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TELEGRAM REVOLUTION – AN ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY OF BELARUS IN 2020

The political instability in Belarus during and after the “2020 Presidential Election” and the extensive use of Telegram Instant Messenger as the media to fuel the uprising became a large discussion point across the world political discourse. This article aims to analyse the impact of Telegram Messenger on political instability during and after the election. This article analyses causal variables for the instability such as the geopolitics of Belarus, the COVID-19 pandemic induced problems, the democratic transition in the post-Soviet space, the economic hardship in Belarus, and the non-transparent political process. The analysis revealed that the accumulation of political power by few elites precipitated political frustration among people. The non-democratic, non-transparent, unfair electoral practice was the immediate cause that led to political instability. Telegram acted as the principal communication channel throughout the demonstrations and had a great role in sustaining the uprising. That is the reason why leading political analysts credited the uprising to Telegram Messenger and hence termed it the “Telegram Revolution”.

Keywords: Belarus, uprising, social media, Telegram Revolution, geopolitics, Russia

The phenomenon of the “Telegram Revolution” has been acknowledged by the world political discourse. This phenomenon has gradually replaced the so-called “Twitter Revolution” or “Facebook Revolution”. Telegram Messenger is becoming the principal tool, and Telegram channels are becoming the primary means for organising protests worldwide. Whether in Hong Kong against the repressive Chinese government, in the USA during the “Black Lives Matter” movement or in Belarus during the 2020 presidential election, the role of Telegram in constructing the anti-establishment narrative has grown considerably.

The phenomenon resurfaced across the political spectrum when Roman Protasevich was detained by the Belarusian authorities. The detention created ripple effects across the European political landscape. Jean-Yves Le Drian – Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, France – expressed anguish concerning the detention. He accused the Belarusian authorities of

hijacking a civilian plane. Heiko Maas – Minister of Foreign Affairs, Germany – showed concern regarding the arrest. Terming the incident as outrageous, he stressed that forcibly stopping a flight, which was flying between two EU states, is interference with civil air traffic in Europe [1]. Together, the chairpersons of the foreign affairs committees in the parliaments of eight countries (Czech Republic, Latvia, Germany, Lithuania, Ireland, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have termed the interception of a civilian flight using a fighter aircraft as an act of piracy [2]. The European Union, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States have introduced sanctions on Belarus [3]. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the West of “demonising” the authorities in Minsk. Russian President Vladimir Putin reminded the West that in 2013, based on rumours that a former CIA agent Edward Snowden was on board, the plane of Bolivian President Evo Morales was forcibly landed in Vienna. There was no hue and cry, but only silence – the Russian president reminded [4].

On 23rd May, Protasevich flew from Athens, Greece, to Vilnius, Lithuania, by Ryanair, an Irish low-cost airline. In the pretext of a bomb threat, the flight was diverted and forcefully landed in Minsk, Belarus. Although the plane flew to the destination that evening, it took off without having Protasevich in it. He was among one of the founders of the Nexta Live channel on Telegram and also the editor of the Belarus’ *Golovnogo Mozga* (Belarus of the Brain) Telegram channel. These Telegram channels were the voices of the opposition during the 2020 Belarusian uprising. With the declaration of the landslide victory of Lukashenko, people thronged into streets alleging electoral fraud. Some opposition leaders were arrested, and some left the country for the security of their families. Internet service was cut off which led to no access to media channels. The Nexta Telegram Channel served as a mouthpiece of anti-Lukashenko protests that erupted in August 2020. Within days of election and internet outage, subscribers of Nexta Live and of Belarus of the Brain rose exponentially from several thousands to nearly two million [5]. The Belarusian authorities identified these two Telegram channels as extremist and initiated many criminal cases against the creators and administrators of these channels [6]. In July 2021, the authorities named ten more Telegram channels as extremist [7]. The graveness of these incidents demonstrates the impact of the Telegram channels on the political instability of a state.

This article endeavours to analyse the political instability during the pre- and post-election uprisings of the 2020 Belarusian presidential elec-

tion. The use of Telegram as an instrument of political dissent has been elaborately discussed. The study has adopted a mixed-method research design. The article seeks to accomplish two major objectives. The first objective is to understand the global and local factors those became growth engines for the uprising. The second objective is understanding the role of Telegram vis-a-vis other social media platforms during the protest. The article tries to find whether Telegram Messenger sparked the protest or helped sustaining the ongoing protest.

Factors of Political Instability in Belarus

The volatile political sphere in Belarus can be understood through two broad ways: global factors and local factors.

Global factors

Crucial geopolitical events across the border and around the globe have been fomenting political unrest inside the Belarusian territory. The political geography of Belarus is at a buffer zone between Russia and the NATO. As a consequence, Belarus would get the attention of the West and Russia. So, a greater degree of political instability is a frequent event in Belarus.

Geopolitics

Kautilya, in his book *The Arthashastra*, categorically emphasizes “geography” as the key factor in conducting international relations [8]. Belarus – a geopolitical hotbed – geographically lies between Russia and the West. Although the USSR was disintegrated in the year 1991, the remnants of disintegration are still visible in various former republics of the USSR. As an idea, the disintegration of the Soviet Union is not completed yet. The Leninist concept of peaceful coexistence, which Nikita Khrushchev widely advocated in his foreign policy doctrine, was marred by numerous inconsistent historical events. The rapprochement of Gorbachev with the West, even his acceptance of Reagan’s terms could not yield any sign of detente between the West and Russia [9, 10].

Russia has always been accusing Western countries of a planned information and political campaign against it. Russia tells off that this kind of hybrid warfare has the sole goal of containing Russia. It was the well-known Cold War spirit to contain the Soviet Union [11–13]. Russia, in its

National Security Strategy of 2015, mentions colour revolutions as a security threat. Among the threats are:

[T]he activities of radical public associations and groups using nationalist and religious extremist ideology, foreign and international nongovernmental organizations, and financial and economic structures, and also individuals, focused on destroying the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, destabilizing the domestic political and social situation – including through inciting “color revolutions” – and destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values [14, 15].

There was a short period of detente between the USA (during Trump’s presidency) and Russia. Trump, who belongs to the Republican Party in the USA, departed without initiating any American war during his presidency. That contributed to a greater degree of geopolitical stability at the buffer zone (Belarus). As Democrats in the USA came to power, bombing and airstrikes have regained prominence in Syria [16]. The change of guard in Washington, the ‘killer Putin’ remark of Biden, an aggressive stance towards Russia have further tensed the buffer zone.

Russia terms the former republics of the USSR as its “sphere of interest” and vehemently opposes the further expansion of NATO towards this sphere. However, NATO has been continuously pushing its influence towards the Russian sphere of interest [17, 18]. The non-enlargement promises (“not one inch eastward”) of NATO, made to Gorbachev, turned out to be a bunch of myths. Since 1999, with five waves of NATO expansion, fourteen countries of the former Soviet Union republics were included in NATO [14, 15].

During the USA invasion of Iraq, the USA was suspicious about the arms sale of Belarus to Iraq. President Bush – the then US President – equated both the terrorists and the states who supported those terrorists. The then USA ambassador to Belarus, Michael Kozak, accused Belarus of selling arms to terrorists. Belarus, in his view, could face the consequences for taking the wrong side. In a conference entitled “Axis of Evil: Belarus – The Missing Link”, the ambassador and other participants raised the issues of arms sales to Iraq and training Iraqi officers [19]. They vehemently suggested a regime change in Belarus. Even US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice dubbed Lukashenko as “Europe’s last dictator” [20].

For Belarus, geopolitics has always played a vital role. The 2010 Belarusian presidential election was very crucial from the geopolitical point of

view. Lukashenko accused both the West and Russia of interfering in the election process. In the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Russia recognised both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. However, Lukashenko did not recognise immediately. He also accused Russian interference in the election. Also, he blamed Russian companies for financing opposition politicians in Belarus. He drew flak from Russian President Medvedev who dubbed him as having an anti-Russian hysteria. Many anti-Lukashenko articles and documents were circulated in various Russian media outlets. Series of Russian media attacks on Lukashenko marked the 2010 election. Nevertheless, Lukashenko managed to win the election [21, 22].

Akin to the 2010 presidential election, the 2020 presidential election in Belarus was a geopolitical gamble between Russia and the West. This time it saw the growing anti-Russian sentiments in Belarus [23]. In a flip-flop manner, Lukashenko tried to balance Russia and the West. In January 2020, Lukashenko accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of trying to merge Belarus and Russia (although later in 2021, the same Lukashenko formalised the integration of some part of Belarusian economy with Russian economy). When Russia cut the oil subsidy, Lukashenko responded by saying, “Americans, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates ... I have a brilliant relationship with them.” “They will fulfill the oil demands of Belarus,” he added [24]. Lukashenko accused Russia of using mercenaries to destabilise Belarus. The arrest of 33 alleged mercenaries from the Wagner Group of Russia created a political confrontation between Belarus and Russia. These events further deteriorated the Russia-Belarus relations.

Accusing the West of waging hybrid warfare, Lukashenko reiterated that new vulnerabilities were searched and directed against his nation. He also feared that Belarus was becoming a testing ground or an experimental site for the West before being thrown to the East [25]. Accusing Russia and the West of interference in internal affairs, Belarus portrayed itself as a balanced state. After the political instability in Ukraine and Georgia, Belarus became the new geopolitical buffer zone between the West and Russia. These changes in the near abroad made Belarus a war zone of ideas, protests, civil unrest.

COVID-19 pandemic

There was a virus outbreak in the Wuhan city of China in the last days of 2019. The deadly coronavirus, through the city of Wuhan, disrupted the

social, economic, and political fabric of the world. Within four months of the virus outbreak in Wuhan, it was declared a pandemic [26, 27]. Billions of people got infected, millions of people were dead, and the numbers are still rising every day.

The pandemic became the shared problem of the world. It has touched Belarus like every other country. Although the infection rate was exponentially rising throughout the world, the infection rate in Belarus was very high compared to the global infection rate (Figure 1). Research says that the pandemic has badly affected the socioeconomic condition of people around the world [28]. As the research predicted, political instability, political terror, and violent demonstration would be the new normal across the globe. In particular, it expected Europe to face an increased number of riots and protests. The Global Peace Index (GPI), which is a measure of the absence of violence, was deteriorated by 0.34 % in 2020 [28]. Internal conflict was the largest contributor to the global deterioration of peacefulness.

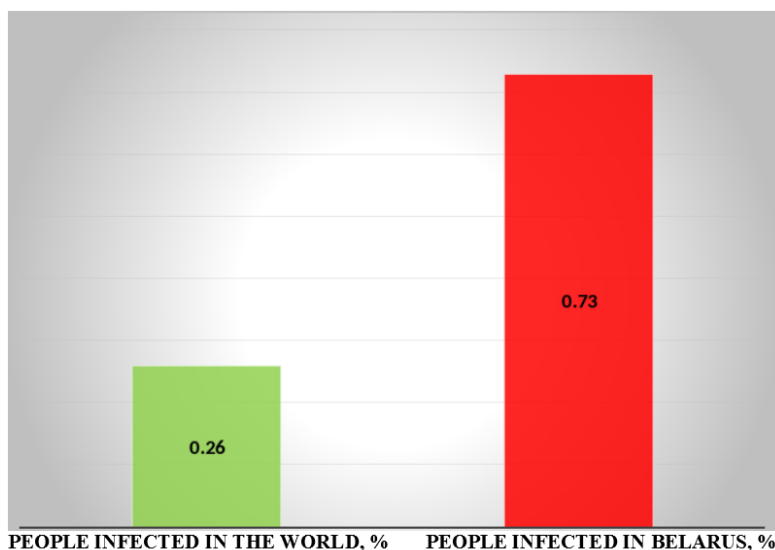


Figure 1. Percentage of people infected by the coronavirus (Source – World Bank)

Humanity encountered a severe crisis in its history because of the pandemic. The pandemic faltered the Belarusian economy like all other

economies of the world. Public services were severely affected. The public health system could not tackle the pandemic-induced health crisis. Lukashenko refused to impose lockdown as a method of containing virus which was practised worldwide. As reported, he suggested drinking vodka to defeat the pandemic [29]. The pandemic stirred up the disappointment of the already existing systemic crisis. People were angry about the mishandling of the pandemic situation in Belarus. It was one of the major causes which incited people to protest against the government.

Democratisation in Eastern Europe

The end of the Cold War brought down various authoritarian regimes. It ended the single-party rule and military dictatorships across the globe. Eastern European countries witnessed a surge in the democratisation process. In particular, multi-party election architectures came to prevail in the region. During the transition, large-scale hunger, extreme ethnic wars, civil wars, political violence occurred in those countries. Democracy prevailed but at the cost of millions of human lives. Levitsky and Way [30] argue that the democratic transition does not always lead to democracy, it rather leads to hybrid regimes. They characterise such regimes as competitive authoritarianism, where competition is real but unfair. In these regimes, a combination of electoral competition and varying degrees of authoritarianism exists. These regimes are civil regimes where opposition parties contest elections using democratic institutions to get power. However, massive electoral fraud, manipulation, limited media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence skewed the level playing field in favour of incumbents. These are kind of hybrid regimes where both characteristics of democracy and authoritarianism exist side by side.

Proximity to Europe and extensive ties with the USA prompted a “strong and persistent external democratizing pressure” across the Eastern European states. In post-Soviet space, there was rapid trade expansion with the West, large scale migration; also there was an invasion of Western media, NGOs, international organizations (IOs). There was, as Levitsky and Way argue, “an unprecedented degree of Western intervention in the domestic politics and policies of Eastern European states” [30. P. 85]. External interference, including extensive Western involvement, resulted in domestic actors such as politicians, technocrats, economic elites, and voters raising voices against the incumbents. Democracy as a criterion for the

membership of the European Union brought a strong external intervention in domestic politics. The massive Western intervention reshaped the domestic balance of power in the Eastern European states.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania developed their democratic institutions along the lines of the European Union and became members of the European Union in 2004 [31]. With massive protests, colour revolutions swept away former Soviet Union spaces [32]. Liva Berzina underlines, colour revolutions are being weaponized in Russia through an interpretation as warfare. The Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and, more precisely, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine affected the democratic landscape of Belarus. Responding to colour revolutions across the border, Lukashenko denounced their effects and ridiculed, “In our country, there will be no pink or orange, nor even a banana revolution” [33]. Taking inspiration from the situations of Ukraine and Georgia, activists employed the methods of the Rose Revolution and the Tulip Revolution in Belarus. It resulted in the Denim Revolution and stimulated successive demonstrations [34, 35].

Local factors

Economic Hardship

Most of the protests across the world start when the economic situation of a country erodes. It is believed that even the French Revolution started due to economic inequalities and hardships among the French population. The rising price and the falling living standard can precipitate anger among citizens, and it was the case of Belarus too. The GDP of Belarus was on a free fall from the year 2010. Although its economy managed to climb the ladder in 2015, it again fell to -0.9 in the year 2020 (Figure 2).

The Belarusian economy was facing the toll of a sustained economic crisis. Thousands of Belarusians took the streets in 2017 to protest against a presidential decree that imposed a tax on those who were not in full-time employment. The unemployed, who worked less than 183 days per year, were directed to pay the government \$250 in compensation for lost taxes [36, 37]. The crisis deepened with the unemployment rate increasing to 4.5 % and the inflation rate to 6.9 %. Economic conditions continue to plague the Belarusian public. The protest started as an economic cause but turned into a political protest.

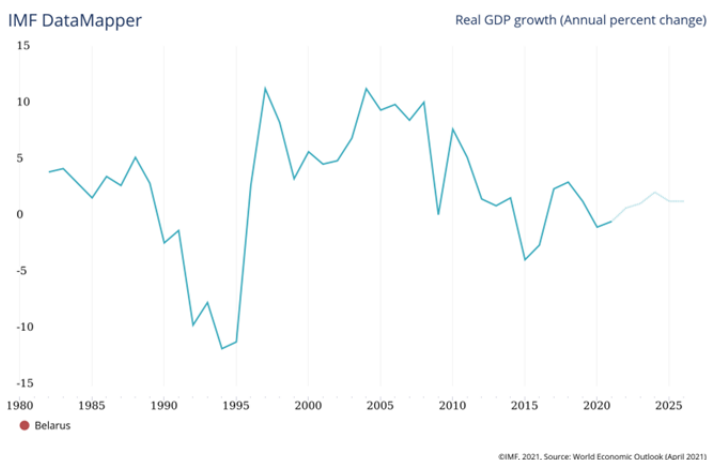


Figure 2. Growth rate of Belarus, 1982–2021

Political Transparency

Political transparency appeared as the guiding factor of the 2020 Belarusian uprising. The crisis was accelerated when the opposition parties in Belarus and European observers accused Lukashenko of mass electoral fraud. Protesters felt that they were trapped in a never-ending, vicious cycle of a non-transparent political system. It caused a political turmoil in Belarus.

Historically, Belarusians always endeavoured to have an independent Belarus state. Amid the turmoils of World War I, the Russian Revolution in 1917, and the German occupation, an independent Belarusian Democratic Republic was formed in 1918. Soon after the withdrawal of German troops, occupation of the Slavic country by the Bolsheviks culminated the dream of an independent Belarus state. Since then, series of events such as years of Stalinist purge and execution, German invasion during World War II, the unearthing of Kurapaty burial site near Minsk (the site of a major NKVD mass extermination of Soviet political prisoners in the 1930s), Perestroika, etc., brought a nationalistic fervour among Belarusians. When people found out the communist lies of the Soviet regime and also when Stalinist crimes were revealed, they got angry. Consequently, the Belarusian Popular Front was formed in 1988 with the intention to have an independent Belarus state. The demand for democracy and hope for independ-

ence emulated mass demonstrations that were organised by the Belarusian intelligentsia. With growing street protests and massive civil dissent, Belarus got its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 [38–41].

Lukashenko won the first independent Belarusian presidential election in 1994. Since then, Lukashenko was in power irrespective of the repetitive accusation of several electoral frauds. Following the constitutional referendum in 1996, which had limited political freedom, a series of mass demonstrations widely known as the “Minsk Spring” were seen across the country [42]. The dream of democracy, which was once dreamt during the *Perestroika* period in every republic of the USSR, was dwindling in Belarus.

Western observers considered the presidential election of 2001, which Lukashenko won again, not a free and fair one. Taking inspiration from the Yugoslavian “*Otpor!* Student Movement”, Zubr – a youth organisation – protested against the regime. They protested because of the disappearance of opposition leaders and the prevalence of a non-democratic environment. It gave birth to the Denim/Jeans Revolution. Lukashenko secured his third term by winning the presidential election in 2006. Western observers and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) described the election as a rigged election [43], whereas election observers from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) termed the election as an open and transparent one [44]. Aleksander Milinkevich – the defeated presidential candidate – was sentenced for 15 days after he had attended a rally to mark the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine. Similarly, Aleksander Kazulin was convicted of hooliganism and incitement to mass disorder. He was imprisoned for five and a half years [38, 45]. Filipov argues that, although so many efforts were made to replicate the colour revolution, it failed to have a greater impact on Belarus [46].

Electoral fraud allegations against Lukashenko were also observed during the 2010 election. The OSCE observers called the 2010 presidential election rigged, and the CIS observers described the election as transparent. Mass demonstrations were held against the unfair election. Hundreds of protesters, including seven presidential candidates, were arrested, and, as reported, were beaten badly. Lukashenko defended the crackdown saying, “You saw how our law-enforcers behaved. They stood firm and acted exclusively within the bounds of the law. They defended the country and people from barbarism and ruin” [47].

This time the crackdown on media was excessive. The administration heavily censored social media and other new media outlets. Western social

media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Talk, etc. were blocked. Several oppositionist websites were blocked. Headquarters of various media outlets were raided [48].

Similar protests, demanding Lukashenko's resignation, were noticed during 2011. This time the internet revolutionaries led the protests. They used social media to organise the latest demonstration against the regime. The Revolution through Social Networks online community invited demonstrators, planned venues for protests through VKontakte and other new media platforms. They tried to reach all sections of society through social media. They said that they were primarily fighting for freedom. The government cracked down on the protest by arresting some 1,800 protesters and closing the protest venues declared by the internet revolutionaries [49]. The government also blocked social media. Lukashenko warned this as an escalation of information intervention. He dubbed the goal of this intervention was "to sow uncertainty and alarm, to destroy social harmony, and in the end to bring us to our knees and bring to naught the achievements of our independence" [50].

The 2015 Belarusian election was held during the heightened tensions between Russia and the West (because of integrating Crimea in 2014 in the Russian Federation). When Russia was burdened with massive sanctions due to the Crimean crisis, Lukashenko attempted to assuage Western criticism and ventured rapprochement with the West. He did not recognise Crimea as a part of Russia's territory (he recognised it only after 9 August 2021) [51]. He won the election for his fifth term. Opposition leaders, OSCE, and UN human rights experts said there was massive electoral fraud. However, Russian President Putin congratulated him [50].

Belarusians are more cautious regarding revolutions. They are cautious about the risk of state collapse, civil strife, and Russian interference in Belarusian internal matters. For them, preserving Belarusian independence was the highest priority rather than democratisation [20]. But, gross violations in the electoral process and unfair practices, arrests of opposition leaders, etc. accumulated public anger.

The 2020–2021 Belarusian protests, which was widely known as the Slipper Revolution, were a series of political demonstrations against the alleged electoral fraud of President Lukashenko. The mottos of demonstrators were a free and fair election, independence, freedom, and democracy. The uprising had its footprints even before the election started. Sergei Tikhanovsky – a businessman, YouTuber, blogger – showed his willing-

ness to contest for the post of president of Belarus. There were mass detentions of his supporters on 7 May in the cities of Vitebsk, Lida, Mogilev, Gomel [52]. He was arrested on 9 May 2020, only two days after his announcement. The demonstrations continued till the election and went on even after that. Sergey Tikhanovsky was deprived of registering to contest elections. Viktor Babaryko, who submitted the highest 367,000 signatures among all the alternative candidates, was put in prison for economic offences. Although submitting 160,000 signatures, Valery Tsepkalo was told only 80,000 signatures were valid. He was excluded from the presidential race, and, fearing imprisonment, he fled the country with his children [53]. This resulted in the eruption of massive protests across Belarus.

As most of the strong candidates – especially males – were arrested, women – Maria Kolesnikova, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, and Veronika Tsepkalo – led the presidential battle against Lukashenko. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya – the wife of Sergey Tikhanovsky – registered as a candidate for contesting the presidential election. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya along with Veronika Tsepkalo (wife of Valery Tsepkalo) and Maria Kolesnikova (campaign coordinator of Viktor Babaryko) became the leader of united opposition. She urged the protesters to stop the street protests and to support her in winning the election in a legal manner. She unified the opposition and drew record crowds to a series of campaign rallies across the country [53].

The uprising erupted immediately after the declaration of official election results. Unlike previous post-election protests, this time there were widespread and sustained protests. Those protests had a larger impact in various parts of Belarus, and, even during the first half of 2021, its impact was continuing. People were angry because of the arrests of opposition activists and the threat of violence against leaders. Large protests broke out across Belarus against the alleged electoral frauds. Nine members of Tikhanovskaya's campaign staff were arrested, Tikhanovskaya fled to Lithuania for safety, and, as she said, 70 people were missing [54, 55]. Clashes erupted between protesters and authorities; protesters built barricades to block the police; the police used tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons [56]. To quell the sustained protest, in October, Lukashenko talked with the twelve political prisoners. As Yuri Voskresensky said, Lukashenko wished for a constitutional reform and told those prisoners that this will be the last term of his presidency [57].

As it is discussed in the above section, the non-transparent political process and electoral fraud were the guiding factors for the demonstrations to begin. Among all other factors, these were the immediate cause that sparked political upheaval in Belarus. Although every attempt was made by authorities to stop the uprising, the demonstrators did not get convinced, and protests could not be quelled. The demonstrators adopted a multi-prolonged communication strategy for the sustenance of the uprising. Social media, especially Telegram Messenger, were massively used for this purpose. Telegram acted as a growth engine for organised protests and state resistance. The use of Telegram Messenger for organising protests was such that political commentators acknowledged the uprising as a “Telegram Revolution”. The next section focuses on whether there was any effect of social media on such political processes.

Effects of Social Media on Political Process

As political pundits dubbed the 2020 Belarusian protest as a “Telegram Revolution”, it is essential to understand the contribution of social media for any such uprising. For ages, media have been playing a crucial role in the production, control, and dissemination of information. Due to their role in the perception management of the citizen, they have always played a crucial role in changing the political landscape of any country. In this hyper changing world, the information and communication pattern has changed dramatically. Legacy media have developed a symbiotic relationship with new media and in particular with social media. Social media have been shaping the political narratives of countries along with traditional media.

Norris [58] advocates that mass media, which earlier were subordinate to the government, became more autonomous and critical of the same government. Old top-down methods of political communication, where only the elites were communicating to the masses, are becoming redundant. Social media reconfigure political communication into a bottom-up approach where masses decide their agenda with their logic, and they forced the ruling elites to follow those agendas. Social media have redefined the way government institutions operate. Social media have the capability to disseminate information directly to individuals without the intervention of any editorial or institutional gatekeepers. They have accumulated a greater degree of autonomy for individuals, institutions, civic groups, pressure groups.

Social media in the contemporary world have similarity with the press in medieval Europe. Both are voices of the mass, both are opposed by the rulers, and both are popular among the masses. The rulers and the mass both have extensively used these in the pursuit of successful public opinion building. Analogous to conventional media, social media have helped to develop intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, public communication, mass communication. They have been a tool to galvanise support for a political party and also for a political movement. Whether the political system is democratic or authoritarian, social media often offer a voice to political dissenters. They give a voice to everyone and empower everyone [59].

From the time of invention, the essential role of mass media was to inform the public. They provide requisite information to citizens for them to make appropriate decisions about their leadership and public policy. They have been working as watchdogs checking government actions. They facilitate agenda setting for public discussions of national and international issues, which was exclusively in the elite administrative domain [60]. They provide a platform for political dissent, unite people with a common cause, furnish like-minded groups working to resolve a particular societal, political problem.

In a democratic setup, opposition leaders often take on government through social media. Citizens use social media as an instrument for the expression of political dissent and constructive criticism. In an authoritarian system, citizens use them for expressing their anguish and also for organising demonstrations against authoritarianism. Social media have played a crucial role in organising large-scale protests across the globe. In popular uprisings, citizens used multiple social media platforms to checkmate the ruling elites. The Umbrella Revolution (pro-democracy movement) of Hong Kong in 2014 (used Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Fire-Chat), the pro-democracy uprising of Hong Kong in 2019 (used Telegram, LIHKG), the Arab Spring (used Facebook), the Iranian Green Revolution (used Twitter), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (aftermath of the run-off vote of the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election), the Telegram Revolution in Belarus, and various other protests used social media as an instrument of uninterrupted communication to initiate and uphold the uprisings [61–64].

As it is seen, social media have always played an integral role in any modern pro-democracy uprising. The effects of social media on the political process are imminent even in authoritarian states. This indicates the

advent of new media; in particular, social media such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. have changed methods of political communication as well as the political process. In fact, political communication in modern states seems to work like a feedback mechanism [65]. Also, the political process is arranged in a bottom-up fashion.

Telegram – A Factor or the Cause?

As it is discussed, whether there was a regime change or not, but social media platforms were the integral tools for the organisation of protests. The crucial question is whether Telegram Messenger (as the cause) sparked activism in Belarus (out of nothing did any Telegram message or video sparked outrage?) or facilitated (as a factor) the spark to grow. To understand this, one must apprehend whether in every case of political change social media spark political outrage, whether political transformation would have occurred without using social media, whether they create a democratic environment by providing freedom of information and encourage individuals to take risky political actions by organising low-cost political protests, whether they are the cause and a single isolated variable or multiple variables, whether they just impact or help produce the output. One must find whether the data are representative or non-representative, and whether the data are from only the English language or also include language of the state undergoing political transformation. Knowing this is a multi-vector analysis.

Authors give different opinions on the role of social media in ending autocratic governments. Conventional wisdom is that social media promote freedom and help global political transformation. They create new environments of political engagement and action. They facilitate “participatory politics and mass mobilization”, help to promote democracy and free markets and create global citizens [66].

Social media help to expose information that embarrasses incumbents in the regime, their corruptions, their repressions. They bring down the monopoly of the authority of controlling the communication platform. They empower the common citizen to raise their voice, assist them to inform and create awareness among others. They communicate and coordinate the goal of movements among diverse groups that do not have an organisational structure and effective leadership. They organise virtual movement when physical movement is difficult or risky. They bring external attention to the conflict. Although they may not give rise to mass mobi-

lisation, they certainly drive mobilisation. They can foster many small group demonstrators and dispersed sites. They minimise the authority crackdown because of the international attention to the demonstration [67].

Critically analysing “cyberutopian” and “cybersceptic” perspectives, Aday et al. [66] offer five levels of analysis such as “individual transformation, intergroup relations, collective action, regime policies, and external attention” [66] for a better understanding of the impact of new media on political transformation. New media, as they acknowledge, “have the potential to change how citizens think or act, mitigate or exacerbate group conflict, facilitate collective action, spur a backlash among regimes, and garner international attention toward a given country” [66].

Rosen provides an opposite perspective about the contribution of the internet and social media in fuelling protests across the world. He was sceptical about social media contribution in initiating a revolution. He argues that “tools are tools, Internet schmineternet” and opines that “revolutions happen when they happen” [68]. He strongly advocated that “factors are not causes” [68]. Highlighting the reason for protest to the decades of oppression by the dictators of Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, Kravets reminds, “... don’t confuse tools with root causes, or means with ends” [69]. Dozens of protesters self-immolated not because of tweets, but because of continuous clampdown of repressive government, he adds.

People use whatever communication means (tools) available for them at the time of political upheavals. Even in the pre-internet era, people used different communication tools to sustain uprisings: during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, audiocassettes were used as means; photocopying machines were used as means during the 1986 Yellow/People Power Revolution in the Philippines for which it was dubbed as the Xerox Revolution; the 1989 Tiananmen Square Democratic Movement, in which China massacred thousands of its own people, was known as the Fax Revolution because of the use of fax as the communication tool during the protests; text messages were used as means in 2001 People Power Revolution II in the Philippines. Reiff does not discredit the contribution of social media completely. He articulates that social media matter a lot, but “they do not incarnate freedom” [70]. Social media can check the authority rather than change the authority. They can be more useful as a media tool. They do not bring political change; rather, they engage the international community and offer media attention to the demonstration. They are a facilitator rather than an inciter [71]. They shape the perception of the outside world more than the

inside of a country. As Rosen stresses, the cause of the beginning of the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of a street vendor in the protest of getting economic justice rather than people having smartphones using social media. So, for cybersceptics, Telegram is a factor rather than the cause of revolution. It only helps to create weak ties and does not compete with traditional forms of organising a protest.

The Battle for Opinion through Telegram

Telegram may be a factor or maybe the cause, but it played a crucial role in the Belarus political upheaval. It was a tool in a battle for public opinion. Authors argue that social media “exacerbate conflict”, help authoritarian regimes to police their opponents, and “encourage self-segregation and polarization”, offer more opportunities to “spread hate, misinformation and prejudice” as people only seek out information that reinforces their prior belief [66].

The use of social media by the regimes has also changed. Authorities and their sympathisers have used it massively for effective communication and as an effective way to reach the masses. Authorities use social media to falsify the narrative of the demonstrators and also justify the crackdown on them. They try to undermine the protest by folding a lot of disinformation which consequently confuses people about the future of the movement. Governments tell people that social media narratives are hybrid-warfare for the sake of political instability in that country. Where demonstrators try to establish that the unrest is a continuation of the struggle against the tyrannical regime, authorities try to establish that the unrest is performed at the behest of external forces. Where protesters try to portray the protest as the voice of the mass and uprising of the mass, authorities try to portray the protest such as the voice of the few, the voice of the opposition only, there is a foreign hand behind the destabilization. Protesters try to portray citizens as victims at the hands of authority and target few political and economic giants, but authorities blame the protesters and some of their leaders as economic offenders who are burgling people for their selfish goals and foreign agents [57].

Referring to the Iranian election protest of 2009, Aday et al. show the fault line of the social media revolution. The Iranian regime, for them, deployed the same social network tools to identify, harass, and arrest the protesters; hence, like any other media, the Internet is not a “magic bullet”.

For them it is similar to a “rusty bullet” [66]. Communication channels are becoming extensively used to influence public opinion by numerous world leaders [72].

In the case of Belarus, unable to block Telegram channels, Lukashenko said irritatingly, “How can you stop these Telegram channels? Can you block them? No. Nobody can” [57]. It is interesting to note that Telegram was not banned during protests. Rather, the Belarusian authorities established effective communication with the public through a Telegram channel. They gather information from the same Telegram channel from which protesters receive information on demonstrations. Unable to block Telegram channels, the Belarusian authorities joined the Telegram Revolution. The government created its own Telegram channels to propagate the government’s view to the public. So, utilising Telegram or any other social media in an information battle is only the fortune of the winning party, be it the people or maybe the government, because both use the same weapon against each other to win the information war.

Telegram – The Invincible Tool of the Uprising

Telegram is an open and free instant messenger. As its founder Pavel Durov describes, it focuses on fast, secure communication, and it possesses the end-to-end encrypted messaging capability. It can be operated from multiple platforms such as Android, Windows, macOS, iOS, Linux, and directly from a web browser. It supports files of any audio, video, or image type. As the torchbearer of privacy, it protects “private conversations from snooping third parties”, and protects “personal data from third parties, such as marketers, advertisers, etc.” [73]. Like a radio broadcaster, Telegram has an unlimited broadcasting feature which is quite useful for organising mass protests. These were the crucial features that made Telegram an essential tool for the uprising.

Information vacuum was the first reason why Telegram became the prime choice of the protestors. The Telegram Revolution in Belarus was a vivid example of how traditional media have lost the narrative to social media. The public disproved the unbiased role of traditional media. The covering of the political process in the country could not reach the anticipation of netizens. As traditional media failed to anticipate the modern trends and the mood of the public, Telegram and other alternative media sources occupied this vacuum.

Encrypted as well as anonymous messaging was the reason why Telegram was even used by the government officials along with the protestors. Protests and uprisings are frequent affairs in a modern state. Political activists are always prone to detention, arrest, torture because of their political affiliation. To protect themselves and to fuel a movement, they need some extent of anonymity. It was observed when Hong Kong protestors in 2019 redefined the democratic uprising adding anonymity to their 2014 democratic protest methods. Telegram provided that level of anonymity and concealed identities during many protests across the globe. It also helped to spread information with encryption. As of 9 August 2020 in Belarus, when internet connectivity was severely disrupted, Telegram Messenger was the only working option for the opponents. The protesters chose Telegram because it was the platform that worked even in hours of severe internet disruption [5].

Information spreading and consumption patterns can be termed as another reason for which Telegram was popular at the receiving end, i.e., among the masses. Consumption, as well as the spreading of news, was faster through Telegram channels. Through Telegram channels, the gathering and dissemination of information were quick. For the consumer, the news was at their fingertips. They read, share, and discuss it with their friends without redirecting to any other websites [57].

The potential of garnering international attention was the fourth reason why the demonstrators chose a Telegram communication strategy. The long history of protests and the crackdowns exhibited the unresponsiveness of the Lukashenko government regarding the demands of the dissidents. Hence, they used social media to bring the attention of the international community, to garner international solidarity towards their struggle. Belarusian activists across the world were seen showing solidarity for the protesters in Belarus. International media, institutions, and communities also talked about the situation. It brought pressure to the Lukashenko government [74].

The Telegram channel Nexta, which means “somebody” in Belarusian, became the network of thousands of Belarusians to share information to strengthen the uprising. Another Telegram Channel named Belarus’ Golovnogo Mozga (Belarus of the Brain) gained prominence among the protesters [57]. Those pieces of information became pieces of public information that were not broadcast through any conventional media. Traditional media and satellite television were neglecting opposition and opposi-

tion movements largely. They covered almost all pro-regime information and almost no information on opposition movements. Telegram became the platform of intra-opposition ties to resist and counter the narrative of the establishment. So, Telegram became an integral part of the voice of the opposition in Belarus [5].

A decentralised and community-owned media environment was the reason why Telegram became the choice of the public. The flows of information needed a non-hierarchical and decentralised communication platform. Telegram provided that decentralised media organisation in the centrally controlled media environment. There were no centralised websites rather than decentralised Telegram channels which were public-friendly information consuming patterns. People from each sphere, from government insiders, from government enterprises, from many agencies, even from security services of Belarus, collaborated with the Nexta Telegram channel to transmit crucial information for the public. High-ranking officials, law enforcement agencies, even people from the president's administration also shared information through the Telegram channel because of the anonymity feature of Telegram. They provided various classified documents. After cross-verification, the administrators of the channel fed the exclusive information to the public for mass demonstration [5].

People harshly criticised the Belarusian authorities; Alexander Lukashenko was vilified personally. People proceeded from the fact that Lukashenko lost the presidential election to Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and strongly supported the opposition leaders. During the 2020 mass protests in Belarus, which began after Lukashenko was declared the winner of the elections, it was the Nexta channel, and not the oppositionists, that became the main coordinator of the anti-government actions [57].

People became anonymous journalists. They contributed text messages, photos or videos to the channel. Telegram became the most effective tool for thousands of protesters demonstrating throughout Belarus. Nexta was a kind of weapon for them. They could know the place and time of the demonstration, where and when to go. The channel deterred the government and the police because, when the police approached them, using information from the Telegram channel, they fled and regrouped. They found out where their detained friends were taken and what was happening to them. Rallies were organised with business-like precision. There were to-do lists for the protesters; precision in goals, precision in time and preci-

sion in location encouraged the mass to engage in the protests. It helped transform scattered rallies into a well-coordinated action [57].

The channel became the symbol of a digital victory over the political leviathan, and Protasevich was coordinating it. Unable to handle the situation, Lukashenko's administration seemed doomed. Even Lukashenko's supporters, workers of state-run factories, joined the protests. Lukashenko approached the twelve political prisoners who are also opposition's leaders, but no results yielded.

In the country with the population of 9.5 million people, nearly two million followed the Nexta Live Telegram channel. The influence of the channel became an urgent threat to the authorities. To control the turmoil, a number of Telegram channels, including Nexta and Belarus of the Brain, were identified as extremist in Belarus; criminal cases were initiated against their creators and administrators.

Conclusion

Uprisings are the by-product of sustained old grievances. The anguish, discontent, frustration of the Belarusian people was seen during the political instability because of the non-distribution and non-democratisation of power. The stagnating economy, eroded public services, austerity policies made by Lukashenko, the falling living standard, the mismanagement of the pandemic, the greater pro-Russian and less democratic nature of government, growing demands for political change after 26 years of Lukashenko's rule, and electoral frauds were the reasons of the uprising from the standpoint of the protestors. The geopolitical disadvantage amounted further to put Belarus into a buffer and unstable political state.

Like in many former USSR states, in Belarus, few elites have consolidated political power. A particular person or few persons affiliated with them ruled the state. People understood the power vertical in Belarus was created by Lukashenko and aims to protect him. They believed that the power matrix had no representation of Belarusian people. People just wanted a transparent political system that can provide them with a free and fair election. Primarily, the Belarus political uprising demonstrates the political aspiration of the middle class who have not been able to receive political representation since 1994. Political frustration drove the uprising in Belarus. The uprising was the confrontation of the working-class frustra-

tion with the political elite. The uprising was in search of a political alternative to the long-standing political status quo.

Few trained activists who do it in the name of broader public interest often shape social movements. They may or may not have public support, but, according to their logic, they are fighting for the people. They portray themselves as the facilitators of change. Although social media are a non-living entity, similar actions of trained activists are performed through social media. Social media cause a *balance of a power equation between* the power of the people against the people in power. In particular, similar actions were performed through Telegram during the 2020–2021 Belarus protests. That is the reason why Telegram was credited as the principal tool of the revolution.

Telegram became an integral part of the design of protest information campaigns, protest organisations, protest coordination with the accurate information on the time, place and agenda of the protests. It performed not only the key functions such as the primary means of communication service and a huge network of protesters but also the crucial functions of the trendsetter and the political agenda-setter. Although authorities across the world had learned how to control Twitter Revolutions, Facebook Revolutions, and other social media revolutions, the Telegram Revolution was new for Lukashenko to handle.

Although social media's contribution to sparking a protest is highly debatable, their role in sustaining the sparked protest cannot be refuted. Here, Telegram Messenger is not an independent variable or the cause of the political instability in Belarus, but it is definitely the moderator variable or a factor that worked as one of the catalysts for infuriating as well as sustaining the uprising. The non-transparent and unfair political system was the immediate cause for the uprising, and Telegram channels were the growth engines for the sustained protests. Social media and peer-to-peer communication were employed as potentially disruptive forces. Therefore, the role of Telegram should be understood based on its role in facilitating collective action against the government rather than based on its treatment as an isolated variable of the uprising.

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Телеграмм-революция – Анализ политической нестабильности Белоруссии в 2020 г.

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Ключевые слова: Белоруссия, протесты, социальные сети, телеграмм-революция, геополитика, Россия

Политическая нестабильность в Белоруссии во ходе и после президентских выборов 2020 г. и широкое использование мессенджера *Telegram* в качестве средства массовой информации для разжигания протеста стали предметом широкого обсуждения в мировом политическом дискурсе. Цель этой статьи – проанализировать влияние мессенджера *Telegram* на политическую нестабильность в ходе и после белорусских выборов. Анализируются факторы политического кризиса в Белоруссии, такие как геополитическая ситуация, пандемия COVID-19, демократический переход на постсоветском пространстве, экономические трудности в республике и непрозрачный политический процесс. Анализ показал, что накопление политической власти немногими элитами ускорило политическое разочарование среди людей. Недемократическая, непрозрачная, несправедливая избирательная практика стала непосредственной причиной, приведшей к политической нестабильности. *Telegram* выступал в качестве основного канала связи на протяжении всех демонстраций и сыграл большую роль в поддержании протеста. Именно по этой причине ведущие политологи назвали этот протест телеграмм-революцией.