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Anti-Regime Activism against Autocracy Support:

Belarusian Anti-Regime Activists, Putin, and the War in Ukraine

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Abstract:
Lukashenka and his rule over Belarus are a striking example of how external autocracy support helps maintain authoritarian regimes. Still, little attention has been paid to the responses of anti-regime activists to autocracy support. Building on political opportunity literature and strategic interactionism approaches, this paper analyses qualitative interviews to study anti-regime activists' perceptions of external autocracy support and with which strategies they respond to it. In the case of Belarus after 2020, this paper finds that anti-regime activists perceive the support by Russian president Putin to Lukashenka as a fundamental constraint to democratic change in Belarus. They respond strategically by engaging in reflection, advocacy, and support for Ukraine's defence against Russia in the hope that Putin's ability to support Lukashenka will be weakened. These findings show how autocracy support functions through the perception of domestic contentious actors. Also, finding that activists might decide to (support the) fight against a third player that provides autocracy support adds nuance to the variety of contentious players' interactions in contexts of internationalized authoritarianism.

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2020, pictures of peaceful marches in white and red went around the world and for a while it seemed as if the protestors all over Belarus were seriously threating the rule of long-time autocrat Alyaksandr Lukashenka – until the Russian president Vladimir Putin announced to send security reinforcement if needed, flew in Russian media staff to replace the striking Belarusian TV crews, and provided financial life support for Lukashenka (Onuch and Sasse 2022b, 67; Kulakevich and Kubik 2023, 10). As a result, most challengers of the regime have been imprisoned or fled the country.

In the past decade, the study of the international dimension of authoritarianism has gained salience. In particular, scholars address the strengthening and promotion of autocracy by external actors (Tansey 2016b, 28). Lukashenka and his rule over Belarus are a striking example of how external autocracy support helps maintain authoritarian systems, but it is not the only one. In Bahrain, a direct military intervention by Saudi Arabia eventually ended the protests of 2011 and secured the rule of the Bahraini monarchy (Hassan 2015, 488). China's supposedly politically neutral development projects strengthen the power of incumbent authoritarian rulers in Angola, Pakistan, and Tajikistan (J. Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010, 25; Karrar and Mostowlansky 2020, 835). This research focuses on the motivations of autocracy supporters and inter-state practices with the receiving regime (Yakouchyk 2019, 152). Less emphasis is placed on contentious action considering the impact of the international dimension of authoritarianism.

Meanwhile, social movement studies investigate transnational activism and movements but pay less attention to what contentious actors do when the authoritarian regimes they challenge engage in international practices such as autocracy support (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005). While the role of Russian support for Lukashenka's crack-down of the mass protests in 2020 is highlighted, the potential response of anti-regime activists has not been focused on. Only a few studies suggest that anti-regime activism persists even in the case of Belarus as self-help networks continue to organize support for political prisoners and diaspora activists advocate for democratic change in exile (Bedford 2021, 810; Aharelysheva 2023). When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2024, some Belarusians even joined the Ukrainian army to fight against Putin and Russian influence together (Hopkins 2022; Kulakevich and Berg 2024).

Therefore, this paper poses the question: *Which opportunities and constraints do contentious actors perceive whilst fighting a regime that receives autocracy support, and*

with which strategies do they respond? To answer this question this paper builds on the concept of autocracy support and theories of political opportunity and strategic interactionism. The impact of autocracy support on contentious action is first conceptualized with political opportunity theory as it helps to understand how specific features of a regime provide incentives and constraints for contentious actions (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 57). Moving on, the approach of strategic interactionism allows to centre the contingent strategic responses to interactions like autocracy support (Jasper 2015b, 10). With these theoretical approaches the paper aims to make sense of the relationship between autocracy support and contentious actors.

It will be argued for the selection of Belarus as an extreme case of autocracy support because here, if at all it can be expected that anti-regime activists recognize and respond to autocracy support (Gerring 2008, 654). Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Belarusian anti-regime activists are well suited to investigate the perceptions and strategic responses to autocracy support but the researcher's own positionality as an "outsider" as well as security concerns must be considered (Rathbun 2008, 691; Gerson and Damaske 2021, 23). Sampling based on criteria derived from desk research about the Belarusian anti-regime movement aims to include diverse perspectives.

The paper finds that the interviewed activists perceive the interactions between Putin and Lukashenka resulting in autocracy support as a strong constraint for contentious action but nevertheless, they respond strategically. To the activists it seems with Putin's financial, security, and political support Lukashenka can uphold his regime. Moreover, the expectation that Putin would not allow any kind of democratic change in Belarus makes contention against Lukashenka pointless from the outset. Exile and the war in Ukraine have emerged as central arenas in which a window of opportunity could be opened for the anti-regime activists. Here they respond to Russia's autocracy support strategically, engaging in reflection and advocacy, solidarity, and support for Ukraine, and fighting Russia's autocracy support and influence over Belarus directly.

A discussion points out the paper's contributions, limitations and generalizability, and avenues for further research. Utilizing the time while waiting for a window of opportunity for strategic reflection and advocacy, supporting another player in the fight or fighting themselves against the autocracy supporter may be considered a strand of contentious actions against the international practices of authoritarian regimes. These findings also contribute to the scholarship of autocracy support emphasizing how autocracy functions

through the perception of domestic contentious actors as opposed to the focus on inter-state channels and tools.

However, it will be acknowledged that the findings are biased towards the perspective of exiled activists and conservative or nationalist activists were not interviewed. It is suggested that those perspectives be included in future research and that the perceptions and strategies of Belarusian activists in Ukraine and the issue of non-violent or violent strategy are paid more attention to. Belarus represents an extreme case of autocracy support which is why the applicability of this paper's findings to other cases cannot be assumed. Nevertheless, they align with the theoretical expectations of the political opportunity scholarship and approaches of strategic interactionism. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to comparatively investigate the perceptions and strategies of other contentious actors challenging a regime that receives autocracy support.

1. Theoretical Approaches

The relationship between contentious action against authoritarian regimes and the support these regimes are receiving is approached from two sides. First, the concept of autocracy support will be introduced, and the motivations, tools, and effects of autocracy support will be discussed. To conceptualize the response of contentious actors, autocracy support will be integrated into the political opportunity structure for contentious action. Finally, the approach of strategic interactionism allows to study the various strategic interactions between autocracy supporter, receiver, and contentious players.

1.1. Autocracy Support

The concept of autocracy support allows to understand what it is exactly regime challengers might be responding to and why they would do so after all. Autocracy support aims to alter and enhance the capabilities of regimes to maintain their power (Yakouchyk 2019, 150). That is why, to fight a regime, challengers can be expected to reject autocracy support and to try to counter it. As will be outlined in the remainder of this section autocracy support is motivated by different interests and functions through several tools and channels.

To understand the response of contentious actors it is important to understand which kind of support specifically they are responding to. Financial support might constrain activists in different ways than security support and different strategies to counter enhanced security capabilities or to take advantage of economic dependencies might be appropriate. While the investigation of motivations and tools of autocracy support is concerned with

mostly inter-state practices, the study of the response of contentious actors in the receiving states adds a new dimension to the functioning of autocracy support.

The phenomenon of external actors (authoritarian regimes as well as democracies) supporting authoritarian regimes in maintaining their regime or actors engaging in authoritarian practices is called autocracy support. Scholars of autocracy support study how external actors influence the preservation of authoritarian power or hinder democratization (Yakouchyk 2019, 147). This scholarship gained salience against the backdrop of the growing role of autocratic states like China in world politics and the simultaneous stagnation of democratization or democratic backsliding (Way 2016, 64). Initially termed autocracy promotion, several attempts of conceptual clarifications have been made regarding motivation and interests, tools and channels, and the effects of autocracy support (Burnell 2010, 5).

The discussion concerning the appropriateness of the term autocracy promotion concerns the motivation for it and whether it is actively pursued. In analogy to democracy promotion, the motivation for autocracy promotion can be based on a normative commitment to authoritarianism (Bank 2017, 1345). While some (mostly) historical cases of ideological support for autocratic regimes exist, several authors find that autocracy support is driven rather by self-serving, economic and geopolitical interests such as in the case of Russian foreign policy in its post-Soviet neighbourhood (von Soest 2015, 4; Way 2015, 695; Bank 2017, 1346). These kinds of interests sometimes trump the policy of autocracy support and can even have unintended liberalizing effects (Obydenkova and Libman 2014, 359).

Autocrats try to preserve their own regime which is why they have an interest in system convergence (J. Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010, 90). The example of other authoritarian regimes contributes to their internal legitimacy (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016, 783). In the case of instability and upheaval in a regime perceived as similar, other autocratic regimes fear democratic spill over and will support fellow autocrats (Odinius and Kuntz 2015, 647; D. Chen and Kinzelbach 2015, 412). As Russia fears losing influence over its perceived sphere of influence in post-Soviet states, supporting authoritarianism reduces the risk of closer ties between EU and neighbouring post-soviet states because democratization is usually part of EU foreign policy conditionality (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 1047).

Autocracy support is also defined by distinguishing deliberate and unintentional actions. Diffusion is understood as unintentional mechanism while learning, support and collaboration count as intentional policies (von Soest 2015, 7; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016, 785). Other authors describe active autocracy promotion as deliberate actions with the explicit aim to hinder democratization or to bolster an authoritarian regime while passive autocracy promotion is a by-product of another self-serving policy (Vanderhill 2013, 8; Yakouchyk 2016, 200).

Tansey rejects these approaches. He argues that the term promotion already implies an ideological motivation to promote authoritarianism for its own sake (Tansey 2016b, 145). Therefore, autocracy promotion cannot include policies which merely effect authoritarian rule as a side effect. Accordingly, he calls for a stricter definition of autocracy promotion which includes only deliberate actions with the intent to bolster autocracy based on a normative commitment to authoritarianism.

Reviewing the conceptual discussion, Yakouchyk introduces the term autocracy support to describe the engagement of external actors aiming to maintain or strengthen the stability of an authoritarian regime without necessarily ascribing to a normative commitment to authoritarianism (Yakouchyk 2019, 150). The term allows to grasp a wide range of actions but does not imply they are successful in supporting autocracy. Importantly, this term allows to capture how also democracies might act as supporters of autocratic regimes (Ambrosio 2014, 332). This paper applies the concept of autocracy support. That means the research interests extends to all cases in which an authoritarian regime or single actor receives support to foster and maintain power regardless of the supporter's motive and potential effect.

1.1.1. Tools, Channels, and Effects

Through different tools and channels autocracy support lowers the costs and increases the capabilities for autocrats to maintain power (Vanderhill 2013, 8; Tansey 2016a, 56). That is why autocracy support is expected to be relevant to contentious actors who are challenging a regime. After all, the capabilities of a regime are what matters to contentious actors trying to remove a regime. With the help of a capable security sector a regime can repress opposition and economic capabilities allow to maintain approval of elites and population. Meanwhile, to overcome a regime its challengers would try to decrease the regime's capabilities or find new strategies to respond to them. If autocracy support helped to maintain or enhance the capabilities of a regime contentious actors are expected

to perceive an impact and might respond to it in order to fight against the respective regime.

In her review, Yakouchyk identifies three channels through which autocracy support works (Yakouchyk 2019, 152). Generally, these channels can be institutionalized within regional organizations. They function as transmission belts and learning rooms for authoritarian strategies and practices as well as provide material resources, information and ideational support (Kneuer et al. 2019, 4; Olar 2019, 4; Debre 2021, 398). Financial support such as subsidies, loans, trade agreements, development aid provides the means to ensure domestic support within the population and elites (Vanderhill 2013, 8; J. Bader 2015, 26; Tansey 2016a, 65). Military support includes arms exports and deployment of troops to increase the capabilities of security forces in maintaining control over territory and population and potentially cracking down on protests (Tansey 2016a, 68; Yakouchyk 2019, 153).

Political support includes countering pressure from other, democratic states and international organizations for example through diplomatic support in the UN or prestigious state visits and recognition of election result (J. Bader 2015, 26; Tansey 2016a, 69; Yakouchyk 2019, 153). In addition, the adoption of flawed election legislation from Russia and alternative election observation mission in the post-soviet space represent important measures of autocracy support (Fawn 2006, 1087; M. Bader 2014, 1357; Tolstrup 2015, 676). Another type of support can be strategic governance and security advice (Vanderhill 2013, 47; Tolstrup 2015, 683).

Besides discussions about its motives and tools, several scholars study the outcome of autocracy support and question its effectiveness. First, autocracy support seems to be strongest in the direct neighbourhoods of supporters such as in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Jackson 2010, 115; Tolstrup 2015, 688; Bank 2017, 1351). Not all measures of autocracy support seem to be successful as Bader finds that out of China's bilateral relations only dependence on exports to China from authoritarian states increased the survival of autocratic leaders (J. Bader 2015, 29).

On a global scale, little evidence has been found for the impact of autocracy support on democratic breakdowns (Brownlee 2017, 1340). Only Belarus stands out as successful case of autocracy support (Vanderhill 2013, 65; Balmaceda 2014, 179; Way 2015, 697; Yakouchyk 2016, 215). Russian autocracy support has been decisive for Lukashenka to consolidate and uphold his regime. In contrast, in many other cases movement towards

democracy was hindered more by domestic conditions than external autocracy support (Way 2015, 696).

1.1.2. Introducing Domestic Conditions and Contentious Response

Looking at the domestic conditions helps to move closer to answering the research question how contentious actors respond to autocracy support for the regime they are fighting against. The strategies of domestic actors and their linkages to an autocracy supporter are important for the effect of autocracy support (Vanderhill 2013, 182; Balmaceda 2014, 181). Especially, the receptiveness of domestic elites impacts the effect of autocracy support (Jackson 2010, 115).

While effectiveness is not the topic here, these authors carve out an important general assumption for this paper. The relevance of domestic conditions for the effect of autocracy support shows that inside the receiving state actors do recognize autocracy support and deal with it differently. Their responses differ and their degree of receptiveness differs. Questioning the effect of autocracy support draws attention to the internal dynamics within the receiving state thereby moving beyond the motivations of autocracy supporters and their inter-state practices.

It is generally acknowledged that regime type, opposition-regime relations and a country's history shape how autocracy support can be utilized by the regime (J. Bader 2015, 29; Bank 2017, 1351). The promotion of Bolivarianism by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez shows how in some cases political and economic crises increased the receptiveness of autocracy support while in others cultural memories of prior authoritarianism represented an obstacle to the adoption of Bolivarianism (De La Torre 2017, 1279). Similarly, Russia's autocracy support has been embedded into strong cultural ties between Russia and Belarus in contrast to the opposition's rejection of Russian autocracy support in Ukraine and Moldova (Tolstrup 2015, 681; Way 2015, 697).

However, little attention has been paid to the response of contentious actors challenging the receiving regime. Vanderhill focuses on elites' linkages to an external supporter and how they use them to their advantage because of their relevance for regime change (Vanderhill 2013, 9). At the same time, the orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 shows that not only elite linkages but the reaction of civil society was decisive for the ineffectiveness of Russia's external influence (Vanderhill 2013, 51; Tolstrup 2015, 683). Anger about Russian influence and counter-reactions to its support for autocrats like in Ukraine show that societies are aware of autocracy support and can respond to it (Way

2015, 698). That is why beyond observing a general awareness and rejection of autocracy support this paper is concerned with the response of contentious actors to the autocracy support for the authoritarian regime they are challenging.

1.2. Autocracy Support in the Political Opportunity Structure for Contentious Action

While transnational movements have received scholarly attention there is less knowledge about what contentious actors do when the authoritarian regimes they are challenging are engaging in transnational activities like autocracy support (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005). For example, several scholars agree that eventually Putin's support for Lukashenka helped him survive the protests in Belarus in 2020 but do not investigate how, if at all, the anti-regime movement responded to that support (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021, 180; Onuch and Sasse 2022b, 4; Kulakevich and Kubik 2023, 2). Similarly, it was evident that an intervention of Saudi Arabian troops in Bahrain in 2011 ended the street protests but there is less knowledge about the protestors' strategies in response to that (Hassan 2015, 488).

To answer this question, this paper first incorporates autocracy support into the political opportunity structure for contentious action. The literature on political opportunities and constraints helps to better understand the response of contentious actors to autocracy support. It emphasizes the dynamic and complex character of contentious action in relation to its political context (Tarrow 2015, 91; Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 57). Considering this interrelatedness of political context and contentious action, this oaoer argues that autocracy support for an authoritarian regime impacts contentious action because it affects the opportunity structure of the regime.

With the political-process-model autocracy support can be thought of in terms of opportunities and constraints for contentious actions. The political-process-model acknowledges the dynamic relation between opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes but places the most emphasis on political opportunities and constraints (Tarrow 2011, 22; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 6 f.). Political opportunities are perceived changes in the political structure of a regime which encourage or discourage contentious action because they lead contentious actors to expect a higher probability of success (Tarrow 2011, 160).

Varying regime types offer different opportunity structures and constraints for contentious actors. Tilly and Tarrow characterize regimes along the axes of capacity and extent (or

lack) of democracy (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 57). Capacity describes the government's ability to exercise control over and intervene in population, activity, and resources. Democracy includes the extent to which the population enjoys broad and equal rights, has a say in policies and the people governing, and is protected from control by the government.

Political opportunities and constraints encourage or discourage contentious action in the following ways (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 59): When there are (1) multiple independent centres of power within the regime challengers of the regime can address the one which they expect to be most prone to listen to them. The (2) more open a regime to new actors the easier it is for challengers to be heard and gain resources. When (3) current political alignments are stable it is more difficult to exploit dependencies and conflicts over power. In contrast, when political alignments are subject to change and elites need the support of the population challengers can try to use that to their advantage. Also, the (4) availability of influential allies can reinforce the calls of contentious action and protect activists from repression. In a regime which (5) represses collective action mobilizing for contentious action and engaging in it means high risks and is discouraged. Changes in these features can present activists with an opportunity and in regimes where shifts occur often their repertoires tend to be more flexible.

Contentious action looks differently in undemocratic high-capacity regimes than in democratic high-capacity regimes. That is because governmental capacity and extent or lack of democracy are reflected in the features of a regime which provide for a political opportunity structure (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 59). Considering that authoritarian states are no monoliths, they shape a variety of different contentious actions (Osa and Schock 2007, 129; X. Chen and Moss 2018a, 667). Contentious actors and movements can act on elite divisions and exploit dependencies (Johnston 2015, 8).

1.2.1. Autocracy Support as Constraint for Contentious Action

Building on the literature of political opportunity allows to ask specifically: *Which opportunities and constraints do contentious actors perceive whilst fighting a regime that receives autocracy support?* With its impact on the authoritarian regime autocracy support is expected to function as constraint of contention action. The reason for this is that autocracy support can strengthen regime capacity and can hinder democratization, the two features from which the political opportunity structure for contentious action emerges (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 59; Yakouchyk 2019, 152). With different tools and channels autocracy support is supposed to maintain and enhance the capabilities of the

authoritarian regime and actors within the regime. Thus, it strengthens the constraining features of an authoritarian regime whose opportunity structure does not provide many openings to begin with.

Autocracy support is expected to alter the (1) power structure and (3) elite alignment of the regime as well as its (5) ability to repress collective action. Aid, cheap oil, or trade agreements enhance the resources and capabilities of factions of elites in a regime (Vanderhill 2013, 17). For example, despite the principle of non-interference in China's foreign policy, in practice providing arms transfers and development projects to regimes where power is monopolized reinforces these power imbalances (J. Bader 2015, 25; Karrar and Mostowlansky 2020, 835). By acquiring the means to suppress opposition and "buy off" relevant parts of the population an authoritarian incumbent or elites in favour of authoritarianism gain relative power in the alignment of the political system (Tansey 2016a, 56).

Election bolstering also shapes the (1) power structure of a regime as well as the (3) alignment of elites and prevents the help of (4) influential allies. In the post-soviet space the election bolstering by Russia prohibits the emergence of strong independent centres of powers which could become influential allies for contentious actors (Tolstrup 2015, 677). By providing strategic and material resources for an autocrat and legitimizing the autocrat's regime amongst others the probability of elite defection and the strength of the opposition decrease. Also, the legitimacy of potential pro-democracy allies is questioned. An example of election bolstering is the political advise and financial assistance to former Ukrainian president Yanukovych in 2004 through which Russia tried to strengthen his capabilities in the run-up to the presidential election (Vanderhill 2013, 47).

Based on the literature on political opportunity, the perception of and knowledge about the type and degree of autocracy support is expected to signal decreasing opportunities and increasing threats to contentious actors. As autocracy support strengthens the leaders of the regime and allows them to maintain support by elites, contentious actors would perceive even fewer opportunities to act because the alignment of elites with authoritarian leaders seems stable. Finding allies will be difficult when all elites are aligned with the regime. Like in the case of the Belarusian political system shaped by the energy trade with Russia this means that there are few if any divisions and factions within the regime that could be exploited by contentious actors (Balmaceda 2014, 181; Johnston 2015, 8).

Moreover, the anticipated costs for collective contentious actions would rise when activists expect the regime's security forces to be more capable to crack-down on them because of autocracy support. Weapons exports as well as advice and assistance to the security forces of a regime help it to project its power over the territory and population (Tansey 2016a, 68). In 2011, in Bahrain, a direct military intervention by Saudi Arabia after local security forces had retreated secured the power of the Bahraini monarchy and deterred future protests (Hassan 2015, 488). In anticipation of high risk of repression opposition tends to stay clandestine (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 58). Also, even the sheer threat of military intervention as in the case of Russia's announcement to potentially provide its own security forces functioned as reinforcement for the Belarusian security forces and severely raised the risks of being beaten and detained for the Belarusian protestors in 2020 (Kulakevich and Kubik 2023, 10).

1.2.2. Contentious Action Despite Constraining Autocracy Support

However, in contrast to the expectation based on the political opportunity literature that autocracy support would be perceived as constraint, contentious action in states receiving autocracy support persists. Activists adapt their tactics and choices of challenging regimes. In Ukraine, local civil society pushed back on Russian support for the authoritarian president Yanukovych. Even in the case of Belarus where autocracy support seems decisive anti-regime movement continues since the crack-down of the mass protests in 2020 (Way 2015, 699; Kulakevich 2022; Aharelysheva 2023; Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023, 140).

Apparently, autocracy support is not exclusively perceived as constraint. Situating autocracy support within the political-process-model offers important perspectives to understand its impact on the political opportunity structure for contentious action and how it can be perceived as a constraint by activists. However, continuing contentious action suggests that there must be other or more differentiated perceptions of autocracy support than it being only a constraint to activists. Looking for contentious action in a context of autocracy support from the perspective of political opportunities can only partly answer the research question.

It seems, deducing activists' opportunities and constraints only from the impact of autocracy support on the political context and regime features overlooks important varieties in the perceptions of and responses to autocracy support. Besides perceiving autocracy support as a constraint or as source of higher costs, contentious actors seem to have the impression that there are in fact more choices in response to autocracy support

than to become discouraged. Continuing activism in cases like Ukraine in 2004 and current Belarus shows that underneath the contextual opening or constraining of an opportunity lays another variety of perceptions, choices, and strategies of contentious actors.

1.3. Autocracy Supporters, Contentious Actors, and Regime Players in Strategic Interaction

To grasp the relationship of autocracy support and contentious action in all its variety the approach of strategic interactionism offers further concepts that go beyond assessing regimes and their political opportunity structures. For both the political-process-model literature and approaches of strategic interactionism, opportunities and constraints are important. The crucial difference between the two approaches lays in their understanding of the emergence of opportunities and constraints. Tilly and Tarrow think of opportunities and constraints as something contextual and external to the movement and contentious actors, located and produced by (changes in) features of a respective regime (Tarrow 2011, 33; Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 59).

In contrast, interactionist approaches understand opportunities and constraints as resulting from continuous interactions between contentious players, state players and others in a variety of arenas (Jasper 2011, 23). Here, states and regimes are not treated as the context which defines opportunities and constraints but only the states' interactions with contentious players create new opportunities and constraints. That means that when opportunities emerge as result of players' interactions the context of contentious players are other players' choices and structure is then built from many historic choices and interactions (Jasper 2011, 17).

Individual as well as compound players have goals and choose actions strategically in accordance to it (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015, 10). Arenas provide rules, resources and infrastructure which players can take advantage of or try to change (Jasper 2015b, 14). Players are each audience to the other and interpret the other's actions and interactions (Jasper 2015a, 10). In pursuing their goals in the interaction with one another, strategic dilemmas arise when players realize trade-offs between their choices (Jasper 2015a, 20). Also, players utilize different skills and resources in different arenas and can switch to another arena in hope to be more successful (Jasper 2011, 18).

Interactions are not free floating and random but patterned and subsequential because players possess and use historically and culturally situated resources and capabilities

(Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, 295). Constraints come into play when they are enacted by other players and often players experience only little choice in their interactions (Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, 299). It is through and in interactions that players experience differences between them and form beliefs about what is possible for them and what is not.

Following the interactions, perceptions, and choices of different players in a variety of arenas, strategic interactionism ideally complements this paper's interest on contentious actors' responses to autocracy support. Instead of merely perceiving autocracy support as constraint, the focus turns towards a variety of strategic players engaging in autocracy support and contentious action. Autocracy support appears as interaction which alters the perceptions and resources of both the involved regime and contentious players and thus how both choose to interact next time (McGarry et al. 2016, 635; Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, 296). Tracing the sequences of strategic interactions of the players engaging in contentious action and autocracy support draws attention to their goals, capabilities, and beliefs and leaves room for their agency, and thus how different players might make different choices (Jasper 2015b, 20; Gheyle and Rone 2023, 522). It allows to grasp a rich and dynamic picture of contentious action responding to autocracy support.

1.3.1. Strategic Responses to Autocracy Support

Conceptualizing autocracy support and contentious action in terms of strategic interactions of different players, this paper moves further and asks *with which strategies to contentious players react to autocracy support for the regime they are fighting against?* The authoritarian regime, its external autocracy supporter(s) and anti-regime activists constitute different players with different goals and capabilities. Autocracy support is considered as an interaction of players from two different regimes which results in support, thus increasing financial, security and, political capabilities for at least one of them.

Meanwhile, contentious players interact with regime players in arenas such as protests, courts, prison, and the media. Increasing capabilities of the regime players might give them a relative advantage in the interaction with contentious players. Large financial resources might allow a regime to buy-off relevant parts of the population and stronger security forces might be able to more effectively crack-down on protestors or trace dissent. In some cases, for example when troops from Saudi Arabia intervened in Bahrain in 2011 to stop protests, players of the regime providing support might even directly interact with contentious players challenging the receiving regime (Hassan 2015, 488).

When thinking of autocracy support for an authoritarian regime in terms of at least two regime players who interact continuously with the result of support for one of them, their changing relationship, their interests, and expectations they project onto the other take centre stage. An autocracy supporter might aim to maintain influence over a region, legitimize their own regime type or hope for economic benefits and because of that choose to provide support to another authoritarian regime (von Soest 2015, 4; Way 2015, 695; Bank 2017, 1346). The specific support that is given results from previous interactions with the receiving regime.

Both regime players enter their interactions with their own interests and needs or willingness to accept support. A protest as interaction between state players and contentious actors might only lead an authoritarian leader to choose to interact with an autocracy supporter because they perceive it as a threat to their rule (Jackson 2010, 115). Meanwhile, the autocracy supporter's perception of the interactions between contentious players and state players might shape the kind of support they choose to offer and services they expect in return. The receiving player might face a strategic dilemma in choosing between receiving support to maintain their power and having to agree to unfavourable concessions in the own self-serving interests of the autocracy supporter (Preiherman 2021).

This interaction of autocracy supporter and players of another authoritarian regime would have impacts for future interactions of state players and contentious players. The state players' choices to provide and utilize autocracy support might constrain the contentious players' ability or willingness to interact with regime players. Support for the security forces would mean an even bigger advantage for them over protestors as in the case of Belarusian mass protests in 2020 (Kulakevich and Kubik 2023, 10). Contentious players might decide that the expected costs resulting from the protest interaction are too high and draw back from protesting (Onuch and Sasse 2022b, 4).

Still, the contentious players' perception of the interaction between the autocracy supporter and the state players they are challenging might result in adaptions of their strategy and choices of tools and goals. Thinking of protests as interactions between different contentious players means they facilitate the creation and sharing of information and mutual learning which can transform the forms and goals of future protests (Della Porta 2011, 265 ff.). The recognition that public spaces as arena for protests are closed to them because an autocracy supporter decided to back up the domestic security forces

might lead to the choice of another more covert arena to challenge regime players. The interaction of regime players and autocracy supporter could also be perceived as leading to dependency of the regime players and exploited as weakness of the regime (Moss 2014, 275; Johnston 2015, 7).

1.3.2. Perceptions of Autocracy Support and Strategies in Response

This section discussed the concept of autocracy support and the theoretical approaches of political opportunities and strategic interactionism to conceptualize the response of contentious actors to autocracy support for the regime they are challenging. First, the concept of autocracy support allows to understand its financial, political, and security tools (Yakouchyk 2019). The scholarship on the domestic conditions of autocracy support carves out the important insight for this paper that domestic and societal actors can recognize and respond to autocracy support (Jackson 2010, 115; Vanderhill 2013, 43; Way 2015, 699; De La Torre 2017, 1279). As autocracy support enhances the capabilities of an authoritarian regime challengers of the regime are expected to reject autocracy support.

The literature on political opportunity structures centres the impact of the political context and regime types on contentious action. With that it provided a starting point to conceptualize how autocracy support shapes contentious action against an authoritarian regime. The features of a regime provide a political opportunity structure with encourages or discourages contentious action (Tarrow 2011; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Through enhancing the capabilities of a regime autocracy support may impact the political opportunity structure and is expected to be perceived as constraining for contentious action.

However, contentious action in authoritarian regimes which receive autocracy support persists. Contentious actors continue to fight regimes or actors that receive autocracy support as cases like Ukraine and Belarus show (Way 2015, 699; Kulakevich 2022; Aharelysheva 2023; Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023). That leads to the conclusion that discouragement cannot be the only response to autocracy support. Beyond the perception of autocracy support as constraint a variety of other responses are expected to appear.

To grasp this variety of contentious actors' responses to the dynamics of autocracy support the approach of strategic interactionism was introduced. In this perspective, autocracy support is thought of as strategic interaction of at least two regime players who simultaneously interact with contentious players. Each of these players perceives the others' interactions and strategically adapts their tactics and goals for subsequent

interactions. Thinking of autocracy support and the response to it in these terms allows to grasp a rich picture of the variety of perceptions and reactions to autocracy support.

It is important to bear in mind that it is assumed that it is the contentious players' perception of autocracy support which shapes their perceptions of opportunities and constraints as well as strategic responses as opposed to an effect for example on authoritarian leadership duration. Opportunities do not exist objectively but they can be perceived differently and might then be attributed to mobilizing for a political issue (Tarrow 2011, 164). There is no direct link between autocracy support and constrained contentious action but how contentious actors perceive autocracy support might discourage them. As contentious players, receiving and supporting authoritarian regimes are each audience to each other they interpret their interactions and contentious players are expected to respond to autocracy support based on their interpretation of it (Jasper 2015b, 10).

The literature on political opportunity structure and approaches of strategic interactionism provided different perspectives to think about the response of contentious actors to autocracy support for the regime they are fighting against. Understanding autocracy support as altering the political opportunity structure of an authoritarian regime the response would be its perception as opportunity or threat. In terms of strategic interactions, a response to autocracy support is thought of as contentious players' strategies with which they react to autocracy support. With these specifications of the expected responses to autocracy support this paper sets out to answer the research question: *Which opportunities and constraints do contentious actors perceive whilst fighting a regime that receives autocracy support, and with which strategies do they respond?*

The following sections lay out the case of Belarusian anti-regime activism after 2020 and discusses the application of qualitative interviews. Moving on, the empirical results concerning activists' perceptions of autocracy support and the strategies they respond with will be presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings' contributions to the literature, their limitations and potential broader applicability. Finally, a summary of the paper is provided.

2. The Case of Belarus after Mass Protests in 2020

Belarus appears as a starting point worthwhile to exploring the reactions of contentious actors to autocracy support. The literature on autocracy support identifies several states

which engage in autocracy support including China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and regimes which receive autocracy support for example Bahrain, Burma, Tajikistan, or Syria (Way 2016, 65). While they question the effectiveness of autocracy support in many of these cases, scholars agree on the decisive effect the longstanding Russian autocracy support has had for Lukashenka's authoritarian rule over Belarus (Vanderhill 2013, 65; Balmaceda 2014, 179; Way 2015, 697; Yakouchyk 2016, 215). This particular durability and effect of Russian autocracy support for Lukashenka make Belarus an extreme case which allows best for an explorative investigation of the open-ended interactions surrounding autocracy support (Gerring 2008, 654). It might not be representative for many cases of autocracy support considering its continuity and decisive effect. Though if at all, the perception of and responses to external autocracy support would be observable in a case like Belarus.

2.1.   Russian Autocracy Support for the Regime of Lukashenka

Since the beginning of Lukashenka's presidency in 1994 Russian autocracy support has been vital for his authoritarian rule. It helped Lukashenka to first consolidate his power and then to maintain his regime preventing democratization (Levitsky and Way 2010, 24; Vanderhill 2013, 75). In the efforts to remove the powers of the Belarusian parliament in 1996, Lukashenka was backed up by the visits of Russian government officials (Way 2015, 697). In 2006, two years after the Orange revolution in neighbouring Ukraine, Russia engaged in election bolstering to prevent another revolutionary scenario (Tolstrup 2015, 684). The Belarusian opposition was discredited in Russian media and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB) jointly targeted popular activists. In contrast, Lukashenka was portrayed positively in the Russian media and Kremlin politicians protected him in European and international diplomatic forums.

Besides ideological and political support, economic aid plays a main role in maintaining Lukashenka's power. Maintaining his financial capabilities allowed him to prevent economic crisis and the erosion of public support (Vanderhill 2013, 75; 2014, 279). In the 1990s and 2000s, Russian financial assistance accounted for 20-30 % of the Belarusian GDP (Way 2015, 697). Belarus has been granted loans from Russia as well as the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 1052). In particular, energy deals including oil exports and subsidies are a resource for Lukashenka to provide economic stability and welfare to the population of Belarus including low unemployment, and prices, free healthcare, and education (Balmaceda 2014; Vanderhill

2013, 68). In this informal social contract, relatively high welfare was provided in exchange for political passiveness (Douglas 2020, 4).

With supporting Lukashenka's regime Russia pursues rather self-serving interests. In the 1990s it was a popular move for the Russian government to support Lukashenka as strong ties between Russia and Belarus resonated with the elite's and society's nostalgia for the soviet union (Way 2015, 697). Also, Russian private and state-run businesses receive access to profitable assets in Belarus (Yakouchyk 2016, 216). Moreover, Putin fears potential diffusion effects on his own regime in case of liberalization in Belarus (Yakouchyk 2016, 215). To maintain geopolitical dominance over what Russia perceives as its sphere of influence, Russia invested a lot to include Belarus into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) thereby supporting Lukashenka's authoritarian rule (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 1052).

Still, the relationship between Lukashenka and Putin has not been without tension. Russian autocracy support rests on conditionality (Vanderhill 2014, 77). In exchange for granting support Putin wants to influence Lukashenka's policies, access to Belarusian assets and support for Russian foreign policy. Lukashenka is constantly faced with the dilemma that his power is dependent on Russia, but is still trying to get the best deal out of the relationship with Russia (Vanderhill 2013, 73). For example, in the implementation of the EAEU Russia had to make great concessions including granting Belarus privileged access to Russian crude oil to convince Lukashenka for Belarus to join the union and accept new customs codes (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 1053).

2.2. Belarusian Contentious Action

While Lukashenka has been receiving autocracy support from Russia, the Belarusian democratic opposition appeared fragmented. It had only been able to mobilize for sporadic protests following electoral fraud in 2006 and 2010, and was unable to channel discontent for example about the so-called Parasite-Law from 2017 into broader political movements (Kulakevich 2014, 900; Ash 2015, 1045; de Vogel 2022, 4; Bedford and Vinatier 2019, 693). Meanwhile, Lukashenka's regime was able to learn new repressive tactics and to quell protests in advance (Korosteleva 2012, 42).

The protests in 2020 were in stark contrast to protest activities in previous years. Economic decline and the disastrous management of the Covid-pandemic led to an erosion of the implicit social contract (Dryndova 2021, 26; Krawatzek and Langbein 2022; Hall 2023, 22). Instead, local self-help groups nurtured trust within the society and

telegram groups facilitated early mobilization for campaign rallies and ensuing protests (Mateo 2022, 37). In response to the electoral fraud on 9 August 2020, mass protests broke out all over Belarus and continued until late autumn (Onuch and Sasse 2022b, 3). Belarusians across the whole country and of different social classes participated and women became the face of the uprising (Šparaga 2021). The riot police OMUN reacted with arbitrary arrests and violence to suppress the protests which led to hundreds being injured and several deaths (Viasna 2021, 2). Almost all NGOs were liquidated, public figures as well as grass-roots activists and ordinary people fled the country (Kulakevich and Kubik 2023, 10; Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023, 140).

Several scholars point out that, eventually, Russia's support for Lukashenka was crucial to his survival. Putin provided financial, ideological and security support for Lukashenka while the EU was slow to introduce sanctions (Onuch and Sasse 2022a, 67). After a short period of muted responses to the mass protests by both Russia and the EU, Putin announced he would provide back up for the Belarusian security forces if needed and Russian security officials advised their Belarusian counterparts (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021, 180). Also, Putin sent Russian media professionals to replace the striking Belarusian TV crews and warned the West against interference in Belarus (Kulakevich and Kubik 2023, 10). Moreover, he granted Lukashenka a loan of $1.5bln.

Lukashenka's power is now almost entirely dependent on Russia. Before 2020, Lukashenka pursued a multi-vector foreign policy turning towards improving relations with the EU to decrease his dependency from Putin (Pierson-Lyzhina 2021, 634). In times when he did not feel threatened internally, fulfilling some of the EU's conditions allowed for greater leverage vis-à-vis Russia (Sejersen 2019, 508; Preiherman 2021). Now, after the crack-down on the mass protests in 2020 Lukashenka is diplomatically isolated. He allowed the Russian army to utilize Belarusian territory to attack Ukraine in February 2022 and his dependency on Russia has increased so sharply some observers question Belarusian sovereignty as a state (Dryndova 2023).

While the emergence, socio-economic patterns and political dispositions of the protests have been addressed there is less understanding of ongoing anti-regime activism and how activists respond to Putin's autocracy support for Lukashenka (Onuch 2020; Douglas et al. 2021; Onuch and Sasse 2022a). A few studies suggest that activists inside and especially women turn towards self-help and decentralized local groups instead of organizing mass protests (Bedford 2021, 810; Aharelysheva 2023). In exile, diaspora

organizations and institutions such as the Coordination Council founded by Tsikhanouskaya represent the anti-regime movement advocating for Belarus (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021, 9; Kulakevich 2022).

On Belarusian Freedom Day in 2024, Tsikhanouskaya spoke out against Russian imperialism and aggression and called for the defence of Belarusian independence (RFE/RL 2024). Before, already Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sparked anti-war actions, though the Belarusian anti-war opposition does not seem to meet the expectations of Ukrainians (Viasna 2023; Kuznetsov 2023). Analysists and interviews with Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine suggest that Putin is considered a common enemy (Hopkins 2022). The disruption of Russian military traffic might be one way the Belarusian democratic opposition is fighting Russian imperialism and control over Belarus (Kulakevich and Berg 2024). Investigating the case of Belarus will shed more light on how Belarusian anti-regime activists perceive Russian autocracy support and with which strategies they respond.

3. Qualitative Interviews to Study Strategic Interactions of Contentious Players, Lukashenka, and Putin

To study the responses of Belarusian contentious actors to Russian autocracy support ten semi-structured interviews with Belarusian anti-regime activists were conducted in December 2023. In comparison to document analysis or surveys qualitative interviews are well suited to investigate the perceptions, choices, and actions of activists (Della Porta 2014, 230). Surveys among activists or polished public documents of Belarusian diaspora organizations might shed some light on final strategy and choices. Qualitative interviews can move beyond that and centre the internal dynamics, the perceptions, and the very processes of reflection, strategizing and decision making of activists (Rathbun 2008, 691; Blee 2013, 96). They bring to light a variety of dynamics and the subsequential emergence and development of movements resulting from continuous interactions of a variety of players instead of focusing on outcomes for example by cataloguing protest events (Gerson and Damaske 2021, 3).

A qualitative interview is an interaction in itself and the dynamic of this interaction shapes the result, the knowledge and insights that emerge from the interview. Through the relation and dialogue between them, the interviewer gains a specific insight into the world of the interview partner and how they perceive it (Fujii 2017, 8). Dimensions of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee including power relations, degree of closeness

and different discussion cultures impact on how the interview proceeds (Helfferich 2014, 564).

That is why the data received through interviews cannot be judged by the same standards as statistical data. Intersubjective comprehensibility is not possible as another researcher will not receive the exact same answers (Kaiser 2020, 291). Instead, the procedure of the data generation for this paper will be outlined with the greatest transparency possible which allows to question how the results of this paper came about and thus, to assess their credibility (Tracy 2010, 837).

3.1. Positionality and Sampling

To begin with, a researcher's positionality, their features of identity, experiences, and skills shape their choice of research topics, perspectives on the topic and approaches to study it. It requires the researcher's reflexivity to become aware and question their motives for the respective research as well as differences in power and social status. This reflexivity allows to address and potentially minimize biases because the potential emergence of surprising or disconfirming results is acknowledged (Gerson and Damaske 2021, 23). It also contributes to generate trust for frank and honest relationships with interview partners (Fujii 2017, 15).

An obvious dimension in the interaction was my status as "outsider" despite having engaged with the Belarus and Eastern Europe throughout the years of my studies and staying in touch with personal and professional contacts from Belarus. Many enthusiastic responses to my call for interview partners and explicit expressions of activists led me to believe that they were quite happy about the fact that an "outsider" was interested in their work. In fact, I got the impression that not being from Belarus, Ukraine, or even Russia opened the doors for very honest and nuanced explanations of their perceptions of the political situation. I was in the position to ask more seemingly profane questions about Russian influence in Belarus that seemed so obvious to them, that a Belarusian would have been expected to know.

Even more importantly, most of the interviewed activists expressed disappointment or frustration about a sense of feeling forgotten and overshadowed by the war in Ukraine. Some of them quickly put their struggle into perspective by emphasizing that of course they condemn the war. A few were also very outspoken in their rejection of a certain imperialistic world view of Russians. I can only guess that in a conversation with a

Russian or Ukrainian researcher, Belarusian activists would have addressed these sensitive issues with more restraint.

Being a white woman with an academic background probably led me to feeling closer to my interviewees despite being an outsider and interviewing them in English. Working and living in the same "bubble" of activism, NGOs, and academia quickly created a mutual understanding of their and my work and why I wanted to interview them. Especially, some of the female activists, even ones I had not known before shared with me very personal statements of their feminist approaches to activism and what it is like for them as a young woman in politics. This allowed me to understand more precisely a gender dynamic in the anti-regime activism while in an interview with another, potentially male, researcher the activists might have emphasized other dimensions of their activism more.

Qualitative interviews offer deep insight, but the usually small samples of interviewees do not provide enough data to test for statistical significance. That is why, this paper relied on theoretical sampling which means that ten interview partners were selected strategically to represent a variety of activists with different political backgrounds engaged in different political activities (Della Porta 2014, 240; Gerson and Damaske 2021, 46). To this end, I created a catalogue of criteria including important issues of activism like labour, youth, eco, church, or anarchist activism that I identified through the literature on contentious action in Belarus. Participation or membership in more or less formalized structures such as the coordination council, political parties, diaspora organizations or other political groups, gender balance and location in- and outside of Belarus were other criteria. Eventually, my sample included more female activists than male activists which created a gendered perspective. This bias however reflects the character of the protests and ongoing activism since women were and are the face of the movement (Šparaga 2021).

To find interview partners, I first relied on snowball sampling and then directly asked people to cover all the above-mentioned sampling criteria. Snowball sampling can be helpful in a case like Belarus where many activists tend to stay anonymous and work very decentralized. However, it also creates bias because it is based on potentially rather homogeneous social networks (Gerson and Damaske 2021, 63). To minimize this risk, I forwarded a call for participation among several contacts from different fields such as academia, party politics, NGOs and grassroots activists and asked them to circulate it in

their networks as well. I can conclude that the call reached a rather wide audience because in their response to me some activists referred to people who had forwarded them the call that I did not even know myself. As not all criteria could be covered by the responses to my call, I proceeded to approach appropriate organizations. Finally, before the interviews I asked the participants to fill out a short questionnaire about their educational and political background to understand potential biases and limitations of the sample.

In fact, the scope and representativeness of my sample remains limited. Because of timing issues, I was not able to speak to an activist representing the role of the church even though it remains relevant for the anti-regime movement. Also, only during the interviews I realized that the activists I spoke with perceive more right-wing tendencies not necessarily as a positive but a relevant faction. Not being able to interview someone representing this tendency and someone being active within the church probably overlooks more conservative perceptions and strategies.

There is also a blind spot due to language barrier and the rather homogeneous socio-economic background as well as a strong bias towards the perspectives of activists in the diaspora. Issuing the call for participation in English and conducting the interviews in English probably prevented some people from participating. Notably, all my interviewees had some kind of academic background and since they were able to leave the country and find a new perspective in exile it can be assumed that they have similar well-off socio-economic backgrounds. Also, despite highlighting the security measures I would take I talked to fewer activists inside than outside of Belarus. My preparatory research as well as other observations show that it is at least questionable whether activists inside of Belarus would have the same perceptions and strategies as activists in the diaspora (Chulitskaya and Bindman 2023, 141).

I tried to account for these blind spots and biases by asking my interviewees not only for their own assessments but about what they think others think and how they perceive of a potential split between inside and outside. To add a more materialist perspective I interviewed an activist from a labour union organization and encouraged remarks about socio-economic issues by other activists. Still, I do not claim to find all perceptions of autocracy support for Lukashenka's regime and all strategies in response to it and the sample allows only for very small-scale comparisons between them. Instead, the paper sets out to explore some perceptions and strategies and may provide a starting point for

further categorization if autocracy support proves to be relevant for the activists fighting Lukashenka.

3.2. Interview Guideline and Qualitative Content Analysis

The interview guideline was designed with the aim to generate some structure to focus on the specific relationship between contentious action and autocracy support. Meanwhile it was supposed to leave enough room to explore nuances of perceptions, reflections and processes of decision making. Eventually, the balance tilts somewhat towards less structuring as the nature of this paper is more explorative (Della Porta 2014, 234).

The guideline starts off with a baseline question to speak about the experiences during the protests 2020. This was to develop a starting point from which to ask about the two main concepts continuing activism and Russian autocracy support as well as the war in Ukraine. These main questions would be asked in every interview, but their sequence was flexible, and they entailed several probes and follow ups which could be asked according to the specific interview situation. This way the guideline allowed for systematic and comparable data collection but left room for individual perceptions and emotions (Gerson and Damaske 2021, 68).

The interviews were conducted in December 2023 and lasted between one hour and one hour and a half. I conducted all interviews online and in English. Naturally, the online setting does not create the same degree of closeness as meeting in person. However, meeting a variety of Belarusian activists in person who are now located all over Europe was not feasible. To counter the inhibiting effect of online meetings at least somewhat, I started every interview out with telling the interviews a bit about myself before I dived into asking them questions.

The systematic analysis following the approach of Kuckartz allows to comprehend and potentially question the research findings of this paper. I manually transcribed and analysed the interview material with the help of MAXQDA. A consistent coding system allowing for comparison was developed based on Kuckartz's suggestions for qualitative content analysis and applied to all transcripts (Blee 2013, 3; Della Porta 2014, 234; Kuckartz 2018, 101).

First, I deduced three broad categories from the interview guideline – *Experience of the Protests in 2020*, *Russian Autocracy Support and the War in Ukraine*, and *Ongoing Anti-Regime Activism*. These categories were applied for the first round of coding. During the second round of coding, I inductively developed sub-codes from the sections coded

within only the categories *Russian Autocracy Support and the War in Ukraine*, and *Ongoing Anti-Regime Activism*. I decided to develop sub-codes only within these latter categories because the experiences during the protests were the answer to my first question of the guideline which rather functioned to kick off the conversation than to answer the research question. Perceptions about Russian autocracy support won during the protests would show up in the category *Russian Autocracy Support* anyway.

With the help of code-relations-tables and MAXMaps generated by MAXQDA I developed the complete coding system. During its development, I grouped sub-codes together in more abstract sub-categories. The extent to which I differentiated the categories depended on their relevance to answering my research question. For example, I did not further develop sub-codes in the code Security and Repression while I distinguished three different sub-codes within the code Putin's Support for Lukashenka. The final coding system was then applied in a third round to make sure all transcripts undergo the same analysis. Visual tools of MAXQDA helped to grasp the relations between the codes of *Russian Autocracy Support and the War in Ukraine* and *Ongoing Anti-Regime Activism*.

3.3. Ethics and Safety

In an authoritarian context like Belarus contacting and interviewing activists as well as the publication of research on the anti-regime resistance can mean personal harm to activists (Janenova 2019, 4; J. Grimm et al. 2020, 10). Security considerations were taken very seriously. After all, it cannot be ruled out that the political environment or personal situation of interviewees further decreases or that the Belarusian regime will try to target activists abroad (Zinets and Chornokondratenko 2021; J. J. Grimm 2022, 308).

To accommodate this risk, personal information, locations, and times are anonymized so that no inferences about individuals can be made. I used encryption features like PGP keys for communication and the interview process, accommodated to the activists' suggestions and preferences regarding messaging tools and adapted to their routine of deleting chats. Transcription was conducted manually so that no data would be transferred to opaque private companies and cloud systems. Finally, all recordings and personal information were stored only locally.

Research on social movements and protests might produce knowledge which regimes and security authorities can utilize in their strategy of repression (ipb 2022). As the regime in Belarus still imprisons people it can be assumed that its security forces try to learn as

much as possible about their enemies. Research about the activism of regime challengers represents a dilemma between focusing on the under-researched topic of Belarusian activism but possibly providing insights that can be used against activists. I decided in favour of this research because all activists and experts I exchanged with appreciated more research about activism in Belarus and I provided as much information as possible for them to make an informed choice about their participation.

4. Empirical Analysis

The following section proceeds to present the empirical results of this paper to answer which opportunities and constraints Belarusian activists perceive in the fight against Lukashenka's regime while it receives autocracy support and with which strategies they respond. The first section lays out how the activists perceive Lukashenka's and Putin's interactions, the resulting support for Lukashenka's regime and the overarching Russian influence on Belarus. The findings of the second section suggest that they perceive Russian autocracy support and Russian imperialism as a fundamental constraint to activism for change in Belarus.

The third section examines how for the activists interviewed the war in Ukraine emerged as a central arena in which a window of opportunity could be opened. In the activist's assessment Russia's autocracy support hinges on the stability of Putin's regime which is why they hope for a Ukrainian victory to weaken Putin. Moving on, the section highlights that Belarusian anti-regime players respond strategically by using the time of waiting for reflection and advocacy. Next, they show solidarity with Ukraine and provide support to enhance the capabilities of those players fighting Russia in Ukraine. Finally, the section concludes with a presentation of a few strategies to directly challenge Putin and Russia including the emergence of the Kalinousky regiment as one of the Belarusian players fighting alongside the Ukrainian army.

4.1. Interactions Between Putin and Lukashenka: Support, Dependency, and Oppression

In the eyes of the activists, the interactions between Putin and Lukashenka have been ongoing for many years but they are perceived as ambivalent and subject to change. Both, Lukashenka and Putin engage with each other based on their own interests in power and economic benefits. At least since after the mass protest of 2020 these interactions represent a strategic dilemma for Lukashenka who receives vital support to maintain his power and his regime but has to adhere to Putin's interest and give up Belarusian

sovereignty in return. The activists understand Russian autocracy support as a tool for Putin to maintain influence over Belarus. They perceive the attempt to keep Belarus under control and influence as an expression of Russian imperialism which is a common threat to emancipatory and democratic change not only in Belarusian activists but other formerly, Soviet societies as well.

The activists learn about and assess Putin's and Lukashenka's interactions based on their regular visits, media reports, rumours, and recognizable changes in Belarus itself. In the arena of bilateral policy, the activists are the audience of the players Lukashenka and Putin. Important indicators are the regular visits between Lukashenka and Putin and joint policy programs such as the road maps of Russian-Belarusian integration which both, independent and state media report about.

During the time of the protests there were also rumours going around about security forces from Russia that were supposedly on the streets together with the Belarusian riot police and recognizable by their accent. One of the activists also recalls how the modernization of propaganda style showed him that Russian journalists were supporting the Belarusian state media and another one recalls that Putin himself declared that he would send the Russian national guard.

4.1.1. Financial, Security, and Political Support

Putin's support for Lukashenka is understood as the basis of Lukashenka's regime. In most activists' assessments there is a direct link between Russian support and the survival of Lukashenka who is very dependent from Putin because of that. They describe different forms of support which regarding to the resources that are given fall into the categories of financial, security and military, as well as political support. Especially, Russian money is thought to be essential for the survival of the Belarusian economy. In general, financial, and political support differ from military and security support. The purpose of the former is to prevent dissatisfaction among the population while the latter is applied when opposition breaks out and becomes threatening.

From Lukashenka's and Putin's interaction in a bilateral policy arena results autocracy support. The activists observe that Putin gives financial support to Lukashenka in form of loans, cheap oil and gas, and direct investments in Belarus. They don't spell out exact numbers but talk about an "unmeasurable amount to keep our regime stable". There is also awareness about the fact that Lukashenka will not be able to pay back loans which is what makes the money a donation in the eyes of one student and union activist. This

understanding explains why the financial resources from Putin are seen as support for Lukashenka rather than a simple economic transaction between two states.

The support resulting from Putin's interactions with Lukashenka enhances the latter's capabilities for the interaction with the Belarusian population. The activists think he uses financial support to prevent dissatisfaction among the population, especially the older generations. Especially older people are perceived as supporters of Lukashenka as they still receive a state pension. Russia as a continuous importer of Belarusian production also helps to circumvent the sanctions by the EU and others against Lukashenka and Belarus. With Russian financial support, Lukashenka's state is able to continue to provide welfare, jobs and stable incomes.

Through Russian financial support Lukashenka also has more capabilities in the interaction with his security forces. Only with financial resources from Russia Lukashenka is thought to be able to pay for the security forces. In the opinion of a diaspora organizer Belarusians serving in the security forces do not have an ideological motivation but are only attracted by the money. With the financial resources from Putin Lukashenka is able to bind them to him and the regime. Especially beneficial conditions for the state's security forces are understood to ensure that they protect Lukashenka from potentially threatening opposition:

> *"Because previously we were really expecting there could be a chance, that people will go protest and in some moment police will change side and join the people. And then it's over because Lukashenka has no private army. He has no support and that's all. But that didn't happen. Because Russia pays money to Lukashenka. Lukashenka pays money to his police and like...It is not even like government police. It is his own private army."*

A few activists also describe Russian military and security support as the deployment of Russian police and threats of sending Russian military in case of unrest. In the arena of street protests Russian security forces might join as additional players besides activists and Belarusian security forces. Because of a certain accent and the sheer degree of brutality two activists are convinced that during the protests in 2020 and earlier ones against the so-called parasite tax in 2017 Belarusian police were backed up by Russian police forces who also supposedly trained them. Others express uncertainty about this kind of direct help of Russian police and think that these might have just been rumours. Adding on to this, an anarchist activist is wary about these rumours. They think of them as psychological excuse for the protestors to not use violence and be more decisive.

On top of police forces, Putin potentially sending Russian tanks to Belarus and the Russian military contingents which are already stationed in Belarus are a threat to the activists. Their interaction with Lukashenka, threatening him is severely restrained by the potential back up Lukashenka would receive from Putin. Many activists feared Putin would have sent Russian tanks in case the protestors of 2020 had seriously threatened to topple Lukashenka. One activist inside of Belarus feels deterred from trying anything because of the stationing of Russian military contingents in Belarus. The invasion of Ukraine underscores the possibility of this scenario: "Especially now when the full-scale war in Ukraine started it was obvious that if we started something more unpeaceful then we will have something like in Ukraine".

However, the activists recognize even more subtle ways of political support. Russian players also entered the media arena in which Belarusian independent formats and state outlets are active in providing news or manipulating the view on the other players. During the protests in 2020, Russian journalists were sent to Belarus to support Belarusian state media in creating better propaganda and to replace striking Belarusian staff.

Also, as a player in multilateral policy arenas Lukashenka is restricted in gaining financial capabilities by players like the EU. At the same time, he is supported by players such as the BRICS countries. Accordingly, an internationally well-connected union activist sees a risk in Belarus joining BRICS where Russia is also a member because together these countries would be able to circumvent the sanctions of the United States and the EU even more effectively.

4.1.2.   A Strategic Dilemma: Dependency to Maintain Power

Overarching Putin's support for Lukashenka, the interviewed activists perceive a high degree of general influence by Putin and Russia on the political and societal situation in Belarus. Firstly, they don't deny a certain pro-Russian sentiment among Belarusians. Russia as point of reference also shows up as activists often compare with and set Belarus and Belarusians in relation to the political situation in Russia and the opportunities and lives of Russians. At the same time though, they emphasize that they are different from Russia and don't want Belarus to be put in the same category as Russia.

Putin's support for Lukashenka and his regime is understood as an instrument of maintaining and expanding Russian influence over Belarus. A diaspora activist confirms that before the protests in 2020, the relationship between Putin and Lukashenka was very ambiguous as Lukashenka tried to manoeuvre between good relations with the EU and

Russia simultaneously. However, now after the protests this relationship has tilted towards a very one-sided dependency of Lukashenka from Putin in both, political and economic terms.

From these interactions emerges a strategic dilemma for Lukashenka. For him, the support from Putin comes with the price of his own decreasing power and sovereignty of Belarus: "I think it's just something that is obvious already and we understand that he will ask more and more, and that this regime is just a puppet regime from Putin." Lukashenka has to give up sovereignty in exchange for staying in power as president of Belarus at least officially while actually having to adhere to Putin's interests. Similar to some experts' discussions, the activists interviewed here even describe this situation as Belarus being close to occupied from Russia.

Still, the interactions between Putin and Lukashenka are not stable but subject to change. Putin's support for Lukashenka is not self-evident but described as conditional. To some the Russian support for Lukashenka and with-it Russian influence over Belarus seems to be obvious and common knowledge:

> *"So there was always this awareness that Russia, that Lukashenka was backed up by Russia [...] And I'm speaking from all the experience, you know, just the experience of living there and everyday reading news [...]"*

Others remember that when the protests began, they were not sure whether Putin would support Lukashenka or if he would help remove him in favour of another pro-Russian candidate.

Maintaining support for Lukashenka serves Russian and Putin's political interest. Nobody of the interviewed activists describes any observations of friendly behaviour between Putin and Lukashenka. Their relationship is rather perceived as a result of cost-benefit assessment: "Why one dictator is backing the other dictator? For favours! Of course." In a way, Belarus is considered as testing ground for even more authoritarian policies. Learning from the EU reaction to the crack-down of the protests in Belarus Putin's regime can anticipate how far it can go itself. Most importantly though, Russian troops were able to utilize Belarusian territory for the full-scale invasion against Ukraine in 2020. The dependence from Putin is perceived as so great that Lukashenka had no choice but to at least allow Russian military to launch the full-scale invasion from Belarus.

However, the activists emphasize that the population of Belarus was and is against the war. The rejection of the Belarusian involvement in the war is how the activists

distinguish themselves and the Belarusian society as absolutely distinct from the regime. Adding to this and the feeling of being a de-facto-colony of Russia, there is the fear of Belarus becoming a bargaining chip between Russia and the West in exchange for Russian withdrawal from Ukraine.

4.1.3. Russian Imperialism Preventing Democratic Change

Some activists also think of the Russian attempt to maintain influence over Belarus as ideologically motivated by imperialism. Here, the great influence Putin and Russia hold over Belarus via Putin's support for Lukashenka is understood as expression of Russian imperialism. As shown above, it is not always clear to the activists whether Putin specifically supports Lukashenka for his own sake but there is agreement that Putin wants to maintain influence and control over Belarus. Russian imperialism is perceived as the reason why Putin aims to keep control not only over Belarus but other former soviet states like Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova.

It poses a threat to all the former Soviet societies which want to move in a more liberal and progressive direction:

> *"[…] it's this kind of gendarme of revolutions. […] So, it's always about like whenever there is a change in, towards like what Russia sees as the Western world, like Western values, liberalism, whatever, leftism, like anything that is not clearly authoritarian, or totalitarian is like no-go."*

That is why the arena of the war in Ukraine matters to the activists. They want to be understood as players distinct from Lukashenka's regime and show solidarity with Ukraine in defence against Russia. For them it is their war as well and they emphasize that they hope for the victory of Ukraine. Therefore, Putin is understood as their "common enemy".

4.2. Autocracy Support as Constraint for Belarusian Activists: "…but Then There Is Still Putin."

Russian autocracy support was and is discouraging and constraining for the activists. In 2020 at the beginning of the protests, many of the activists had hope that they could be able to remove Lukashenka peacefully but soon saw no chance against the backdrop of Russian support for Lukashenka. After and towards the end of the protests the understanding grew, that Russia was continuing to back Lukashenka. That made the activists realize that change in Belarus would not be possible while that support is ongoing. One social science student activist cites research on peaceful protest and that it could have worked in Belarus but not with an authoritarian neighbour like Russia:

"It was like three percent or something like this and in some time this regime would fail and we had this three percent. So, we had a lot more. So, I think it would be enough but okay, we have authoritarian neighbor. […] So, I think this was the decisive factor.

The Russian support for Lukashenka and influence over Belarus results in a general hopelessness and frustration on the part of the activists. Their situation feels very sad and hopeless: "Basically, because the world doesn't look like a good place. And it doesn't look like it's going anywhere nice. And it's just hard to acknowledge." For them there is no positive scenario and no realistic plan. More than with fighting Lukashenka they have to deal with surviving daily life including supporting friends and comrades in prison, life in exile and the feeling of having been forgotten by world politics.

Growing convinced of Russian autocracy support the activists perceived fewer political opportunities to fight Lukashenka. Since 2020, they see few ways to challenge Lukashenka's power while he receives financial and security support from Putin. While according to them, a majority of Belarusians wants change and Lukashenka gone there is still a part of the population which profits off or is dependent from state-paid jobs and pension. Insecurity and poverty could potentially lead to a revolution again. Still, it seems like something in the far future, if at all, that people would protest again out of economic insecurity and poverty.

With the help of Russian financial support, he seems to be able to maintain high repressive capabilities of the regime and prevent divisions between elite authorities. That means that even if there was more open opposition Lukashenka can afford protection by his security forces. The financial support allows Lukashenka to offer beneficial financial and living conditions to his security personnel which prevent them from defecting to the side of the anti-regime movement. The presence of Russian military contingents on the territory of Belarus also has a deterring effect on the activists. The maintenance of a highly repressive regime led many Belarusians to flee Belarus and discourages Belarusians inside from any visible action.

In the activists' assessment the future of Belarus hinges on the political situation in Russia. Even if they were able to remove Lukashenka Putin would not allow any real change: "But then still, there is Putin. And until the regime changes in Russia, which is very unlikely, I have no idea what needs to happen." Some of the interviewees compare their situation to the annexation and invasion of Ukraine which they interpret as the proof that Putin is willing to invade another country like Belarus to keep it under Russian influence

and control. Though other than in Ukraine, there is no hope in the Belarusian military to be able to resist an invasion. To them that means until Putin is in power there is no chance for a democratic Belarus:

> *"Because Putin is like paying money for holding Lukashenka. Because Putin cannot allow to have […] for example, he cannot forget that he let in Ukraine, to have a kind of democracy as a neighbour country. So, he cannot let the same happen in Belarus: To have like democracy, to show in Russia there can be a democracy and free, happy people right over the border. He cannot let that. He won't let Belarus go that easy."*

However, the activists acknowledge that there are more players than only Putin and Russia which complicate the situation further. For one thing, they mention the role of the security personnel and regime officials and the low likelihood of defection to the side of the democratic forces. Also, for some of them future elections and constitutional changes could introduce rivalry within the regime which would open up opportunities for the opposition to find influential allies. There is a diffuse hope that actions by the EU and the United States could impact the regime.

In the scenarios of the activists there are no precise steps, but they generally assume that a lot of unexpected things can happen very quickly. They point out how dramatically everything could have changed had the former leader of the Russian Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin been able to topple Putin in the summer of 2023. This underlines the sense of absolute unpredictability the activists currently feel.

While a general sense of hopelessness persists in light of Putin's control over the political situation in Belarus, some activists simultaneously reflect on the impact their perceptions of what is possible and corresponding actions had on the protests and could have on the future of Belarus. Firstly, in the eyes of an anarchist activist Putin's threats and potential military support for Lukashenka only functioned as an excuse for the protest movement to not use force and be more decisive because most of the people were scared and didn't know how to act in case of violent repression.

Also, a diaspora activist questions her initial fear of Russian tanks when she concludes that actually it would be unrealistic that Russia would send its own military. In her eyes that would mean the protest movement had been successful in removing Lukashenka and then it would be realistic to assume that the movement would be able to do another successful revolution again. There is even the notion that if Lukashenka sent Belarusian troops to Ukraine an anti-war movement could become so strong that it could seriously

threaten Lukashenka. In this line of thought change is dependent on the peoples' belief in their own political agency and not only on external constraints:

> *"And I think possible Belarusian future, changes in politics, whatever, it will be connected with... It lays on this field of believe. So, we need to recover this belief of the people in their own forces, in their influence on the government, influence on their lives. And as far as they feel these feelings of belief, they can do many things."*

4.3. Waiting for a Window of Opportunity: The Ukrainian Victory as Mechanism to Reduce Russian Regime Stability and Capability to Support Lukashenka

The interaction of other players, Putin's support for Lukashenka is central for the activists' perceptions of opportunities. In their perception of the overarching Russian influence and Putin's control over Lukashenka and Belarus the activists see little what they themselves can do and mainly resort to waiting for a window of opportunity. The belief that even if Lukashenka was seriously struggling Russia would not allow democratic change in Belarus makes any action hopeless from the outset.

The future of Belarus seems to be in the hands of Putin and his ability and willingness to exert influence over Belarus: The activists consider Putin's regime stability as the deciding factor for that. Most of their ideas revolve around a weaker regime of Putin who would not have the financial resources anymore to support Lukashenka even if he wanted to.

Also, there is hope for internal changes in Russia and that whoever might replace Putin would not be as interested in Belarus as Putin. Subsequently, liberalization in Russia might spill over to Belarus because Russian and Belarusian political tendencies usually foreshadow each other. That means the failure of Putin's regime, either in terms of economic weakness or Putin's removal, would lead to the fall of Lukashenka's regime: "[…] if Putin is over, that means that Lukashenka is over."

For this scenario, the war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in 2022 emerges as the main arena in which a window of opportunity could be opened. The Ukrainian victory over Russia is the activists' main idea of how Putin's regime can be weakened. The activists assume that the outcome of the war in Ukraine will impact on the strength of Putin's regime. That is why the outcome of the war holds great potential to shape their opportunities to fight Lukashenka. They believe that if Ukraine is free, Belarus will be free or at least have better conditions to establish democracy. From that follows consensus in the hope for a Ukrainian victory because it is assumed to weaken Putin and Russia:

"Because I believe that, I believe in victory of Ukraine. And if Ukraine will win, or when Ukraine will win, like this regime in Russia will be...Even it will be, not like end, it can be weaker and [...] this can lead to the fall of this regime of Lukashenka."

Still, for some activists, ambiguities regarding the war appear as they point out that the war results not only in potentially positive scenarios like Putin's defeat. Simultaneously but not as prominently, they realize that the war leads to much suffering and many deaths. The activists are wary of traumas from war that will affect society and are personally worried about friends and comrades fighting for Ukraine. An eco activist is afraid of the nationalist tendencies the war furthers also within the Belarusian society. Adding on to that, an anarchist activist is very critical of how the Belarusian Kalinousky regiment with right-wing leaders and members which is fighting on the side of the Ukrainian army gains political legitimacy in Belarus.

Russia losing the war against Ukraine would fulfil the hopes of the activists concerning both the lack of political interest in Belarus and economic inabilities of a potential new Russian president. After the defeat, they imagine Putin and Russia as too weak to support Lukashenka and exert influence over Belarus. Putin and his regime would have only little financial resources after so much has been spent on militarization during the war and Russia would have to pay reparations. Focusing on internal problems and Putin would retreat from not only Belarus but all post-soviet countries.

He would not be able to fund another regime like Lukashenka's: "[…] this means we will have a chance to destroy Lukashenka's regime because Putin will not be able to support it as much as it was supporting before.". Besides economic problems, defeat against Ukraine could lead to internal protests and discontent amongst the elites. That would also threaten Putin's position and potentially result in his removal.

These scenarios of a severely weakened Russian regime represent a window of opportunity for the activists. Autocracy support would cease to constrain their contentious action. Without Russian support Lukashenka would not be able to pay for protection through security forces. The repressive capabilities of the regime would be severely minimized. Also, he could not provide welfare to Belarusian citizens which are still bound to the regime through state-jobs and -pensions. Lukashenka would then have to negotiate with the EU which is hoped to lead to liberalization. The activists are waiting for this moment: "[…] There will be no money so it's kind of perfect scenario for revolution." They believe that there is still a majority against Lukashenka in the country

and that the Belarusian democratic forces and all of them are ready to act in that right moment.

However, also regarding the scenario of Ukraine's victory and the subsequent fall of Putin's and Lukashenka's regime the activists remain rather pessimistic. The general sense of unpredictability carries on. The death of Putin or political change induced from within the Russian society or elites does not seem realistic. An anarchist activist also differentiates the scenario of regime change in Russia and emphasizes that forces like Prigozhin would not lead to liberalization for neither Russia nor Belarus. Regretfully for the activists, the central event of Ukraine defeating Russia does not seem near either. Further on, an activist still inside of Belarus points out that the Russian defeat could also lead to Putin finally occupying Belarus as compensation.

4.3.1. Strategic Reflection and Advocacy

The activists have switched from the street protest arena in which Lukashenka's security forces could get the upper hand to arenas in exile where they could escape the regime players. The exile arenas in Western and Central Europe allow for them to engage with each other and European politicians and societies more openly. As some of them perceive no other option than to wait for the right moment, they consider the current period to be the time for reflection and strategizing.

The activists engage in organizing the diaspora communities, building, and strengthening a Belarusian civil society. In particular, education is important for them to build political opinion and agency within the Belarusian society to be prepared for the time after Lukashenka. The activists emphasize that the movement is not over.

They consider the end of the protests as a part of a longer process of political change instead of a defeat. They will never forget about this experience and took away important learnings from the protests. For a feminist researcher and activist, the protests were successful because they were the "birth of political agency, community and horizontal practices of nation building." Now they find it important to not give up hope and to keep up their opposition in daily life inside of Belarus and outside.

Nevertheless, the anti-regime movement itself is constituted by a variety of sub-players with different political views. Newly emerged players such as NGOs, independent labour unions as well as reunited political parties are enabling these processes of reflection and strategizing after all NGOs and independent political bodies inside of Belarus had been

liquidated. The activists recognize important issues to be discussed within the partly conservative diaspora such as feminist, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues.

Another issue that some of them reflect on is the necessity of using violence after peaceful protests were not enough to overthrow Lukashenka. Meanwhile using force as a means is also seen as potentially strengthening right-wing tendencies:

> *"But I think that maybe, I mean, I don't really want to say it but I think that the only way is way is nonpeaceful way. And also this makes me feel very scared. Because people who are now fighting on the side of Ukraine mostly these are nationalists. [...] And I see how much of the support they have from Belarusians. And this is really scary because then they will probably have power in Belarus if everything changes."*

However, the switch from a Belarusian protest arena to exile arenas led to a split between inside and outside players. Throughout the interviews the activists distinguish between Belarusians outside in the diaspora and still inside of Belarus. The split between inside and outside arenas is very noticeable in the different opportunities they offer for activists to express their opinions and be politically active.

While there are some attempts to bridge the divide between inside and outside arenas, it is difficult for activists to keep in touch beyond their arenas because they cannot communicate or switch back and forth safely. Still, one important interaction between inside and outside players is exiled activists trying to help political prisoners and their families inside.

The activists experience the split between them differently. A part of the activists thinks that there are no significantly different positions between inside and outside while others have experienced that they are concerned about very different issues than their comrades inside of Belarus. One of them points out that outside they can simply not know much of the insider's perspectives and questions the diaspora's legitimacy to speak for Belarus while not being there anymore:

> *"[...] the mental split also between the exiled people and the people in Belarus is growing so fast. And there is such a big gap between us. And also, the people inside Belarus are completely excluded from any political decision-making right now. So, everything that is decided is decided by the exiled activists. [...] these people also don't have any influence on what we are doing here. Even though we are pretending to be the voice of them. Which we're not."*

One of the arenas outside is international and European diplomacy. Here, the diaspora communities represent Belarus and keep the anti-regime movement on the international

and European political agenda. In the eyes of most of activists, Tsikhanouskaya, her office and the transition council fulfil an important task in networking and representing the Belarusian democratic forces. While some of the activists outside advocate for sanctions against Lukashenka's regime by the EU and the US an activist who still lives inside of Belarus also worries about the impact of sanctions on the population of Belarus instead of the regime.

Generally, many of them are frustrated about the lack of interest in and knowledge about the political situation in Belarus and wish for more allies internationally. There is a feeling of having been forgotten by Europe and being overshadowed by the war in Ukraine. While Belarus is considered a co-aggressor, almost all of the activists reject societal responsibility for the war. Only one of them feels guilty because she acknowledges that the war is being led from Belarusian territory. After all, some activists think it is important for them and the democratic forces to show the distinction between the Belarusian society who opposes the war and the regime of Lukashenka.

4.3.2. Strategic Solidarity With Ukraine

As the war has become a central arena on which all the interviewed activists place great hope, they try to improve the capabilities of the Ukrainian players involved. The activists show support for Ukraine both from a standpoint of solidarity in the fight against a common enemy, and in the hope that Ukraine's victory will contribute to liberalization of Belarus. They understand the war as a common fight and support Ukraine politically and practically:

> *"I really believe, and that is why I also decided to join this volunteer organization that helps refugees, because like I really believe is that the best thing that we can make right now as Belarusians to help Ukrainians. Because on the victory in this war depends our future."*

The activists talk about several ways to express solidarity with Ukraine, opposition against the war and the Belarusian involvement in it. For many activists, initially after the invasion the war became a priority in their activism. They report that inside and outside of Belarus many Belarusians participated in protests against the war. The people inside of Belarus also resorted to signing statements against the war, hanging the Ukrainian flag, and posting on social media in solidarity with Ukraine. Outside, activists continue to advocate for solidarity with Ukraine and fighting Russia. Adding on, one diaspora activist recalls that she stopped speaking Russian at all out of empathy for the Ukrainian refugees she worked with.

Besides expressing solidarity with Ukraine, many of the activists engaged in practical ways to support Ukraine. A big aspect of their practical help includes volunteering. Right after the invasion, many Belarusians helped Ukrainians refugees who arrived in Western Europe and continued to help with help in daily life for example translating. Other ways to support include donating money for humanitarian aid, medical necessities and supply for the Ukrainian military.

Still, some ambiguities in their solidarity with Ukraine persist. On the one hand, the activists support Ukraine and hope for its victory. The activists believe it is important to prove that they are on the side of Ukraine. Some even think they are not doing enough to strengthen relations with Ukrainians and recall their efforts to unite their struggles. Therewhile, standing on the side of Ukraine also functions as an instrument to show the European partners that Belarusians are not with Russia but align with democratic values and deserve support as well.

On the other hand, they feel their situation is "overshadowed" by the war and that they should not forget to advocate for Belarus. Sometimes they also feel frustrated about being met with suspicion by Ukrainians and other EU countries. They realize tensions between Ukrainians and Belarusian civil society and democratic forces but feel they are unfairly punished for regime's involvement in the war. To some it seems Ukrainians and other Europeans had not been interested in their struggles since 2020 and were only now acknowledging Belarusians to judge them for being from the co-aggressor country.

4.3.3. Strategies to Fight Against Russian Influence and Autocracy Support

The activists point out only a few arenas in which they as players can directly challenge Russia in the hope for decreasing Russian autocracy support. They agree that they have to fight and stop Russia. Still, there are only few impressions of activists who go beyond the general acknowledgment of this necessity and engage in direct struggles against Russia and Putin. The activists only think in small steps and remain pessimistic about the potential of directly fighting against Russia.

Some activists become active in their communities, and in economic and diplomatic arenas to decrease Russia's ability to support Lukashenka and influence Belarus. They try to spread awareness and advocate against the Russian influence in Belarus and internationally. An eco-activist works on advocating against and boycotting Russian investment projects in Belarus. This activist strategically connects her goals to prevent harm to the environment with trying to prevent new Russian factories in Belarus.

Similarly, a diaspora activist explains she tries to talk to Belarusians and make them aware how the Russian support for Lukashenka works and how for example traveling to Russia is actually funding Lukashenka's regime. Others target an international audience and try to find allied players against Russia. That includes continuing to advocate for sanctions against Russia as well as making comrades and activists in Western Europe more aware of Russian authoritarianism and to discuss how to stand together against it in solidarity.

In line with the hope for a Ukrainian victory, the main way for Belarusians to weaken Russia is to enter the war arena and fight the Russian army alongside the Ukrainian army. For both Ukraine and Belarus, the activists consider it necessary to fight Russian imperialism. That is why some Belarusian volunteers and activists became soldiers and went to Ukraine to fight Russia there:

> *"[...] we agree that fighting this force, fighting Putin and his regime is the utmost importance right now, in our region. And unfortunately, people have to do with this, in this form."*

In the arena of war, the Belarusian Kalinousky regiment emerged as a new central but controversial player. An activist whose comrades went to fight in Ukraine explains that as Belarus is perceived as co-aggressor Belarusians cannot legally enter Ukraine without official permission from the Ukrainian authorities. That is why Belarusians who want to fight against Russia in Ukraine mostly enrol through the Belarusian Kalinousky regiment.

The activists align with the aim of fighting Putin but remain pessimistic about the success of the regiment. In their eyes its goal is to first contribute to defeat Putin and thereby gain some experience to then fight Lukashenka's regime and army. While the regiment might make Lukashenka's life more difficult, the activists don't have much hope that it will be able to overthrow Lukashenka.

Firstly, they don't believe there are enough soldiers:

> *"But in general, this liberation of Belarus through liberation of Ukraine sounds nice but we don't have a lot of resources. Like, okay, you have one regiment. Actually, not one, there are some other groups. But in general, we cannot do a lot."*

Secondly, the soldiers of the regiment are not considered to have much agency in deciding who and where they are fighting. The activists believe the soldiers are treated by the Ukrainian army as simple volunteers who are fighting for Ukraine and not necessarily for Belarus.

The activists' perceptions of the regiment range from very critical to gratefulness. According to one diaspora activist the Kalinousky regiment is one of the most respected organisations among Belarusians. Still, it appears there exist tensions between the democratic forces and the regiment. A diaspora activist thinks the regiment's leaders do not want to be instrumentalized or be under the control of the democratic forces and both have not been able to agree on common positions.

In line with this impression, an anarchist activist observes and criticizes the regiment's attempt to become a political force itself and in competition to Tsikhanouskaya and the democratic forces. Offering a more concrete strategy and fighting in Ukraine lends the regiment political authority and legitimacy to shape the future of Belarus is what also other activists are afraid of. In their eyes the regiment is corrupt and led by nationalists which should not be the basis for the future of Belarus.

However, as this section has shown, before there can be any thoughts and discussion about a future for Belarus the activists think Russian autocracy support for Lukashenka and influence over Belarus must be fought. In fact, the first finding presented in this section is that contentious players recognize autocracy support and perceive it as a strong constraint. First, they understand Russian autocracy support as financial support for Lukashenka to pay for his security forces and to bind a relevant part of the population to him.

Secondly, some believe that Russian security forces back up Belarusian security forces and expect Russian military support in case Lukashenka was seriously threatened. The third channel of support they perceive is political meaning the deployment of Russian media staff in Belarus or Russia's help to circumvent sanctions by the EU. The activists agree that whilst Russia's strong influence in Belarus persists and Putin's support for the authoritarian rule of Lukashenka does not end there is not really an opportunity for them to challenge him.

The second finding of this paper are three strategic responses of Belarusian anti-regime activists to the perceived constraints through autocracy support. The interviewed activists respond with strategic reflection and advocacy, strategic solidarity and support for Ukraine, and strategies to fight Russia directly. The first strategy involves the reflection on strategic questions like the question of nonviolent action, societal issues like feminism and LGBTQ+ rights in the exile arena to be prepared to react when a window of

opportunity opens. Besides that, they continue to advocate for democratic change in Belarus so that Belarus stays on the agenda of European politics.

The second strategy is solidarity and support for Ukraine in response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The ongoing war emerged as a new arena where a window of opportunity could be opened. Here, the activists hope for the Ukrainian players to defeat Putin. As a result, Russian autocracy support for Lukashenka would decrease. That is why the interviewed activists not only stand in solidarity with Ukraine because they identify Russian imperialism as a common threat. They also support Ukrainians so that their capabilities to defeat Russia and Putin increase and thus, Russian autocracy support and Lukashenka's capabilities would decrease.

Finally, according to the activists the third strategy is to challenge Russia directly. In entering the war arena in Ukraine and fighting alongside the Ukrainian army some Belarusians aim to join forces against the common threat of Russian imperialism. In this arena a new Belarusian player, the Kalinousky regiment, emerged with the alleged goal of liberating Ukraine and then liberating Belarus. Another way of the activists to directly challenge Russia and Russian autocracy support is spreading awareness about Russian influence among international arenas to find more allies and to support the call for sanctions against Russia.

5. Discussion

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of contentious action considering the impact of the international dimension of authoritarianism. While transnational movements have been researched before, less attention has been paid to what contentious actors do when the authoritarian regimes they are challenging also engage in transnational practices like autocracy support (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005). Meanwhile, scholars of autocracy support have focused on the motivations of autocracy supporters and inter-state practices with the receivers (Yakouchyk 2019).

Therefore, this investigation seeks to centre the perceptions of autocracy support by domestic contentious actors in the receiving states. Specifically, the following question is addressed: *Which political opportunities and constraints do contentious actors perceive whilst fighting against an authoritarian regime that receives autocracy support, and with which strategies do they respond?* The remaining section proceeds to discuss the findings and contributions of this paper, their limitations and generalizability, and concludes with avenues for further research.

5.1. Contributions to the Literature

The finding of Russian autocracy support as perceived constraint contributes to the scholarship of autocracy support as it highlights that autocracy support also functions through its deterring effect on contentious actors in the receiving state. Scholars have questioned the effect of autocracy support on stagnating democratization or contributing to the maintenance of authoritarian regimes. Besides the literature's focus on motivations and inter-state practices, this paper centres the perceptions of domestic contentious actors in the receiving state.

That way it finds that another effect of autocracy support is the constraint it poses to activists challenging the receiving regime. Irrespective of the quantifiable effects on an authoritarian regime, in the Belarusian case autocracy support functions by how it is perceived by challengers. Here, autocracy support functions not only through enhancing financial, security, and political capabilities, but also by discouraging activists from challenging a receiving regime from the outset.

This perceived constraint through Russian autocracy support can be considered as one impact the international dimension of authoritarianism has on contentious action. The scholarship of autocracy support shows that not only movements act transnationally but also the authoritarian regimes they are challenging engage with and support each other (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005; Yakouchyk 2019). The political opportunity literature suggests that the political context and regimes shapes contentious action (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 57). The findings of this paper confirm the expectation of the literature whereby autocracy support discourages contentious action when it enhances the repressive features of a regime and constrains political opportunities. Interestingly, they draw attention to a potentially unusual case of social movement studies in which contentious actors circumvent the very regime they are challenging and opt to fight themselves or support other players fighting the autocracy supporter.

The findings of three strategic responses to Russian autocracy support also underline the assumption of the strategic interactionism approach that new opportunities and constraints constantly emerge from the interactions of different players. This approach calls to break down the state and movements into a variety of sub-players and to focus on their interactions to understand their goals and the contingency of contentious action (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; Duyvendak and Jasper 2015). To this end, this paper introduces autocracy support as interaction between authoritarian regime players to study

how contentious actors perceive and respond to it. Because Russian autocracy support is perceived as a strong constraint, Belarusian anti-regime activists strategically respond with switching to arenas in exile and fighting Russia directly in the war in Ukraine.

It may seem as if the approaches of political opportunity literature and strategic interactionism were contradicting each other. The former focuses on contextual and external factors to explain the emergence of opportunities and constraints while in the latter opportunities emerge from the continuous interactions of a variety of state and contentious players. Accordingly, the research interest moves from a focus on the perceived strong constraint Russian autocracy support poses to the agency of Belarusian contentious players.

The investigation shows that contentious players have agency to respond to threats but in their interactions with other players different capabilities and power imbalances come into play (Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, 299). The experiences players make when interacting and the interactions of other players and how these are perceived shapes players' beliefs of what is possible and what is not. That is how interactions predate and thus, shape each other (Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, 295).

Finding that Russian autocracy support is perceived as a strong constraint to which Belarusian activists respond strategically adds nuance to the study of players' interactions. Players do not enter arenas with the same dispositions and cannot randomly engage in or leave interactions with any player. They are not equal to each other, and constraints put up by other players matter to them. The perception of the interaction of Putin and Lukashenka resulting in support for the latter seriously constrains how contentious players in Belarus can interact with and challenge Lukashenka. The contingency of contentious action does not mean free-floating interactions but the variety of strategic responses for example switching to an exile arena in or entering the war arena in Ukraine to utilize different capabilities to exploit dependencies of Lukashenka.

5.2. Limitations and Generalizability

The representativeness and generalizability of this paper are limited. The findings from the interviews with the activists provide a nuanced but not fully representative account of the perceptions and strategies of anti-Belarusian regime activists. Thus, these results are a starting point to but neither show all strategies nor provide detailed accounts on the emergence and implementation of a particular strategy.

The first limitation is the small number of interviews that were conducted. With regard to feasibility only ten activists were interviewed which does not fully represent the Belarusian anti-regime movement. For example, conservative or nationalist perspectives could not be included but appeared to be important in the assessments of the interviewed activists. Still, as Russian autocracy support generally mattered a lot to all the activists interviewed the findings can pave the way for further research.

The second limitation is that the perceptions and strategies explored here mainly come from an exiled perspective. In fact, the perspective of the diaspora is very relevant as a big part of the anti-regime movement has in fact left Belarus. However, one activist questioned the legitimacy of outside activists to represent Belarus and a somewhat deviating perspective of an interviewee inside of Belarus corresponds to the mental gap experienced by a few activists outside.

For one thing, an interviewee inside was the only one who questioned the implementation of sanctions against Belarus. They criticized the impacts it has on the Belarusian society and how it discourages those who are left resisting the regime inside. This activist also seemed to be a bit more pessimistic and frustrated about simultaneously feeling forgotten by European politics and worrying about becoming a bargaining chip between Russia and a supposed West.

It would make sense for somebody inside to be more sceptical of sanctions and a potential Russian occupation as they would feel their impact more directly than activists outside. Inside, Putin's support and the stationing of Russian military might be perceived as a stronger constraint because they directly discourage any political action. Meanwhile, in exile political action is possible only its potential for success seems limited with the understanding that Russia would not allow change.

The third limitation concerns the applicability of the results to other cases of autocracy support. Belarus represents an extreme case in which autocracy support has been longstanding and its effect on maintaining Lukashenka's authoritarian rule is hardly controversial. That is why it cannot be inferred from this extreme case that activists fighting against other authoritarian regimes which receive autocracy support would perceive it as such a strong constraint as Belarusian activists do. Much less can be expected that they would respond with the same strategies to potentially constraining autocracy support. After all, not all countries governed by a regime receiving autocracy

support have a war in their neighbouring country which would emerge as the central arena to fight the autocracy supporter directly.

5.3. Avenues for Further Research

Nevertheless, the limitations of the findings presented point to avenues for further research. To begin with, the case of Belarus has revealed some interesting aspects that should be further analysed. First, it has appeared that at least a few of the interviewed activists consider conservative or nationalist tendencies of the movement relevant, even if they do not necessarily thin of them positively. Also, in some respects one activist interviewed living inside of Belarus expressed slightly differing opinions than activists in exile. Thus, future research should take care to include these perspectives to gain an even richer understanding of Belarusian anti-regime activists' perceptions of autocracy support and strategies in response to it.

Another starting point for future research could be the reflection on the strategy of nonviolence. Surprisingly, considering the narrative of peaceful protests, more than one activist questioned the effectiveness of nonviolent protests (Onuch 2020; Kuznetsov 2020). For example, a social science student activist argues that in other cases the amount of people who had mobilized in Belarus would have been enough for peaceful change but not in a case with an authoritarian neighbour.

This assessment could suggest that the perception of autocracy support as strong constraint for contentious action and democratic change could lead to a switch from nonviolent to violent strategy. The emergence of the Belarusian Kalinousky regiment fighting in the war arena in Ukraine to fight Russia directly could be an indicator for this potential switch of strategy. The soldiers might not consider themselves as activists, but it seems that at least some activists align with the soldiers on the view that Putin's influence must be fought with non-peaceful means.

Accordingly, a third issue for further research should be the activities of Belarusian activists in Ukraine, including those fighting alongside the Ukrainian army against the Russian invasion. Investigating the strategies of Belarusian activists in response to Russian autocracy support showed that solidarity and support for Ukraine, be it symbolic or in the form of helping Ukrainian refugees, sending material to the troops, and fighting in Ukraine themselves, is a central component of fighting against Russian autocracy support. That is why centring the perspectives of activists inside Ukraine, zooming in on their strategies and internal dynamics is important to understand more in detail the

Belarusian strategies against autocracy support. It would also allow to further explore the ambivalences and tensions in the interactions with Ukrainians that come with Belarus being a co-aggressor in the war against Ukraine.

Moving on, even though the findings from the case of Belarus are limited in their applicability to other cases of autocracy support the general findings that autocracy support is perceived as constraint and that activists switch strategies in response to it can be expected for other cases as well. They are consistent with the literature of political opportunity and strategic interactionism. Therefore, it could be worthwhile to utilize these approaches to explore the specific perspectives and strategies of activists challenging other regimes receiving autocracy support.

Of course, it should be considered that Belarus represents an extreme case of autocracy support where scholars agree on a decisive effect on the longevity of Lukashenka's regime. However, the paper shows that autocracy support not only works through financial, security, and political channels but also has a constraining effect on regime challengers through the way it is perceived by activists. Thus, the question could be raised whether the quantifiable effect of autocracy support on hindering democratization or maintaining authoritarian rule correlates with the extent to which it is perceived as a constraint by activists.

Just as in this paper, focusing on the interactions of the autocracy supporter, the receiving regime and anti-regime activists would allow to grasp the dynamic and potentially ambivalent character of autocracy support and how this interaction is perceived by anti-regime activists who might adapt their strategies accordingly. Instead of fighting Lukashenka directly, while waiting for a window of opportunity the Belarusian activists interviewed here mostly resort to reflection, advocacy and support for Ukraine, another player, to weaken Putin, the very player directly interacting with Lukashenka. These strategies seem to differ from the response of the Ukrainian society during the Orange Revolution in 2004 when the Russian backing of presidential candidate Yanukovych and electoral fraud resulted in mass protests (Way 2015, 699).

Fighting the Russian army in a war to weaken Putin's ability to support Lukashenka could be one very specific strategy against autocracy support. It would be just one attempt of regime challengers to find arenas in which the very player providing autocracy support can be weakened. After all, contentious actors exploit the weaknesses, dependencies, and elite divisions of the regimes they are fighting against (Johnston 2015; X. Chen and Moss

2018b). For example, the Bahraini activist Maryam Al-Khawaja views the struggle for democracy in Bahrain as a challenge to all the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council including Saudi Arabia, whose military intervention stopped the Bahraini protests of 2011 (Al-Khawaja 2020, 158). Her call for intersectionality and cross-border solidarity could be another strategy involving alliance-building of a variety of anti-regime players challenging an alliance of authoritarian regimes.

This outlook for future research followed the discussion of the findings of this paper. The section argued that Russian autocracy support perceived as constraint by Belarusian activists and the responses, strategic reflection and advocacy, solidarity, and support for Ukraine, as well as strategies to fight Russia directly, confirm the expectation of the political opportunity literature and strategic interactionism. These findings help to understand better how contentious actors respond when authoritarian states they are challenging engage in transnational practices such as autocracy support. It was pointed out that the findings may contribute to the scholarship of autocracy support as the perception of autocracy support by activists appears as another effect through which it functions. Discussing the interactions of Belarusian anti-regime activists, Lukashenka, and Putin underpinned the study of interactions of a variety of players with the nuances of how power imbalances come into play in interactions.

Next, the limitations of the paper's representativeness due to the low number of interviewees, missing perspectives from inside of Belarus and conservative or nationalist activists were acknowledged. In addition, the section addressed limited generalizability of the extreme case of Belarus to other cases of autocracy support. With these limitations in mind, the remainder of the section illustrated further avenues for research exploring issues such as reflection on non-peaceful strategies and the perception, and strategies of Belarusian activists in Ukraine. Finally, it was suggested that the response of other activists challenging authoritarian regimes that receive autocracy support might differ and should be explored in the future.

6. Conclusion

Based on qualitative interviews with Belarusian anti-regime activists, this paper investigated the perceptions of and strategic responses of contentious actors to autocracy support for the regime they are challenging. For one thing, this research interest emerged because scholars know a lot about transnational movements but consider the impact the international dimension of authoritarianism has on contentious action less (Della Porta

and Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005). Moreover, the scholarship of autocracy support and the international dimension of authoritarianism focuses mostly on inter-state practices but less on domestic contentious actors in receiving states even though they can be expected to strongly reject autocracy support (Tansey 2016a; Yakouchyk 2019).

The analysis was framed with the concept of autocracy support and theoretical approaches of the political opportunity and strategic interactionism literature (Tarrow 2011; Jasper 2011; Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; Yakouchyk 2019). Belarus as an extreme case in which Russian autocracy support has been decisive for the authoritarian president Lukashenka to uphold his regime appeared as an intriguing starting point for this paper's research interest (Onuch and Sasse 2022b; Kulakevich and Kubik 2023; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021). The analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with Belarusian anti-regime activists mostly located in exile, but with diverse political backgrounds led to two overall findings concerning their perception of autocracy support as well as their strategic responses to it.

First, the interviewed activists perceive Russian financial, security, and political autocracy support as a strong constraint for their actions and for a general potential for democratic change in Belarus. Especially, during the mass protests in 2020 they came to the realization that no matter what they would do the Russian president Putin would not allow Belarus to liberalize. Secondly, however, the war in Ukraine emerges as central arena in which they hope for an opening of a new window of opportunity when Ukraine defeats Russia, which is supposed to lead to reduced capabilities to support Lukashenka. The interviewees respond strategically with reflection and advocacy, solidarity, and support for Ukraine, as well as challenging Russia directly.

Principally, the findings suggest that autocracy support is perceived as constraint for contentious actors and that contentious actors respond strategically in switching arenas to weaken the respective autocracy supporter or to support other players challenging the very autocracy supporter. This aligns with the theoretical expectations of the political opportunity and strategic interactionism literature. The exploration of the Belarusian case can shed some light on contentious action considering the international dimension of authoritarianism and help to understand better how autocracy support works through the perception of domestic contentious actors. However, the findings are neither representative for the whole Belarusian anti-regime movement nor easily applicable to other cases of autocracy support. Investigations of cases of autocracy support like in

Ukraine 2004 or Bahrain 2011 may add yet another perception of autocracy support or strategy in response to it by the contentious actors fighting regimes that receive autocracy support.

7. Literature

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