among them are 30 anarchist and anti fascists. And if you realize that the anarchist movement is not so big in the country, the anti fascist movement doesn't really exist at the movement. So, there're pieces of some groups, leftovers of like this antifa hooligan scene, let's say who are not like really organized. We are speaking here about 300, 500 people max, like you are just affiliate themselves with the ideas. And having like 30 of them behind bars out of this number and 1,000 of the millions of Belarus who were protesting means that's our part of the movement got repressed quite a lot, if we speak about like percentage.

TFSR: Can you talk about the upcoming crowd-funding to the ABC Belarus is going to be enacting, how much funds are needed, where the money would be going and how people can and get involved in supporting that?

Maria: Right. So, basically, like I said previously, we are trying to help people financially in the first place with legal fees and care packages to prison. But also with paying for therapy sessions or providing money for people who have spent like a month in jail, for example, but they couldn't work at, but they have to still pay for their flats. Or people who have migrated and need some support, at least in the first 3-6 months. And that's a lot of people. We don't really receive a lot of the nations in Belarus because there's almost no one left, everybody is either in jail or outside of the country. Also, it's not safe to have a personal account where people could donate in Belarus. So most of our donation channels are like electronic wallets or bitcoin, Paypal, or European bank accounts. Which is not to really useful for people in Belarus, because Paypal doesn't work there and European bank account would require a lot of fees. So most of our donations are coming from abroad and each case costs us like around 5,000 Euros or \$6,000 – \$7,000. And these are ongoing. Like, people are going to stay in jail for like 5-10 years if nothing changes. And in order to provide assistance on an ongoing basis, once a year we're putting on a big crowd-funding campaign trying to attract funds. So, it would be really cool if people could spread it, and I think the link was going to appear somewhere in the description to this episode. It would be really cool if you could spread the word, because this is something we really need now.

TFSR: Were there any other things that you wanted to say before we ended this interview?

Maria: Maybe I just wanted to mention that it does sound like a failure and I think it is a failure in a way if we just think about it as that the aim was to change the regime. Let's say that for me, as a participant in all these process of transformation of the society that used to be totally apolitical and totally not interested (also a little bit anti-anarchist, let's say), I saw a lot of good things about it. And I think actually, I'm happy that it didn't change in like a month that people just have another president now and think they leave in democracy. I think it's perfect that people had to go through this process. Of course it's painful for them and it's like maybe doesn't make sense for many of them, but in general it feels that the next time when something like this happens- and it will happen at some point- we've got like a lot of people in the country with experience, with the anger, and with probably not so much illusions about the peaceful protest or whatever. And also people who have experienced solidarity, who have organized solidarity by themselves or who got to know their neighbors, tried some kind of self organizing methods and so on. And especially now they're got really interested in... not really anarchist ideas, I would say, but... Anarchists became people that everybody likes, let's say, without knowing what exactly they're doing, but I think the anarchist movement got like this kind of credit of trust and I think it's important for us.

Vasili: And I think that for me, what is also important is that for a lot of people in the so-called First World, anarchism is some kind of an abstraction that may be leads to some bizarre utopia, but it doesn't have connections to the reality. While for us in the east, it is a reality. We are not just, you know, fighting for some utopia on some island or on some other planet, but rather we're trying to push the anarchist revolutionary ideas towards the society and the moment that we had in 2020 was the moment when the society was transforming as well, under the anarchist influence and under anarchist ideas of horizontal organizing and self-organizing in the neighborhood assemblies and so on and so forth. So, it is really important to remember that we are not standing for some thing that will never happen, rather that we are standing for revolutionary transformation of society that will happen if we believe in that, if we are fighting strong enough. And Belarus is still fighting, and we hope that we will, well, destroy the fucker's regime and we'll live not only in the beautiful

new Presidential Republic, but will live in the country that is giving an example to the rest of the world, how to be free, how to organize, how to smash the authoritarianism!

TFSR: Thank you, Maria and Vasili both for participating in this conversation and sharing your experiences and perspectives, and I look forward to sharing this with the audience.

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