

Almira Ousmanova
Belarusian partisans in the Cyber Age

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“We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us” - that is the well known tagline of the international hacker activist, or “hacktivist,” movement “Anonymous.” In Belarus, the phrase “We will not forget, we will not forgive” has got a very particular meaning: by putting this slogan on posters or voicing it during marches, Belarusian citizens remind their government of the crimes it continues to commit against the people.

Yet the slogans are not the only similarities between the hacktivist collective and the Belarusian protest movement: first, both movements are leaderless, decentralized, and are coordinated over the internet. In Belarus, like elsewhere, online coordination plays a crucial role for organizing offline mobilisation. Second, the principle of not disclosing one's identity, characteristic of the Anonymous movement, is also important for Belarusian cyberpartisans. Anonymity is both a matter of personal safety and of the efficacy.

There are also some important factors that make the Belarusian movement different from Anonymous. First, the movement of cyber partisans in Belarus developed under very specific circumstances and in one particular country, wherein unrestricted, unlawful, and unpunished state violence against civilians runs rampant. Indeed, Belarusian authorities persecute not only political leaders (many have been jailed or forced to leave the country against their will), but also opinion leaders (journalists, athletes, actors, artists, musicians), even ordinary citizens, especially those who record video messages critical of the government or express their disagreement in various media outlets. Under these circumstances, the only way to fight for freedom is to become a partisan.

Second, the question of anonymity has acquired a particular (and ambivalent) dimension in the Belarusian context. COVID-19 played a crucial role in the unfolding of the political crisis in Belarus. Although Lukashenko has repeatedly stated that COVID-19 is nothing but a “mass psychosis,” Belarusians felt the real effects of the virus and were outraged by their government’s belated and inadequate reaction to it . Most importantly, however, Belarusian state authorities used the pandemic as a pretext for restricting civil liberties, especially in relation to the presidential elections. For example, international election observers from organisations like the OSCE were not welcomed to observe the polls; independent national observers were not allowed to enter polling stations; lawyers continue to be denied access to their clients who have been detained; all trials in the Belarusian courts during the last few months have been carried out via Skype, and neither the prisoners, nor their relatives, have the opportunity to see each other during the court hearings.

The global pandemic has made mask-wearing in public a hygienic norm in all countries. In Belarus, however, this practice has acquired additional functions and even negative connotations. Enforcement officials like riot police and judges, in absolutely every situation, from recording protesters in the streets, to carrying out perjuries in the courts , to arresting and the surveillance of civilians, always hide their faces behind masks. They were [mandated](#) by authorities to wear masks to protect their anonymity in light of their criminal actions. Conversely, protesters remove their masks in front of riot police, having nothing to hide, holding posters demanding that “All masks should be removed!”

Since not a single case has been brought to trial in relation to the shootings on the streets or tortures in the detention centers, the cyber partisans have taken matters into their own hands and have started [to act](#). To that end, they have hacked several official state department websites (for instance, the Ministry of Internal Affairs website was shut down for 18 days, although the Ministry officially declared that it was just a "technical problem". The site has been hacked again a couple of days ago). Further, Belarusian hacktivists made it their mission to reveal the identities of all those who partake in violent repression against protestors. They have started to publicise the personal data and deeds of policemen and judges on various Telegram channels (including NEXTA, Basta! and the BlackBookBelarus), as a means of holding the authorities accountable for their actions against civilian protesters.

Third, in Belarus, partisan warfare has long been the symbol of protest: the Belarusian people's memory of partisan warfare is strongly associated with the period of Nazi occupation (1941 – 1944) during World War II (WWII). During Lukashenko's rule, partisan warfare has gained a new impetus and acquired new forms.¹ Today, the protest's vocabulary activates the memory of WWII among the population, and Belarusians started to refer to the regime as an "occupier" and the riot police are often called "the chasteners." These references to the Nazi occupation and the methods that partisans used in their fight against their enemies are particularly relevant in today's context, wherein citizens try to defend their right to the city. As in the WWII years, the struggle to showcase symbols of protest in public space (for a white-red-white flag or for new symbols, such as a mural with "DJs of Freedom") acquired a special meaning: the police and local administration spend a lot of energy and resources removing these symbols of resistance, but at night, protest-partisans return these symbols to their place and even multiply them, posting them in new places, not only in the city.

In one of my earlier articles (dedicated to the protests of 2006 and the new forms of emerging political [subjectivity](#) I argued that Belarusian "situationism" invents new forms of protest in response to the specific "situation" in that country. In today's Belarus, any form of peaceful protest is deemed by the authorities to be a violation of the law, and all forms of free expression (though guaranteed by the Constitution) are banned and prosecuted by the state. The image of the *partisan*, the fighter who defies the conventions of battle, is dear to Belarusians. They feel that winning the fight according to the "rules" imposed by the authorities is impossible in a lawless playing field.

Even the way protest marches in Belarus are coordinated and carried out today reflect traditional guerrilla tactics: to gather by small groups nearby the known meeting points, to go ten different routes then showing up together in one place (similar to the striking strong blow), and then again to dissipate, as quickly and unnoticeably as possible, only to return on a different day and in another place. These techniques make it difficult for riot police and military forces to surround, break off or block the protest marches. Indeed, partisan tactics are convenient for peaceful protesters and are challenging for regimes to combat, discrediting the regime's false claims of holding civic disobedience under control. Guerrilla actions exhaust the "enemy" by way of unpredictable actions and steadily "undermining the forces of the opponent, who never knows where and when the next blow will be struck, and so is compelled to maintain his readiness for battle at all times."²

¹ There are media resources and art projects that have been named after "partisan" (<https://belaruspartisan.by> ; <http://partisanmag.by/?cat=104> , etc.).

² Ousmanova Almira (2009) "Flashmob - the Divide Between Art and Politics in Belarus", in *Art Margins* (<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/588-flashmob-divide-between-art-politics-belarus-long-versionarticles>).

Apart from the weekly Saturday and Sunday marches in Belarusian city centres, protest actions also take place elsewhere, in parks and squares, on the outskirts of cities, in the courtyards of residential buildings, near fountains, monuments and so on. Evening “protest-actions” that are organized in residential courtyards often take the form of musical concerts, children play-days, or some other community activity. Yet today, these daily community activities all have a political meaning for the neighbourhood as well as for the police in the area, with the phrase “Every day!” becoming another important protest slogan.

Lukashenko authorities blame the owners of Telegram-channels to be the organisers of the protests, but in actuality, for Belarusians, these channels function mainly as community media. In other words, these channels are used for various organisational aspects related to the protest, such as exchanging news, coordinating collective action, outlining meeting points, voting for the community’s flag, organising financial support for those in need, planning itineraries for safely moving through the streets and squares if they are “occupied” by the riot police, and so on.

After the secret inauguration of Lukashenko on September 23, Belarusians again took to the streets. As before, riot police brutally cracked down on the protesters. In response to the government’s violence against civilians, Belarusian cyber partisans promised an all-out hacker attack from September 24 to 30. Thus, in response to growing state repression, Belarusians have 'turned on' a high-tech partisan regime, with their “(h)acting”, in order to fight against the government’s machine guns, police batons, violence and lawlessness.

The list of political demands from Belarusian protestors has not changed: remove the illegitimate president from power; end violence against civilians; release all political prisoners; and hold a free and fair presidential election, with the participation of international and Belarusian election observers.

Almira Ousmanova – feminist scholar and philosopher, Professor at the Department of Social Sciences, Head of the Laboratory for Studies of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art at the European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania).

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Original EN [Tech Army Set Up by Europe's Last Dictator Turns on Its Creator](#), *The Daily Beast*, September 30, 2020.
RU Переклады: [«Лукашенко, мы тебя предупреждаем»: Как белорусские айтишники повернулись против режима](#), *The Village Belarus*, October 1, 2020.
- Dmitri Gurnevich
Original BE and RU [«Прайшоў 70км палесе, начаваў пад елкай і на вакзале». Былы сьледчы пра цану сыходу зсыстэмы](#)
[Walked 70 km through the woods, spent the night under a Christmas tree and at the train station." A former investigator about the cost of leaving the system], *Radio Liberty Belarus*, October 1, 2020.