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Social Activism in Post-Communist Countries and New Media: The Case of the Tent Camp Protest Action in Minsk, 2006

Abstract: Social movements, along with political parties play a significant role in socio-political life of contemporary democracies. As distinct from political parties, they do not pretend to take part in the direct exercise of power (though many of them do demand to be included into the decision-making process), but realizing their specific aims and functions, they exert considerable influence on the political process. Existence in a given country of wide range of social movements, struggling for their own interests is widely considered an indicator of a strong civil society. But how do social movements pursue their goals in countries with underdeveloped institutes of civil society? Does the intervention of new ICTs have certain emancipatory potential, which could be used by social movements to facilitate the desired social transformations? Is it possible to speak about the generational change in social movements, meaning new collective actors, using ICTs and Internet, significantly differ from those that can be termed "old" collective actors? In this paper, I analyze the ways in which new ICTs change the scope, ideology and structure of contemporary social movements and illustrate these transformations with the example of peculiar Belarusian movement,—namely, the Tent Camp, emerged as a result of falsification of the presidential elections in March, 2006, on October Square in Minsk.

Keywords: New social movements, Melucci, Internet, post-Communist collective actions, Belarus, Tent Camp.

Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, states, which have been recently under the command of centralized authority, suddenly gained independence. As Alexey Pikulik[1] (2007: 194) stresses, the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe began their journey from the autocratic state socialism to the consolidated liberal democracy on the political axis and from the state-controlled to the market economy on the economical axis (p. 194). It is important to mention, that starting conditions were not identical and the beginning of the transformation was not the situation 'tabula rasa'. Almost all countries of the Central Eastern Europe after the 15 years of the political and economic reforms became the members of the EU. In these countries, the process of democratization was successfully combined with the process of the economic liberalization.

[1] Alexey Pikulik, Belarusian analyst, director of Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies

The group of so-called "problematic" post-Soviet countries was developing in another vein. According to 2014 Nations in Transit data[2] three out of 12 post-Soviet republics were labeled "hybrid regimes" (Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova), and nine "authoritarian regimes" (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan). As outlined in the Index of Economic Freedom, as published by Heritage Foundation[3] in 2014, one country was recognized as 'mostly free economy' (Georgia), four countries have 'moderately free' economies (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan), four—'mostly not free economies' (Moldova, Tajikistan, Russia and Belarus) and three—'repressed economies' (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine). It is necessary to stress those authoritarian trends in abovementioned countries cannot be considered "pure" as sometimes there are signs of pluralism; liberal market economies may contain elements of planned economy. As Pikulik stresses, Belarus represents unique case of the co-decomposition in both political and economic spheres. Put it in another way, we witnessed rollback towards authoritarianism simultaneously with the deliberalization of economy (2007: 194–195).

Pikulik (2007) argues that both leverage of international finance institutions and the EU integration policy were among the most important external factors, determining the specific trajectory of the development of the Central Eastern European countries (p. 194). Arguably the most significant internal factor for the specific character of the post-Communist developmental trajectory was the agency of various collective actors, most notably, social movements, aspiring to return to Europe and struggling for the recognition of their identities. Those movements, as I argue, significantly differ from the old, class-based movements, typical for Western societies in 1950s.

As Miniankou stresses, today we witness the birth of the culture, where "parents were have to learn from their children" (2006, p. 34). Indeed, the older generations' experience becomes inapplicable to deal with the quick transformations of contemporary global society, because in even the most remote parts of the world young people engage in the communication via networks and obtain some common experience. This generation gap is new, global and universal. To a large extent this transformation is the result of penetration of new ICTs in our everyday life.

Main aim of this paper is to prove that characteristic traits of so-called "New generation of social movements" (rhizomorphic, fluid, decentralized structure and flexible ideology) are obtained through the active usage of ICTs and Internet in particular, which appear to be not mere *means* for communication, but rather organizational principle per se. I illustrate this thesis, addressing to the specificity of the Belarusian Tent Camp movement (often labeled "Belarusian Maidan"), emerged on the October Square in March, 2006 after the falsification of the election results, where young

[2] Nations in Transit is a thorough in-depth comparative research of the democratization process in post-Communist countries, conducted by the influential NGO Freedom House.

[3] Heritage Foundation is a recognized think tank, based in USA, aiming "to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense" See http://www.heritage.org/about/.

people used Internet to communicate about the aims and means of collective action. In particular they discussed slogans, forms of collective action via Internet.

The structure of the paper is as follows: at first, in order to make an introduction to the social movements' problematic, I will briefly present NSM approach to social movement analysis, elaborated by Alberto Melucci, which, as I argue, allows for better understanding of the contemporary social movements actively using ICTs. Then I will concentrate on the types of social activism, typical for the post-Communist societies. Finally I will analyze specific social movement, namely, the Tent Camp, implementing conceptual instruments elaborated by Melucci to reveal its uniqueness.

Social Processes in Network Dimension: The Directions of Analysis

The rapid development of new ICTs and Internet from the mid 1990s and their interweaving into our everyday life led to the heated debates about the impact these technologies may have on the social practices and political processes. Such questions as whether Internet can make politics more transparent, accountable and responsive, whether it is possible to transform the authoritarian regimes through the mobilization of supporters via Internet came at the focus of attention. By the end of 1990s—beginning 2000s most of the researchers of so-called "electronic democracy" were quite reserved in their speculations,—more often than not Internet was rather assigned a complementing part in the political processes. The researchers did not believe that Internet could change democracy either in positive or negative way (see e.g. Dreyfus (2004)). However, they did recognize that the global information network contributes to the growth of number of protest actions and transformation of collective actions' types and forms. Be it the Zapatistas or anti-globalization movement, social movements can be characterized as having fluid, non-hierarchical and decentralized character thanks to active Internet and ICTs usage. What is more important, new movements challenge and disrupt the dominant discourses of liberalism and Marxism, stimulating formation of alternative practices and discourses instead of attempting to establish new hegemony.[4] In this chapter I would like to describe how new ICTs and Internet influence social movements as well as to demonstrate, that Internet does not merely play complimentary role in the political process, but is constitutive for the way in which the collective actors make meanings of themselves and their actions.

When speaking about the impact Internet has on the specificity of contemporary practices of collective identification we may refer to four important aspects. First of all, electronic media can influence the users in a new, more effective ways (through the combination of textual information with the representation of messages in audio- and video- form); second, and more important: new possibilities for communication, emerged as a result of active ICTs usage in our everyday life, facilitate the formation of new collective actors. Third, the organization of protest has become less expensive: e.g. one does not need to print leaflets with call for action today, it is sufficient to

[4] As is assumed for example by the theory of hegemony elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985)

create a Facebook page with all the necessary information and ask friends to "like" it.[5] Fourth, all the aspects mentioned above, contribute to the unique character of meaning-making process implemented by the social movements, or, in another words, influence on how social movements understand themselves and the world around them.

Considering the specificity of contemporary collective actors I would like to use Melucci's concept of collective identity as an analytical instrument. The concept of collective identity was introduced into sociological discourse in order to overcome the limitations of the previous theoretical approaches (resource mobilization theory and political process theory). As Jasper and Poletta (2005) argue, concept of collective identity is thought to answer four important questions:

1) What reason stands for the emergence of collective actors? Instead of taking the collective actor for granted we must explain why it has emerged in the first place. Analyzing the historical and cultural context the social theorist must bring to light the conflict which led to the organization of the collective action (Jasper & Poletta 2005: 286).
2) What was the motivation for the participation in the movement? The concept of collective identity may be helpful in explaining the reason for the participation in a collective action (Jasper & Poletta 2005: 286).
3) Does the collective action performed by the actor have strategic character? The collective actors by the very choice of the form of action make the act of communication with the audience: strategic choice of the form of action reflects the beliefs and self-understandings of the social movement (Jasper & Poletta 2005: 292).
4) The concept of collective identity also allows analyzing the ramifications of collective actors' activity for the cultural dimension of society (as opposed to the resource mobilization and political process theories). Collective actors, according to Italian social theorist Alberto Melucci (1996) are "the prophets" who predict cultural and social transformations, occurring not in the future, but at this very moment (p. 1). It is crucially important to hear and understand the voices of these actors, as their role is to "signal deep transformation in the logic and the processes that guide complex societies" (p. 1), as they affirm something which overcomes their particularity and address all of us (ibid.). Further I will briefly consider Melucci's New social movement approach to analysis of collective actors.

Melucci's NSM Approach to Social Movement Analysis

The Italian social theorist Melucci introduced the concept of New social movement to try and differentiate social phenomena emerged in 1960–1970s from "old" social movements—class-based formations appealing to the state in order to resolve

[5] Bimber (1998) claims that easinness of information dissemination in Internet is especially important for marginalized groups and organizations, which are deprived of access to public institutions or political organizations. These new groups, oriented towards the direct action, enjoy the advantages of Internet to a greater extent as compared to the traditional political actors such as parties or labor movements (Bimber, 1998, p. 393).

the vibrant issues. In particular, the social theorist defined New social movements as "social symbol operating in modern society, illustrating a symbolic challenge to the dominant power structures" (1989: 12). As opposed to the "old" social movements, New movements did not aspire to the redistribution of political power; instead, they sought for the transformation of dominant normative and cultural codes through the recognition of new collective identities and transformation of lifestyles (Melucci 1996: 1).

Collective identity for Melucci is "interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals or groups at a more complex level and concerned with orientations of actions within the perceived field of opportunities and constraints" (Melucci 1996: 49). "Interactive and shared" in this context means, that these elements are constructed through the repeated process of communication between the individuals. According to Melucci, collective identities are "constructs" expressing their pragmatic relationship towards the world and themselves, and representing the silent consensus among the individuals. It is this silent knowledge, which structures and directs the thoughts, meanings and actions of the collective (Melucci 1996: 34).

Internet, being the fundamental medium of communication for contemporary collective actors, connects the dynamic points of the collective actor (its elements or members) with each other. Collective identities in this context are the process of common meanings' organization: interaction of members via Internet leads to formation of symbolical structures, which presuppose the elaboration of common understanding of the situation, definition of friends, enemies etc. Massimiliano Andretta admits that as the result of the "meaning work" social movements symbolically construct a collective subject (the working class, the people, the nation, environmentalists, women, etc.); integrate the structural mobilization potential; convince sympathizers to become involved in a collective action, and convince broader public opinion that the movement's claims are "just" and that the status quo is "unjust" (Andretta 2003: 1).

Snow and Benford describe these symbolical structures as interpretational schemes or frames, used by the social movement for the simplification and coding of the "contradictory reality" (including various situations, events, objects) in such a manner as to extend new reality in the minds of the movement's members and mobilize the potential supporters to take part in the unconventional collective action against the status quo (1992: 132). The process of framing consists from three aspects: 1) analysis of the problematic (or "unjust") situation, in order to 2) define "culpable" side responsible for the unjust situation, and 3) suggestion of the solution of the problem (Snow & Benford 1992: 133). Successful framing may result in the formation of the noncontradictory image of the world, embracing various events, which leads to perception of the specific social situation as meaningful, and to the legitimization of collective action (represented as "struggle against the injustice").

It is necessary to stress that the establishment of the interactive frames in the collective actors is by no means the singular action: the events and social situation are always redefined as the "diffused" power of the network socie-

ty[6] tends to retrace the symbolical field and reinterpret the collective actions in their own way. Consequently collective identities of contemporary social movements obtain rhizomorphic[7] character: they are anti-hierchical, unlinear, decentralized and are always in the process of becoming. These traits emerge as a result of active process of communication through the Internet. Let us consider how Internet contributes to the fundamental transformation of social movements.

New Media as Constitutive Element in Development of New Movements

While the first researches about the influence of Internet on the social movement considered it merely as the new form of communication,—contemporary social theorists agree that Internet is not only the medium for communication but rather the organizational principle per se (see Van Aelst (2004), Kavada (2003)). As Kavada argues, Internet influences all three fundamental characteristics of social movements: structure, ideology, scope.

1) Internet contributed to the loose anti-hierarchical forms of organization which reflect its rhizomorphic structure (Kavada 2006: 4); 2) Internet allows the "organization of events on a global scale," and serves as connecting medium for the participants of the movement in various countries (ibid.); 3) Internet may connect ideas which at first sight may seem incompatible. Also, "Internet-based transnational movements exhibit less ideological crystallization and more centrifugal tendencies than non-Internet based movements" (ibid.).

At the same time it is necessary to stress that Internet is not a free space, devoid of power markers, and one can not represent it as an ideal medium for the resistance. Having emerged as predominantly "smooth space" it has been reterritorized by the capital and the State in the course of time. Panoptical power of State and capitalist control slowly yet inescapably transform Internet into "striated space." Among main mechanisms of control used by authorities—adoption of laws, regulating the flows of information and the introduction of various supervision instruments (e.g. control of traffic); main mechanisms used by business organizations—commodification of information, advertisements, colonization of networks' infrastructure (Wray, The Rhizomatic/Panoptic Dyad, § 2). In most of the countries (especially authoritarian ones) authorities aspire to regulate and control Internet. When speaking about the adoption of laws regulating the Internet activity, more often than not they are contradictory and ineffective (as is the case with the infamous directive № 60 adopted by the Belarusian government), and violate the basic freedoms of citizens. To my mind it is necessary to protest against any of these acts, in order to prevent the authorities from interference in the communication medium. The flexible forces of capital

[6] As Castells argues, capital regenerates in the cyberspace, adopts digital form and becomes mobile and diffused, hence, contemporary elite moves from the centralized city spaces to the decentralized cyberspace (1997, p. 470).

[7] Term "rhizhome" was used by Deleuze and Guattari in their influential work "A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia" (1987) to describe fluid, decentralized structures as opposed to stable centralized arborous structure.

also adopt innovative strategies in order to colonize more spaces and neutralize the resistant actors (one of the most effective means for this—controlling of the network infrastructure). Nevertheless the resistance forces in Internet (as for example the digital disobedience actions implemented by Zapatista movement) form the lines of flight from the "striated spaces" colonized by the capital and the State and form deterritorized "smooth spaces" (ibid.).

One should also mention one important trait of collective identities' formation process: as opposed to the movements of the past (at the centre of which lay structural characteristics assigned to the movements by the state) they appear to be the result of self-reflection. Collective identity may be described as reflexive process of organization. Melucci stresses in this context that "collective identity is a learning process which leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor that we can call a 'social movement'" (1996: 75). The learning process means gaining experience through the solution of problems posed by the social environment, interpretation of events in a certain vein, which allows movement to obtain continuity and integrity. Referring to Appadurai's terminology, we may argue, that formation of collective "project identity" is the result of reflexive construction process, which occurs by the virtue of "imagined worlds" creation from the "building blocks" or "perspective constructs" (or scapes in the terminology of Appadurai (see 1996)).

* * *

In such a way, reflexivity, obtained because of new ICTs usage, is another important trait of the collective identity formation: identity becomes the learning process, during which the social actor creates his own "imagined world" through the specific way of symbolic landscapes organization, and the interpretation of the events and facts in a certain vein. The nation-state attempts to appropriate the right for the production of differences, treating the legitimized identity as "central" or as pattern for all other particularities, which leads to the aspiration to cut off all the differing groups. Such an approach reflects modern understanding of the society. At the same time, social imagination practices, implemented by New social movements via Internet, lead to construction of new collective identities, and hence, "alternative realities," opposing the dominant image of world translated by the nation-state propagandists.

That same logic could have been traced during the collective action of the Tent Camp, emerged in March, 2006 on October Square as a result of falsification of presidential elections. Labeled as "Belarusian Maidan" and "the Birth of New Belarusian Opposition" by Belarusian social theorists, this event has become one of the most vivid collective actions in 2000s. The participants of the movement actively used Internet in order to organize and maintain collective action, which posed certain difficulties for social theorists who tried to anayze that movement. Before proceeding to the analysis of the Tent Camp, let us briefly consider specific traits of the collective activism in the Eastern and Central European post-Communist countries.

The Dynamics of Social Activism in the Post-Communist Countries: The Tent Camp as NSM

Despite passing unique trajectory of development after the collapse of the USSR, most of the Eastern and Central European post-Communist societies cannot boast of vibrant civil society and significant number of collective actions (with Poland being the notable exception). Some theorists even wonder whether newly established democracies in these countries can be considered democracies at all, as both the vibrant civil society and active social movements, recognized as the important distinctive features of the consolidated democracy, have little or no influence on the political and social processes in these countries. Meyer & Tarrow (1998) in particular stress: when it comes to political mobilization, the abovementioned countries are no match for the Western societies, boasting the active, socially-integrated, and professionalized social movement organizations. To my mind, this peculiarity of the post-Communist societies can be explained by some developmental traits to a certain extent typical for all the countries of the Communist period.

Communist authorities encouraged the mass participation in the ritualized collective actions, designed to demonstrate mass support of the political regime (e.g. the anniversary of the October Revolution, May 1st marches, May 9th demonstrations etc.), while any other type of mass activism has been prohibited. Hence there was no room for activity of autonomous social movements in the Soviet period, with Poland's Solidarity being the notable exception. As Císař argues, "collective action and social movement activity were expropriated by the Communist regimes, which ideologically identified their origins in the working class movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries" (2013: 994). At the same time, Communist regimes supported certain New social movements (at least on rhetorical level), preoccupied with the feminist and peace issues, as their aims coincided with the "official Communist regimes' anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist agenda" (Císař 2013: 994). However those movements have not had any real influence on the social environment and the practices.

The Peculiarities of Collective Actions in Post-Communist Countries after the Collapse of the USSR

After the collapse of the USSR, masses started engaging in various grassroots initiatives, with most of them being implemented by the trade unions (see Císař (2013)). Though sometimes reluctantly, newly established governments favored the emergence of various social movements and NGOs, allowing them to organize collective actions and draw new members. However despite the favorable circumstances, the level of participation in collective actions in the Eastern and Central European countries was low, as compared to their Western neighbors. Howard identifies four reasons for a relative passivity of the citizens:

1) Mistrust to Communist organizations. Traumatic experience of participation in the Communist organizations (where pluralism was suppressed), led citizens to perceive newly emerged organizations as the successors of the old Communist-type

ones. As opposed to the Western liberal tradition, authorities of the transitional Eastern and Central European countries did not recognize the protest as a legitimate way of solving political process (Howard 2002: 293).

2) Importance of informal networks (so-called "circle of friends"). There is another legacy of the Communist period—while public life was almost entirely politicized, common people have had the only opportunity to discuss vibrant political and economic issues, while being in the circle of friends (or people they could entirely trust). As a result, people did not experience necessity to increase their social capital, as they were content with the volume of social interactions they had (Howard 2002: 294).
3) Disappointment in post-Communist reforms. The failure of political elites to meet popular expectations of implementing effective political and economic reforms that could drastically improve their everyday life, made people feel themselves deceived and apathetic. As a result, newly received political freedoms were perceived as "opportunity not to participate at all" (Howard 2002: 294).

According to Císař (2013), trade unions were those organizations, which managed to retain relatively high level of participation after the collapse of the USSR (even though the membership decreased dramatically in the beginning of 1990s). Císař stresses, that "functioning logic is path-dependent, since these organizations inherited mass membership from the pre-1989 period either in the form of officially existing regime-controlled organizations or in the form of mass movement against the Communist regime (the Solidarity movement in Poland)" (2013: 995). Labor unions contributed to a lower number of collective actions in the post-Communist period, because of their conventional and formalized way of communication with the political system. Ost (2008) in particular stressed that trade unions did not succeed in representing the interests of the working class after the collapse of the USSR. Despite still being able to organize mass actions (whose repertoire was limited to conventional forms of petitions, demonstrations, strikes), the unions lost their capacity to defend the needs of workers, which were deeply affected by post-Communist reforms. Ekiert & Kubik (1999) stress that majority of actions were preoccupied with the economic issues, while post-materialist demands were rarely expressed.

At the same time, Císař (2013) stresses that so-called "transactional activists" ("based predominantly on small advocacy organizations in sectors such as the environment and women's and human rights" (p.996)) did actually stand for the post-materialist issues (such as civic and human rights, ecological and environmental problems, etc.). Their actions have been to a large extent ignored by the most of scholars of the post-Communist transformations. Those organizations received assistance from various EU- or USA-based non-state funds and private foundations (such as Soros' Open Society Fund). The foreign assistance allowed the organizations survive without the support from the side of local population, which was largely disinterested in the issues advocated by the abovementioned social actors. As has already been mentioned, transactional activism could not boast a wide popular support, and their actions usually drew only several dozens of participants. The repertoire of actions usually involved a wide range of non-violent strategies, sometimes with reliance on

the cultural forms such as performance, festival, exhibition (Císař 2013: 997). Though Ekiert and Kubik (1999) have not registered post-materialist demands in Poland in the 1990s, Císař (2013) argues that those issues were at the center of one third of all the actions in Czech Republic.

Another type of social activism, which has drawn yet fewer participants, was the so-called radicalist activism. As opposed to the transactional activists, radicals used to implement the direct action and demonstrations (sometimes violent) to reach their aims, being "extra-institutional political force" (Císař 2013: 997). Císař stresses that "both radical Left movements, which are interested in radical change of the capitalist economy and radical Right and nationalist organizations, which attack the fundamentals of the present liberal state such as minority rights (e.g. homosexuals in Poland, Roma in Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Hungary), fall into this category of activism" (Císař 2013: 997). Radicalist activism used decentralized networks in order to mobilize their supporters for collective actions and relied on the resources generated by the members of the group. It is obvious that due to marginal character of their demands their actions lacked popular support. As has already been mentioned, the negative experience associated with the anti-capitalist leftist ideology made it even harder for the radical movements to draw new participants, while radical right slogans became relatively popular in the post-Communist countries (such as Poland, Russia, Hungary, etc.). Radicals usually raised the problems concerning foreign policy and national security (Císař 2013: 997).

Císař differentiates another type of activism, typical for the post-Communist countries—civic self-organization. He admits that the mere presence of this kind of activism is surprising, as it "partially questions the skeptical diagnoses of the state of post-Communist civil society based on individual level data on non-participation" (Císař 2013: 997). Indeed civic self-organizations were rather rare occurrence (they were usually scarce, did not draw a lot of participants and took the form of non-violent demonstration) and have been registered in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Czech Republic. In most of the cases participants did not rely on the assistance of organizations and funds and financially contributed the action themselves. Císař stresses that in order such action to take place, there should be "dedicated individuals, probably experienced in social and/or political organizing," who can mobilize supporters if some significant event occurs (2013: 997).

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The peculiar character of the social activism in the post-Communist European countries cannot be described by a single concept. Císař suggests differentiating "at least four different ways by which political activists organize and express their grievances" (2013: 998). While to a large extent the abovementioned trends and types of actions were characteristic for Belarus in the beginning of 1990s as well (see Dynko & Bulhakau (2011)), the sphere of social and political activism has dramatically shrunk after Lukashenka established authoritarianism. He introduced new decrees making it almost impossible for the NGOs to receive the financial aid from abroad and compli-

cating the procedure of the NGOs registration. As a result, most of the NGOs were forced out of legal space and started operate underground.

The opportunities for the protest and direct action have also dramatically decreased after the adoption of severe laws concerning the mass demonstrations. In most of the cases authorities stuck to policy of "zero tolerance" towards protests. That is why in recent years we witnessed the politicization of the social life, where any collective action (irrespective of its form) was considered the expression of disloyalty to the existing regime and hence as a violation of the law. The scale and massive character of actions decreased, with most of collective actors facing difficulty in mobilizing supporters to struggle for the most important issues. Consequently, while trying to analyze the Belarusian social environment, one may even wonder, whether there is civil society in Belarus at all. Most of collective actors' activity is usually rather pronouncedly a-political, or conducted with numerous precautions. In my account of Belarusian situation I prefer to speak about civil society in a weak sense, that is, rather about the civic initiatives, mass/collective actions, than about the civil society and social movements as a whole. Unfortunately, the social, political and economic environment is too unfavorable for the activity of the social movements with a mass support.

From another side, political opposition (meaning all the political actors struggling against the regime) tries to form the lines of equivalence (in Laclau and Mouffe's terms (1985)) with other social groups in order to build the counterhegemonic block. Hence any collective action which does not aspire to the transformation of existing regime and intentionally distances itself from the political agenda is considered as marginal and insignificant. However such a view, concentrated exclusively on the measurable aspects of the actions (such as their efficacy/inefficacy, demands of the participants, etc.) leads to omission of some important traits of contemporary collective actors, such as uniqueness, open-endedness, experimental and creative character of collective actions. NSM approach in this context could prove to be a useful alternative. Among the main benefits of the NSM approach, elaborated by Melucci—ability to avoid the substantialism in the interpretation of social movements' agency. Moreover, the concentration on the symbolical and communicative dimensions of the movement allows analyzing social movement as intersection of complex processes. Further I will try to demonstrate how NSM approach could be helpful in considering the peculiar collective action in Belarus.

New Generation of Activists in Belarus: Analysis of the Tent Camp

On the eve of the presidential elections of 2006, many Belarusians hoped that long-term Lukashenka's rule (of 12 years) would be over and that the democratic transition will begin. This argument may be backed by the fact that the year 2006 was marked by the most massive collective actions in the 2000s. As far as the civil activity is concerned, one can bring the collective actions of 2006 into line with the street protests of 1996–1997 (the peak of the struggle between the opposition and the authorities in history of independent Belarus, occurred after Lukashenka has radically changed Constitution to concentrate power in his hands) (Dynko & Bulhakau 2011: 500).

Among the main mobilization factors were the presidential campaign of 2006 along with the democratic revolutions occurred in post-Soviet countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan). Another important factor according to Melyantsou was the relative competition among the oppositional political forces: for the first time in a long period they formed the coalition, named joint candidate for a presidential post who has elaborated substantial political program, and held the successful media campaign (the rating of Milinkevich rose from 1.6. to 26 per cent[8]) (Dynko & Bulhakau: 500). According to the polls, the protest moods were quite high: almost 40 per cent of the population was waiting for the political changes.[9]

As Melyantsou stresses the electoral campaign of two candidates from opposition "was accompanied with the expectations of the non-violent revolution according to the model of the Ukrainian one" (Dynko & Bulhakau 2011: 500). Those expectations were fueled by the financial support from the EU and the USA, as well as by the political isolation of the Belarusian authorities. According to Melyantsou (2011) in 2006, there were around 10 collective actions with the quantity of participants exceeding the number of 1000 (Dynko & Bulhakau 2011: 500). This figure contrasts the previous years' statistics (as in the period of 2001–2005 we witnessed rather decreasing of the civil activity) (ibid.). All the significant collective actions of 2006 were held in Minsk, although some actions were also held in the regions (they attracted less participants) (ibid.). Almost all of actions were implicitly connected with the presidential elections and the protest against the falsifications (ibid.). One may conclude that the presidential campaign has been the key mobilizing factor, determining the direction of the protest activity of 2006. Indeed, almost all of the actions can be characterized as "traditional": in a sense that they were conducted following the habitual scenarios of oppositional meetings: marching through the streets, after which the meeting was held. All these collective actions may be well described by the model of the "politics of demand." In all except one of them participants protested against the "unfair elections" and demanded the recalculation of votes. I argue that the collective action held between 20 and 23rd of March when the protesters set the Tent Camp on the central square of Minsk can be considered the glimpse of the "New social movement" in the sense of a word used by Melucci.

As Melyantsou (2011) argues, the Tent Camp was "the rare example of the self-organization when the initiative proceeded from the activists and not the political leaders" (Dynko & Bulhakau 2011: 502). It is this action, which has become the symbol of the protest of 2006 and allowed the maintaining of the protest potential in Minsk. The Tent Camp emerged spontaneously and was supported by the activists who did not belong to the traditional organized opposition. For the first time in the history of social activism in Belarus, heterogeneous group of protesters (consisting from the unengaged young people along with the adults and the activists of the political parties) has decided not to follow the scenario suggested by the political leaders and pitched the Tent Camp on the Minsk central square, organizing the twenty-four-hour duty.

[8] See IISEPS polls, February, 2006 (http://www.iiseps.org/2-06-1.html).
[9] See IISEPS polls (http://www.iiseps.org/press5.html).

Notwithstanding the frost participants of the protest action have spent almost a week under the supervision of the police and KGB. The latter blocked any assistance to the participants from the side of local residents and NGOs (police arrested people carrying the tea, food stuff and blankets to the participants, as well as those leaving the Tent Camp). Activists used Internet (internet community minsk_by in particular) to inform all those interested about the development of events on the square, to invent the slogans of the protest, as well as to draw potential supporters. In fact, as I argue, it is through the online discussions in that Internet community held between the Tent Camp inhabitants, sympathizers and opponents that the collective identity of the protest movement was formed.

Although most of Belarusian social theorists compare it to Ukrainian Maidan (see e.g. Miniankou (2006), Melyantsou (2008)), my thesis here is that we deal with quite another type of social activism, which can be described as spontaneous formation of rhizomorphic assemblage. First, the contingent of all those taking part in the collective action was mixed: protesters did not belong to a single political force; second, their actions were not previously planned; third, participants have not had clear political goals; fourth, they demonstratively refused from the representation of their interests by the political leaders (Kazulin and Milinkevich); fifth, even after the arrest protesters have continued to form assemblages with all those concerned (as a result, several political initiatives were started, including "Bunt" and political flash-mobs). Further, I will consider all abovementioned arguments in detail, based on data from Pontis foundation. However before this I will briefly describe the "history" of the Tent Camp, main stages in its development and explain its uniqueness.

The Tent Camp: History and General Description

I will try to explain why the Tent Camp, despite relatively low number of participants, obtained important symbolical significance in the struggle of opposition for power.[10] In my consideration of Tent Camp I rely on data taken from the book of interviews *Verym! Mozham! Peramozham!* (2006). This book consists from interviews of participants who suffered from repressions of authorities. It is organized in such a way, that the interviews of the participants who were arrested before the "Ploshcha" (pitching of the Tent Camp) come in the beginning, while the interviews of those who were beaten and arrested after the Tent Camp dismantling come near the end of the book. In such a way, the Tent Camp serves as the key element of the book.

On the 20th of March, 2006th around 20.00, after the end of the meeting against the falsification of the presidential elections the activists have set the Tent Camp on the October Square. On the first night on the October Square participants put

[10] This thesis could seem vague for the readers, who are not closely familiar with the Belarusian political scene. Though being used quite often in the beginning of 2000s, it is after the Tent Camp of 2006, that the "invitation to seal presidential campaign at the Ploschcha" (meaning "to draw as much people as possible to participation in the street protest action"), has become an important political moto of the oppositional politicians. Four years later, during the presidential campaign of 2010, seven out of nine presidential candidates called their supporters to come to Ploshcha. This trend, I believe is the result of mythologization of the Tent Camp protest action and heroization of the participants.

up 18 tents. At first there were only 5 of them which were dismantled by the KGB officers who beat the initiators of the action and took the tents and the sleeping bags with them. Then, the activists joined hands with each other and formed the circle, within which another 10 tents were set. This human ribbon prevented the police and KGB officers from penetration into the Tent Camp, although some of them succeeded in poking their way into the Tent Camp under the semblance of opposition activists thereafter. This was the result of the openness of the Tent Camp for any sympathizing individual. And as early as on the second night, activists became more attentive to the threat of KGB officers' penetration and developed series of methods allowing them to minimize the risk of unwanted visits.

First night there were many people staying in the Tent Camp and around it. Journalists interviewed the participants and the sympathizers. After the 11 PM, the music was cut off in compliance with the laws (as any violation of the laws or rules could be used against the protesters). Although some of the activists left the square, the human ribbon remained strong enough not to let the police to ruin it. The police and KGB officers cordoned off all the approaches to the square and searched the people going in the direction of the Tent Camp for the warm clothes and foodstuff. They detained all those carrying the thermos bottles, food or sleeping bags to the tent-camp inhabitants and imprisoned them for 3 to 15 days.[11]

While the self-organization of the Tent Camp played significant role, the support of the citizens sympathizing to the protesters remained another crucial element: they brought the foodstuff and warm clothes despite the risk of being arrested. In order to warm up, protesters organized the dance contests and sport activities. The spirit was supported through singing of Russian and Belarusian songs and chanting the slogans.[12] The problem with the toilet (as participants could not leave the square without the risk of being arrested or beaten) was resolved thanks to the activist-digger's skills: he opened the hatch with his bare hands, which was then covered with the tent.

On the *first night* both KGB officers in civilian and representatives of BRSY arranged provocations (e.g. trying to come to fisticuffs, or bellowing out) in order to make the protesters losing their patience and then arrest them for fighting. In addition, the protesters did their best in drawing attention of passer-byes through inventing of various techniques. For example, when about the 6 AM when first buses started moving through the October Square the part of the human ribbon which faced the street, kneeled down (in order to let the passengers see the Tent Camp behind the backs of the human line) and chanted "Join us!".

On the 21st the number of tents increased to 28. As some of the activists argue (rather in ironical manner), it was the second day, when "field commanders" emerged. The new leaders tried to support the discipline and organize the everyday practices

[11] According to the information posted in the Internet 131 people were arrested either during the meeting on 20th of March or in the night. See http://charter97.org/ru/news/2010/12/20/34837/

[12] As Fox writes in his blog: "there were neither field commanders nor attempts to straighten out my actions and paranoia (as was the case in the next days). Anarchic and romantic time. Should have kept it in mind forver. It is difficult to describe it with words" (W/a, 2006, p. 148).

(e.g. for a certain period of time they prohibited to let the outsiders in, then, however, the restrictions were lifted).[13]

On the evening of the *second day* the ambassadors of some of the Western countries visited the Tent Camp,—which was a symbolic recognition of the Tent Camp as the locus of concentration of the civil society's most active part. Another important event of the day is the principal disagreement of the oppositional leaders (Milinkevich and Kazulin) as to the future of the Tent Camp which led to the "final break of relations between their headquarters" (Melyantsou 2008: 51). While Kazulin suggested leaving the square, Milinkevich called on to the inhabitants of the Tent Camp to stay until all the demands of the opposition (albeit not specified) will be fulfilled. As Melyantsou argues, this quarrel has had significant influence on the Tent Camp inhabitants: "after that they decided to stay on the Square for their own persuasions and ideals, not for the sake of Milinkevich or Kazulin. From that moment on, the Tent Camp's participants acted autonomously, without any political structures and former political leaders, thus turning into a separate political force which the joint democrats must reckon with" (Melyantsou 2008: 51).

On the second night, activists began self-organization. The Tent Camp was divided to a several zones, and "field commanders" were put in charge of every zone. Participants separated the responsibilities: while all those firm enough (as a rule—lads) were standing in the human ribbon, others were providing the protesters with the foodstuff, warm drinks and clothes. As Eduard Glezin argues, there were more than enough of food, and on the second day, somebody has even brought brazier. Participants also posted the list of the necessities in Internet community minsk_by. One of the Tent Camp inhabitants' was the professional host, who helped to entertain the protesters on the second night.[14] Among the important traits of the Tent Camp is that its inhabitants aspired to speak Belarusian.[15]

Third night was marked with multiple provocations from the side of KGB officers in civilian who tried to break the human ribbon and start the fight. Nevertheless, activists continued sticking to the principle of non-violence and tolerated even the most impudent provocations. It was believed that any fight could provoke the crackdown the Tent Camp.

On the fourth night, the Tent Camp was attacked by the activists of BPYU,[16] who were chanting "Lukashenka" and, again, tried to start the fight with the Tent Camp inhabitants. By 3 a.m. all the journalists were displaced from the square; only one of them has decided to stay (A. Padrabinek) with the protesters. Then the liquidation

[13] Some bloggers argue that Tent Camp inhabitants have even elected the commandant, coordination committee and the press office. See http://by-politics.livejournal.com/125170.html?thread=826354

[14] Glezin stresses that the host did not know Belarusian and when in the night he attempted to thank all the protesters for their attention and said in Russian "Spasibo!" the protesters answered in chorus "Dzyakuy." See Impressions of Moscow Resident—Witness of Jeans Revolution and the Prisoner of Lukashenka Jail. ch. Second Night: Organization, para. 7: http://ed-glezin.livejournal.com/2006/04/25/

[15] Another interesting case, described by Glezin: one of the tent inhabitants has begun speaking Belarusian. He explained the fact of transition from Russian to Belarusian in a following way: "Belarusian has awaken in me." See: Impressions of Moscow Resident—Witness of Jeans Revolution and the Prisoner of Lukashenka Jail. ch. Second Night: Organization, para. 8: http://ed-glezin.livejournal.com/2006/04/25/

[16] Belarusian People Youth Front—pro-government youth organization.

operation began: the Tent Camp was destructed, while all of its inhabitants were beaten and arrested. To the bitter end the protesters defended their principle of non-violent resistance and demonstrated that the aggression proceeded only from the side of authorities.

Difficulties Arising during the Tent Camp Analysis: the Tent Camp as NSM

While trying to consider the Tent Camp from the point of view of political science (that is, analyzing the number of participants, contingent of those taking part in the protest, political demands put forth by the members of the social movement, etc.) Belarusian political scientists (like Dynko & Bulhakau, Melyantsau, etc.) faced several serious difficulties. In what follows I will try to list main difficulties, based on research of Belarusian political scientists, as well as on the data of Pontis Foundation, which make me believe one should rather treat the Tent Camp as New social movement. First of all, the actions of Tent Camp participants were not previously planned; second, the contingent of all those taking part in the collective action was mixed: protesters did not belong to a single political force; third, participants have not had clear political goals (although some of them have suggested in their blogs some goals); fourth, they demonstratively refused from the representation of their interests by the political leaders (Kazulin and Milinkevich); fifth, even after the arrest protesters have continued to form assemblages with all those concerned (as a result, several political initiatives were started, including "Bunt" and political flash-mobs). Further, I will develop abovementioned arguments.

Firstly, the moment of the emergence of the protest movement is quite difficult to define. Was it the moment when the first tent was pitched on the October Square? Or is it the first discussion of this idea between Darya Kostenko (who is considered to be one of the initiators of the protest) with her friends? Or was it the first meeting of the participants of community http://minsk-by.livejournal.com/ off-line on the 18th of March, or the meeting against the falsification of results on the 19th of March?

Most of the theorists date back the emergence of the protest movement to the 20th of March, when the first tent was pitched on the square. This action came as a surprise for opposition leaders as well as for KGB officers, while Milinkevich and Kazulin have even called to leave the square to meet on the next day or in a week. But I am not so sure, where it is possible at all to trace the moment of the Tent Camp emergence, because, there is another difficulty, which hinders the determining the actual point of Tent Camp "beginning." This difficulty consits in the fuelling of the mass expectations by the oppositional political leaders, who repeatedly stressed that "all will be decided on the Square." Both Milinkevich and Kazulin openly called on to come to the central square right after the preliminary results of the elections will be announced (which were proactively supposed to be falsified) in order to start the non-violent revolution. These appeals, motivated largely by the successful Orange revolution in neighboring Ukraine and by the readiness of Western country to support the democratic transformations in Belarus have implanted the certain scenario in the minds of the radical youth: they began organizing the Tent Camp long before its

actual manifestation (Melyantsou, 2008, p. 50). It seems likely that several months before the actual beginning of the presidential campaign, youth organizations were discussing "the most appropriate name and color" of the Belarusian revolution (the most popular name was "Jeans Revolution") (Melyantsou, 2008, p. 50).

However, that potential was not realized by the oppositional leaders, who preferred to stay within the habitual practices and rituals of their ways of "doing politics." Another important point, mentioned by Melyantsou: "there was no situation of legitimacies' confrontation, without which no revolution is possible, i.e. the oppositional candidate did not declare his victory, but only demanded to re-count the votes (later, there was a question of repeat elections)" (Melyantsou, 2008, p. 50). Many bloggers vented their frustrations after the oppositional meeting on 19th of December, which has ended with nothing. Milinkevich and Kazulin have neither proposed any agenda nor did they make an impression that they really want to struggle for the power. Probably this moment may be considered another crucial point in the organization of the Tent Camp: the political impotence of the political leaders led to growing understanding that it is necessary to organize the direct collective action. To my mind overall passivity and inability to act decisively may be a good illustration of the trend "terror of becoming." In other words, it is exactly the practice of following the same routes in practicing the politics (instead of using all the accessible means and to implemented the political experimentation), which has led to the failure of the protest. In such a context, it may seem strange, that some of the authors claim that the Tent Camp was suggested by Milinkevich.[17] Rather, it was "line of flight" from the habitual political practices; in other words it was spontaneous action started by several activists and then supported by other participants.

Second difficulty during the analysis of the Tent Camp refers to the necessity of defining the approximate number of the participants of the Tent Camp and determining their contingent. According to the survey conducted by the Pontis foundation in Belarus,[18] the Tent Camp consisted predominantly of young activists between 17 and 25 years old. Most of them were either students or young professionals. Among the participants there were only 10–15 percent of other age groups, including elderly people and adolescents. Nearly half of the participants "came from outside of Minsk from small regional towns" (p. 2). Some people came from abroad, including Estonia, Norway, Ukraine, Russia and Poland.

Speaking about the contingent of the participants, Melyantsou identifies at least three groups: a) students, who previously were not engaged in the political activity and the bloggers (there were the symbols (white and blue balloons) of the Internet-communities minsk_by and tut.by forum.); b) "members of youth organizations (Volnaja Moladz, Zubr, Hopits! and Young Front, Poglyad, several opposition par-

[17] See e.g. W/a. (2006), p. 45, or http://news.tut.by/elections/65950.html

[18] Pontis Foundation, based in Bratislava, conducted a survey of the attitudes of Belarusian youth. The survey "consisted of a report on representative youth organizations, structures and initiatives in order to provide an overview of youth activity in Belarus following the 2006 presidential elections. Coinciding qualitative research into four focus groups served to identify key themes and interests regarding the current political situation and social relations within Belarus" (p. 2).

ties and Anarchists);" c) adult people, some of them being the members of the oppositional political parties (p. 51). They may be called the core of the Tent Camp (around 400–600 people); besides these "permanent inhabitants" "there also was a circle of its supporters, including friends, colleagues, fellow students, relatives and simple sympathizers, who took an active part in the life of the Tent Camp bringing food and warm clothes, distributing information about this protest action, etc." (Melyantsou 2008: 51).

And yet the authors of Pontis Foundation survey warn the readers from trying to count the number of participants affiliated with certain organization, relying on the mere observation of people grouped around particular symbols. People were constantly changing their positions helping to hold flags and posters in different areas. Paradoxically, only anarchists were forming the coherent group and stick to their symbols, taking little participation in the life of the Tent Camp. But they helped to protect the Tent Camp by forming a human chain around the tents. And yet most of the Tent Camp inhabitants belonged neither to political party or NGO's, participating in a protest action for the first time in their lives. Also is it possible to mention all those participating the protest virtually,—i.e. through the communication via Internet? Undoubtedly, they were important part of the protest, as they took active participation in the process of meaning-making as regards the agency of the Tent Camp (invented various strategies of resistance, shared information, suggested various slogans and so on).

Third difficulty relates to the absence of political demands made by the Tent Camp defenders. According to the report the main motivation of the participants was the moral protest against "living in fear" and shame that their country became isolated from Europe despite its favorable geopolitical position. Another motivation was the determination to protest against the falsification of the results via direct action and show a glimpse of courage to all those staying at home. Report suggests that only few people named dissatisfaction with the economic situation as their main motivation with around one third claiming "a crisis of Belarusian culture and the need for its revival" has been their main motivation (p. 2). At the same time the majority of the participants spoke against the persecution of political opponents and ordinary citizens and propaganda. To my mind the very fact that the absolute majority of the Tent Camp defenders have not mentioned the political demands in their diaries places it outside of the framework of Laclau's discourse theory (as political demands are the nodal point uniting the participants into one movement). It is interesting that participants in various ways tried to make the movement intelligible for "outsiders," but the political demands were not at the centre of the discussions about the meaning of the protest.

Fourth, Melyantsou (2008) also stresses that Tent Camp (which was organized by youth) did not coincide with the plans of the oppositional leaders: they were not able to lend any other assistance to the protesters, besides the moral support[19] (p. 50). Most of the participants followed the course of events with a grain of salt: "it was

[19] Milinkevich has reached an agreement with the authorities of Western countries as regards the acceptance of all those dismissed from the universities on the political grounds. However, this was rather the result of the courageous actions of the protesters than his achievement.

a manifestation of protest for the sake of protest itself, aimed at inspiring other Belarusians to struggle for their rights. The "Maidan" was a result of disappointment in the politicians and protest against the regime" (Melyantsou 2008: 50). The Tent Camp could seem to be senseless: "a small group of brave people on the Square became a symbol of the resistance and an example of valor and commitment which the oppositional leaders failed to demonstrate" (Melyantsou 2008: 50).

Fifth, besides difficulty to define the date of the Tent Camp "birth," it is equally complicated to specify the date of the Tent Camp "death." This may seem paradox, as it was physically removed from the square on the 24th of March; but participants of the protest who were not arrested in that night organized series of collective actions (flash-mobs) hereafter. Moreover, as Melyantsou argues all those arrested were planning the collective action even in the jail (which led to the emergence of series of civil initiatives, e.g. "Bunt"). So, is it possible to consider 24th of March the date of the "death" of the Tent Camp?

Summarizing, the difficulties mentioned above make it possible conclude that one needs to find another conceptual instrument to address the specificity of the Tent Camp. Two distinctive traits of the Tent Camp make me think that the New social movement theory is an adequate instrument for its analysis. First of all it is Internet activity of the participants, who not only communicated via Internet about the fields, aims and means of action, but also invented creative slogans and coordinated collective action. Second trait is the implementation of flash mob strategy to struggle against the authorities. To my mind those two traits to a certain extent allow associating the movement with the anti-globalists: both collective actors constructed collective identity through the processes of "meaning work" and imagination of the "alternative worlds."

Internet Activity. During March, 2006 Internet remained the only reliable source of information about the presidential campaign and the dramatic events afterwards as opposed to the sheer propaganda from the state TV channels. Despite the efforts of the Belarusian authorities, who did their best in elimination of the alternative sources of information ahead of the presidential elections, Internet web-sites and Live Journal communities allowed the participants to inform people about the events and communicate with each other. According to the report, the most popular web-sites were as follows: "tut.by news portal, svaboda.org, charter97.org, spring96.org, 3dway.org, belaruspartisan.org, afn.by" (Pontis 2007: 4). Bloggers of Live Journal have been particularly active during the March political events, with some of them describing the protest actions in their diaries. The posts in communities (e.g. minsk_by, plac_2006) became important platforms for discussions of the views, news, as well as elaboration of strategies of the protest action (Ibid.).

Report suggests that online-communities proved to be an important tool for the mobilization of the protesters. Thanks to a relative availability of Internet, online-communities have become "virtual places" were the protesters could coordinate their actions, invent slogans, discuss the aims and means of the collective action (Pontis 2007: 8). Protesters maintained communication with online communities (embracing the participants of the protest, sympathizers and all those interested in the events

on the square) via SMS and mobile Internet. Inhabitants of the Tent Camp kept everyone informed, sending them updates on the situation, main events, describing "the location of militia patrols and their policy at the moment" (who implemented various power techniques against the Tent Camp inhabitants, for example,—detaining all those bringing the food and warm clothes on the way to square, encouraging provocateurs to start the fight, prohibiting the cars from stopping near the Tent Camp, etc.) (Pontis 2007: 8). From the other side sympathizers helped the participants by sharing with them the latest news from independent media, providing them with the living essentials, giving them advices from the experience of other protest actions, etc. At the same time members of online-communities were aware of the threat of KGB agents, who tried to misinform them, sow discord within the community or undermine protest plans (Ibid.).

After the Tent Camp was dismantled activists who interacted with each other within several major online-communities at Live Journal, formed their own communities, like by_mob, by_politycs, pravakatary (where the participants could enlist the detected provocateurs), supraciu (resistance). According to the report, "a great number of smaller web pages created by people who took part in the March protests and tried to describe what happened to them (for example, okrestina.org) appeared in a very short period of time" (Pontis 2007: 8). Unfortunately mere enthusiasm of the former protesters was not enough for supporting the pages for a long time; that is why majority of them ceased to be updated (e.g. okrestina.org or plac_2006).

The protesters and sympathizers also informed each other and mobilized the supporters via home networks. However authorities recognized the threat of such networks (as they could contribute to the formation of local communities) and declared them illegal, initiating the campaign of removing of the networks wires from the residential buildings (implemented by the representatives of local housing and utilities administration). Meanwhile KGB agents continued detaining the most active bloggers and forum activists (Pontis 2007: 8–9).

Flash mobs. Flash mobs played an important role after the Tent Camp was dismantled, as it "motivated youth groups to become part of a cutting edge, popular form of civil protest" (Pontis 2007: 9). Those, sympathizing Tent Camp protesters, used online-communities to share creative ideas on how to express criticism of the Belarusian society in a symbolical, playful and easily recognizable form and announce the upcoming events. As a result they concluded the flash-mob with its de-centered and spontaneous organization is the most suitable form of collective action for Belarusian context. The law-enforcement bodies could neither predict nor timely react at those collective actions, with actions having received an immediate and positive response from passers-by. According to the report, "the main source of dissemination of information remained chain emails, home networks and personal communication between activists" (Pontis 2007: 9).

By the end of the spring, the activists, who interacted with each other via online-communities by_mob and Live Journal blogs, initiated the formation of their own movement titled "Initiative". Although there were only five permanent participants in the movement preoccupied with the organizational duties, a lot of anonymous

visitors visited the page of the Initiative. Report suggests, "the usual number of flash mob participants has been 10 to 50 with different people coming to different events. There is no consistent, unchanging group of participants for each and every event" (Pontis 2007: 9).

The flash mobs were devoted to a various range of themes, including purely political ones. Report states that the flash mob "Idejnyja Gramadziane" involved "a number of young people 'watching news on TV', the news being a screen of October Square while the students' eyes were covered" (Pontis 2007: 9). Other flash mobs brought to light some of the social problems in Belarus or were just funny. Politically-charged flash mobs declined by the end of summer 2006, being replaced by merely funny events in public places. The authors of flash mobs tried to keep their activity relevant, e.g. marking the beginning of the school year (beginning of September) with a series of flash mobs devoted to the problems of Belarusian education. One of such flash mobs sarcastically addressed the issue of teaching history of Belarus in Russian language. According to the report, the flash mobs were not as popular as they could be, because they were Minsk-based: "regional or rural flash mobs are not common and they are usually organized by local activists not connected to Initiative" (Pontis 2007: 9). Authorities responded nervously to these new activities which were incomprehensible for them: they detained participants and recorded their personal data, albeit have not brought any charges. The situation has completely changed in 2011, when flash mobs "silent protests" were violently repressed by the authorities.

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I have tried to demonstrate that contemporary social theory is ill-equipped to understand the specificity and creativity of contemporary social movements, actively using ICTs and Internet for the communication. New technologies have radically changed the way the movements communicate about the aims and fields of collective action, not to mention the ways of collective action organization. What is more important these New movements are not instrumental: they do not aspire merely to the inclusion into the decision-making process, they rather try to transform social norms and common everyday practice. They are exemplary, as they bring to light the relations of discrimination and domination in the society and politicize issues which were to a certain moment left without attention by the wide public. Melucci stressed that in order not to overlook the creative aspect of these movements, they should be analyzed as "system of vectors in strain" with an emphasis on the symbolical and communicative processes. NSM approach elaborated by Melucci allows making intelligible the movements, labeled marginal by the majority of the theorists.

March protests proved that despite the severe repressions used by authorities, many Belarusians have the courage and will to struggle for their participation in decision-making processes. Though their protest seemed to be a losing battle from the very beginning it proved to have a great symbolical meaning in a long run. The example of the protesters helped other people to banish fear and believe that solidarity and collaboration are not empty words. According to Miniankou (2006), participants of

the protest "rhizomatically constructed new world, having defeated with their creative actions the primitive image of world, produced by the authorities" (p. 34). Belarusian social theorist stresses, that authorities were incapable to withstand the experimental and creative power of the imagination of the Tent Camp participants, who shared ideas on the ways of protest in online-community minsk_by. As nowadays many people literally "live in the networks," they can easily disrupt hegemonic discourse and cast doubt on most points of "official ideology." This new, seemingly chaotic, world is created by the multiplicity of various intertwining imagination practices, which contribute greatly to the transformation of our everyday life from below. Young participants of the Tent Camp "came out for this rhizomatic world, against their parents and authorities imposing obsolete imagination schemes" (Miniankou 2006, p. 34).

Conclusion

The history of Belarusian activism bespeaks one odd trend: it seems that major social actors (such as oppositional parties, youth organizations, etc.) started "desiring their own oppression" (when speaking in Deleuzian terms). As from the mid-1990s, by the beginning of 2000s the number of mass protests dramatically declined. As Pikulik (2007b) explains this trend of early 2000s, once the authoritarian regime has consolidated, various social groups started gaining certain advantages from the authoritarian regime, notwithstanding the fact that they had to sacrifice their freedoms for the sake of relative well-being. In a certain sense, the Tent Camp has revealed the "concealed fascism" of the Belarusian state (here I use this term in Foucauldian sense[20]), which until the last moment tried to show the European observers they respect freedom of assembly. At the same time police sneakily used various strategies to minimize the scope of the protest and force the Tent Camp participants from the square (such as prohibition to bring food and drinks to the square, arrests and beating of the protesters and sympathizers out of the reach of foreign journalists' cameras, etc.). They have also used various discursive strategies to develop negative attitude as regards the collective action. However in the end they failed to break spirit of protesters and had to use brutal force to disperse the Tent Camp.

According to Usmanova (2006), in a somewhat similar vein the leaders of the left movement RAF (going down in history as terrorist organization acting in Germany in 1970s) tried to make visible the institutional fascism enrooted in the German society (p. 120). They intended revealing the fascist character of the state in the everyday life and sow discord within the System. In order to do this RAF members tried to

[20] In the preface to English edition of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Michel Foucault argues that the book makes a sound impact in the struggle against the fascism. The book brings to light "all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives" (1983: xvi). What is more important, Anti-Oedipus is preoccupied not only [with] historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini," he stresses, "but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploit us" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: xiv–xv).

contradistinguish the practices of systematic disobedience to the policy of repressions and elimination, conducted by the state as regards the minorities and the opposition. Despite that 'fascist state' had a rich armoury of means of opression at its disposal and implemented it without second thought, the RAF members succeeded to reach their aim, albeit at the expense of their lives and freedom (Usmanova 2006: 120).

As Usmanova stresses, in order to reveal the "fascist strategies" implemented by the state and consolidate all those opposing against the repressive regime, one can use wide range of means (demanding neither blood nor treasure) (2006: 120). Michel Foucault argued that in order to effectively oppose sophisticated power techniques, aspiring to manipulate citizens, one has to create multiplicity of resistance hotspots. Nowadays, the penetration of ICTs and Internet into our everyday life decreased the cost of communication between various interest groups and organization of collective action to zero. Protest groups have the opportunity to stage multitude of collective actions unpredictable for the authorities. Usmanova asserts that instead of allowing authorities interpellating collective actors, or to be precise, presenting the latter as "always already interpellated" (thereby making them into law-abiding subjects), collective actors should engage in partisan struggle against the ideological cliché (2006: 120). In other words, they should form lines of flight from the territorizations implemented by the authorities and create new unforseeable social situations, instead of merely reacting to the actions of the state (as oppositional politicians used to do). Usmanova argues that today cultural representations operate as the means of production of collective identities (e.g. race, sex or class discrimination eventually becomes part of our cultural background long before we actually face it at our working place, as we usually become acquainted with those social phenomena at a very young age (a school of kindergarten)) (2006: 120). By subjecting to common social practices, sticking to them in our everyday life, and perceiving certain cultural codes as "norm," we reproduce the system. Consequently in order to undermine the system one should transform the established cultural codes and practices.[21]

As has been demonstrated, the Tent Camp protest, flash mobs and other cultural and political initiatives have effectively undermined the power techniques, abolishing common sense habits and creating new public spaces in the seemingly coherent discourse of power. This in turn, has created necessary room for the formation of assemblages and rhizomorhpic communities, seizing the initiative from authorities and formulating alternative agenda. Besides creating alternative cultural representations, the Tent Camp participants and the sympathizers have created series of initiatives undermining the cultural representations, formed by the authorities. For example web-site the Third Way (3dway.org) launched series of initiatives designed to mock the actions of authorities and image of A.Lukashenko[22]. Ironical distance allows

[21] Usmanova suggests using private micro-spaces (such as clothes and windows of apartments or cars) to express our cultural and political identity, if organization of collective action becomes impossible at the central squares.

[22] such as "People's TV channel" (www.narod.lu, www.multclub.org), caricatures' collection (www.svoboden.org/ru/cartoons), photoshopped images' collection (http://belzhaba.com) Main political events of contemporary Belarus are represented in series of ironical animations.

decreasing pathos and bringing to light the absurdity of the dominating ideology. The authors split the dominating discourse from within, devaluating verbal constructions and images used by the discourse. As a result official culture becomes looking increasingly ridiculous and grotesque.

Unfortunately, as history testified, purely cultural protest usually has rather short short-term effect. For example mass protests of 1968 disclosed huge potential of cultural protest, but that potential was almost fully exhausted in around five years. In this sense, Usmanova stresses, flash mobers' actions in Belarus should not be considered as the most effective form of protest in our context. Instead, it should be considered a part of the long-lasting efforts in formation of the public discourse (Usmanova 2006: 119). Usmanova stresses that in order to be really effective the Tent Camp and flash mobs should have created their own public, instead of targeting collective actions merely on the passive consumers of the urban spectacles (2006: 117). With this aim in view, flash mobers should have come up with various methods of message delivery and think over the strategy of "transit places' capture" (ibid.). It is in these places, where passers-by can be transformed into public, once they start to experience the solidarity with the flash mobers.

Thus, the Tent Camp can be considered a unique event in the history of Belarusian mass activism, which, I argue, is the reason of the youth actively using contemporary ICTs for organization of the collective action and communication about the aims and means of action. The practices implemented by the Tent Camp (such as flash mobs and creative slogans, direct action (they rejected the representation by the political leaders and were pronouncedly reluctant to put forth the political demands)) clearly detached the movement from the so-called "traditional" collective action, organized by the major political actors (such as political parties).

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