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– *What is your overall take on the objective prerequisites and key incentives for the mass protests against the authoritarian regime that have taken place in Belarus since 2020?*

It is always important to rely on hard facts, but I think that what was abused and therefore had to be restored was a sense of justice. The Belarusian elections left no doubt as to who was the actual winner: Lukashenka had been clearly defeated. But even prior to this outcome there was already a surge of solidarity, namely, people announcing their political preferences with the help of visible signs (to show how many of them were against Lukashenka) while they were standing in line ready to vote at their precincts. However, it is impossible to predict what will tip the scales, in other words, what will result in unified mass action. It may be worthwhile to recollect Fredric Jameson's remarks on the suddenness of a spark that flies between base and superstructure, bringing about actual change. No one knows when this moment will arrive. Jameson's comments have to do with the notion of messianic time in Walter Benjamin, something that completely escapes human prediction. For Jameson it is a way of expressing hope in conditions of utter hopelessness (indeed, such were Benjamin's own circumstances in the 1930s when revolution was inconceivable in any meaningful sense). Even if one does not sympathize with the concept of the messianic (which is too heavily imbued with religious connotations), one has to admit that transformation — in our case collective action — cannot be predicted in any conventional way. The event, continues Jameson, siding here with Derrida, “demands a different preparation and approach”.

However, a public upheaval did occur in Belarus and it undoubtedly was the result of a combination of heterogeneous factors. The worsening economic condition, a new generation of free-minded citizens willing to become part of a different world order (as opposed to the remnants of a former empire with Russia as the dominating imperial center), a sense of violated human dignity, which brings us back to justice with the only qualification that this kind of justice is directly



expressed through action itself — such are some of the important factors. Of course, the exact timing of the event remains basically unpredictable. Again, it is the mentioned spark that sets all the factors in motion, that triggers off manifestations of public discontent. Was it the rigged election itself that served as such a spark? Or the prospect of enduring an unwanted and discredited person for another presidential term? I will not speculate on this issue. But what is absolutely obvious is that the majority of Belarusians refused to put up with the existing state of affairs. The only way in which this sentiment is truly expressed, especially in the absence of a democratic infrastructure, is collective action, and so Belarusians took to the streets. I admire their determination and courage, as well as the forms of solidarity that were invented in the following months when protestors were faced with appalling acts of police violence amid a general crackdown.

– *What was most surprising and striking for you in the Belarusian events throughout last year?*

Everything depends on the perspective. If one follows the development of a protest movement in a foreign country with a similar political regime, one experiences a very special kind of feeling. I would call it enthusiasm, and although the idea itself goes back to Kant and has to do with national audiences watching the grand spectacle of the French Revolution, there is something about this description (and likewise concept) that is relevant today. Obviously, the mentioned audiences themselves were not part of the historical “upheaval”, yet they were very sympathetic towards it. For Kant, the phenomenon of the French Revolution proved that humanity was advancing on the path of progress, while enthusiasm, a modality of the feeling of the sublime, was an “as-if presentation” of Ideas (more specifically those of progress and civil society) that could not be presented directly. What is interesting, however, is that Kant’s famous interpreter Jean-François Lyotard focuses on enthusiasm as deriving from *sensus communis* and therefore as something potentially universal (it is a rule that awaits its universality, which has to do with the faculty of judgment, according to Kant). I will repeat that enthusiasm is a feeling shared by the observers placed on various national arenas. It turns out that in the contemporary world we are often reduced to the same position. Only if in Kant’s case republicanism was the ideal, with us it seems to be the very triumph of democracy.

We Russians were truly enthused and followed the Belarusian events with a heightened sense of solidarity. The most striking thing, perhaps, was the sudden collective upheaval, especially after so many years of what appeared to be a political standstill. The intensity and the duration of the protest, its various creative forms more

reminiscent of public festivities than protest actions in the proper sense of the word – all of this was indeed fascinating. And since the protest became visible via still or moving images, it was breathtaking to see tens of thousands assembling in the Minsk city squares every weekend. This is what you never see exactly with your own eyes while being on the ground, among the protestors themselves, i.e., a bird's-eye view or a drone captured scene, the visualization allowing one to grasp the power of numbers. And such power, in its turn, points to what remains invisible, namely, to the dynamic of the struggle itself, which is articulated in the concept of the multitude. So, one might suggest that today the notion of enthusiasm may be somewhat readjusted or reformulated. The multitude, being expressly a social dynamic, is not restricted by national borders. Rather, it manifests the undulations of social matter that affect national “audiences”, however differently, at the same time. The movement of such matter contains both impact and plasticity, and its macrorhythms are due to transform all possible forces involved.

The speed of social transformation may therefore be predictably slow and uneven. Also, what brings about enthusiasm is far from being a simple psychological reaction. What is implied is the non-subjective dimension of protest, although psychologically we (sympathetic neighbors) cannot but respond.

– What argument does the Belarusian case provide for the future of democracy vs the future of autocracy? The crisis of democracy is ubiquitous these days, even if with various underpinnings in different (e.g., Western and East European) settings. From your perspective, is there anything Belarusians should learn from Westerners and vice versa for the sake of a viable democratic society?

I would like to unite these two questions by addressing the problem of democracy in the most general terms. It seems that there is no alternative to democracy as a form of government, by which I understand not so much a set of institutions as the rule of the people. We live in mass societies and democracy reflects this situation. However, institutionally it always betrays the expectations of the masses. This is perhaps what contemporary scholars had in mind when they spoke of democracy in terms of a promise, as something that remains essentially deferred. To this I must add that protest movements, such as the one in Belarus, plainly show the discrepancy between mass action that develops according to its own logic and the functioning of institutions, albeit democratic ones. Institutions are always normalizing and restrictive, they tend to homogenize complex and multifaceted phenomena, for such is their predestination, so to speak. And the movements themselves are pretty much like waves that come and go, but, most importantly, produce long-time disturbances. Personal political engagement

is indeed a powerful affect, however in terms of desired social transformation its time span may be exasperatingly short. Protestors would surely like to see visible changes right away or at least in their lifetime, but immediately institutions step in (or even worse, lawlessness pure and simple), and all there is left is the feeling of a lost cause or even betrayal.

As for the Belarusian situation, it is changing right before our eyes. Quite recently we have seen the video of a man defending his home with a rifle in his hands and shooting one of the heavily armed policemen who forced his door open. This, of course, is a symbolic act despite its actual circumstances. It serves as a counterpart to the well-known image of Lukashenka armed with a Kalashnikov machine-gun and equipped with a bullet-proof vest. It should be remembered that the photo was taken in August 2020 in response to a mass rally attended by some 100.000 demonstrators and was thus designed to be an act of defiance and intimidation. However, all this time the protests were exclusively peaceful, while police violence only kept intensifying. Although the comparison might seem a bit far-fetched, Belarus reminds one of necropolitics, a situation when human life is both absolutely unprotected and hence unaccounted for. Moreover, according to Achille Mbembe, the author of this concept, necropolitics is a right (exploited by dictators) to expose other people to death. Of course, Belarus is still far from being one of those African countries where such mode of governance prevails. Yet, it is becoming a kind of dark territory in the heart of a democratic Europe that seems to be mesmerized by the spectacle of this very transformation. Now, the counterimage to state violence (as exemplified in Lukashenka's machine-gun), namely, a citizen armed with his rifle, can be read in terms of resistance. Which is to say that human life is no longer dispensable, a mere object of manipulation and abuse. What comes to the fore, then, is struggle, but this time on completely different terms. I don't know if this is the only way to fight dictatorial regimes. But I do know that their power, however cynical and brutal, is in no way meant to last.