

CHARLES UNIVERSITY  
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Bachelor Thesis

Stitching New Belarus: Folk Embroidery Art as Resistance Strategy against Authoritarian State

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## Statement

I declare that I have created the thesis by myself. All sources and literature used have been duly cited. The work was not used to obtain another or the same title. This declaration and consent will be signed by handwritten signature.

28.06.2024, Prague ..... Krystsina Zhuk

## **Acknowledgment**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the political and personal functions of Belarusian embroidery as a form of political art in the wake of the 2020-21 protests in Belarus. These leaderless, self-organized protests featured significant participation from women and pensioners and were ultimately suppressed by severe state repression. Despite this, unconventional resistance tactics, including the use of traditional textiles for political expression, have persisted. Focusing on Rufina Bazlova's embroidery projects, "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" and "#FramedInBelarus," the research investigates how collective embroidery art-making challenges the authoritarian state in non-confrontational, sustainable, and non-heroic ways. Additionally, it examines the influence of these art-making practices on the lives of protesters amid ongoing political repression and forced migration. Grounded in the theories of "weak resistance" by Ewa Majewska, Judith Butler's vulnerability, and bell hooks' solidarity, the thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the artistic responses to the 2020 protests. The findings reveal that non-traditional, nonviolent, everyday forms of protest, rooted in solidarity, can effectively challenge authoritarian regimes and sustain protest movements, offering emotional support and fostering community among participants.

## **Keywords**

weak resistance, Belarusian protests, protest art, embroidery art, feminist political theory

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## Introduction

The 2020-21 protests in Belarus that started after presidential elections of 2020, marked a significant shift in the relationship between daily life, artistic expression, and political resistance in the country. The protests did not have a single leader and were self-organized, spread across cities, neighborhoods, workplaces, and educational institutions, with women and pensioners being the key participants. Despite severe repression, the protests continued through fall, featuring women-only demonstrations, marches led by people with disabilities, strikes by state factory workers, and various other acts of civil disobedience. Although these protests were decentralized, they were eventually crushed by the state's repressive measures.

The time following the protests has been marked by political repression targeting those who participated or supported the protests, as well as and massive migration out of the country. However, given the unique structure of the protests that emerged as a response to tightening of state repression, many unconventional resistance tactics have developed and continue to emerge. One such example is the use of traditional textiles for personal and artistic political expression, which gained popularity during the protests and continues today. Observing the rise of protest textile art initiatives since the beginning of the protests in 2020 inspired me to analyze them.

In this thesis, I thus explore the political and personal functions of Belarusian embroidery political art. More specifically, I focus on how Belarusian political embroidery art challenges the authoritarian state and provides support for those who engage in political protest. Using Rufina Bazlova's embroidery art projects as a case study, I investigate how collective folk embroidery art-making can challenge the authoritarian state in non-confrontational, sustainable, and non-heroic ways when direct political expression is not possible. I also examine the influence of collective embroidery art-making on the lives of protesters in the post-protest context of continuous political repression, frustration, and forced migration.

My analysis is based on research of two of Rufina Bazlova's artistic projects that emerged in response to the 2020 protests: #FramedInBelarus and History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka. The "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" project, which began on the first days of the 2020 protests, includes artworks alone. "#FramedInBelarus," a collective embroidery art project created by Bazlova in the aftermath of the protests in 2021, includes both artworks and letters written by participants upon completing their embroidery.

The theoretical approach of this thesis is grounded in Ewa Majewska's concept of "weak resistance," Judith Butler's theory of vulnerability in resistance, and bell hooks' notion of solidarity. Combining these frameworks offers a comprehensive understanding of the artistic responses to the Belarusian protests of 2020 and challenge normative notions of political expression that often focus on short-lived heroic actions.

The initial chapters provide an overview of the political landscape in Belarus, setting the stage for understanding the significance of the 2020 protests as a backdrop for protest artistic expressions. The chapter describes how these protests began, their causes, progression, and the state's reaction to them.

The analysis chapter is divided into two parts, corresponding to the analyzed art projects. In the first part, I analyze the art cycle "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," focusing on eight artworks. The analysis reveals how Bazlova's works document and represent the events surrounding the 2020 protests, offering an alternative narrative to the state's version of events and positioning her art as a form of weak resistance.

In the second part, I analyze the letters of the #FramedInBelarus project. My analysis demonstrates how collective embroidery art-making projects like #FramedInBelarus provide emotional support, foster community, and sustain engagement in resistance. The conclusion brings all of my analysis points together. The goal of this thesis is thus to illustrate how non-traditional, nonviolent, everyday forms of protest rooted in solidarity can challenge authoritarian regimes and foster sustained protest movements.

## **Belarusian Protests of 2020**

The period of the Belarusian protests in 2020 marked a significant transformation in the relationship between daily life, artistic expression, and political experiences in Belarus.<sup>1</sup> This chapter examines the importance of these protests as a backdrop for artistic responses, including Rufina Bazlova's "#FramedInBelarus" and "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," which are analyzed in detail in the "Analysis" chapter. First, I provide a brief overview of the political landscape in Belarus, tracing the evolution of government control since Lukashenka's rise to power. Following this, I shortly describe how the protests of 2020 began, the reasons behind them, and their progression.

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<sup>1</sup> Kopenkina, "No Time for Art?"



The contemporary political landscape of Belarus began to take shape in 1994, the year the country held its first presidential election following independence. Aliaksandr Lukashenka won this election, and since then, he has continuously held office, gradually strengthening the state's control. In May 1995, a referendum initiated by Lukashenka reinstated the Soviet version of the Belarusian flag and coat of arms as national symbols. In 1996, a subsequent referendum led to amendments in the constitution and the replacement of the existing Parliament with appointees closely associated with Lukashenko, removing the separation of powers and contributing to a more centralized government. By the late 1990s, he had implemented measures to prevent political opposition. His approach involved restricting independent media and Western assistance, alongside suppressing election monitoring and any form of protest.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, a constitutional referendum was held, which allowed for unlimited presidential terms. Several more elections were held every four years, but each of these elections was found to have significant issues in vote counting.<sup>3</sup>

The 2020-21 protests were triggered by the presidential election held in the year of 2020. Although not the first protests in the country's history, the protests in 2020 were notable for their massive participation and relatively long duration. Several opposition candidates were initially registered for the election, but many were arrested on politically motivated cases and thus could not participate.<sup>4</sup> One of the favored candidates was Siarhieĭ Cichanousky, an entrepreneur and blogger who actively campaigned but was also detained on May 29 and accused of violating public order.<sup>5</sup>

After his candidacy was refused, his wife, Sviatlana Cichanouskaja, registered in his place. Following the disqualification of other prominent opposition figures, such as Babarika and Capkala, their teams united behind Cichanouskaja, establishing her as the sole opposition candidate with substantial public support. By the time the election took place, nearly all of Lukashenka's primary opponents had not been allowed to participate in elections as they were either detained or placed under criminal investigation.<sup>6</sup> The initial street protests started to occur in June as a response to these events, later escalating into large-scale demonstrations following the presidential election in August.

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<sup>2</sup> Stykow, "Making Sense of a Surprise."

<sup>3</sup> Limås-Kollberg, "Opposition Wins No Seats in Belarus Election." <https://crd.org/2019/11/22/opposition-wins-no-seats-in-belarus-election/>.

<sup>4</sup> BBC. "Belarus: Opposition Leader Tikhanovsky Jailed for 18 Years over Protests."

<sup>5</sup> Michalevich, "Чатыры гады таму быў затрыманы Сяргей Ціханоўскі [Čatyry hady tamu byŭ zatorymany Siarhieĭ Cichanoŭski]."

<sup>6</sup> BBC. "Babaryko Case: Belarus Jails Top Lukashenko Critic for 14 Years."

Despite evidence that Sviatlana Cichanouskaja won the election, the official results declared that 80% of the votes went to Aliaksandar Lukashenka, and only 9.9% to Cichanouskaja.<sup>7</sup> While electoral fraud had supposedly occurred also in previous elections, the public's response in 2020 was different. The lack of economic growth, poor handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, the arrest of legitimate candidates, and the blatant manipulation of the election results led to widespread dissent.<sup>8</sup>

The protests began in the middle of the night, after the election results were announced on August 9. All major cities, including Minsk, Brest, Babruisk, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Mazyr, Pinsk, and Homel, participated in the protests to express their disagreement with the election outcome. The government's response to the protests included the use of stun grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds, as well as subsequent mass detentions and beatings of the protesters. The internet was shut down from the day of the election and for several days thereafter, allegedly due to actions taken by the Belarusian government, likely to prevent citizens from organizing. On August 11, 2020, Sviatlana Cichanouskaja was forced to leave Belarus due to threats from the Belarusian authorities, as she later stated in her interviews.<sup>9</sup> Despite the increasing number of arrests, severe injuries and several deaths caused by special police forces, the protests continued through the fall season. The first women-only demonstrations and solidarity chains started to occur in response to police violence, with participants demanding a peaceful resolution while dressed in white as a symbol of peace.<sup>10</sup> Marches led by people with disabilities also took place.<sup>11</sup> State factory workers joined the protests, and many went on strike.

The protests of 2020 were leaderless and remained self-organized and horizontal.<sup>12</sup> This structure allowed for diverse tactics, from large-scale marches, solidarity chains, and strikes to less apparent acts of defiance such as collective singing, dancing, neighborhood meetings, car honking in support of the protesters, posters, flag hanging, graffiti and improvised art exhibitions. During that time, various civil initiatives providing medical, legal, and financial support to those affected by state repression emerged. Medical workers assisted injured protesters, residential buildings kept

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<sup>7</sup> Dw.com. "Belarus Election: Lukashenko Wins Vote with 80%." <https://www.dw.com/en/alexander-lukashenko-wins-belarus-election/a-54506718>.

<sup>8</sup> BBC. "Babaryko Case: Belarus Jails Top Lukashenko Critic for 14 Years."

<sup>9</sup> Roth, "Belarus Opposition Candidate Implies Threat to Children after Leaving Country."

<sup>10</sup> BBC, "Belarus Election: Women Form 'solidarity Chains' to Condemn Crackdown."

<sup>11</sup> Belsat.eu, "'White-Red-White Views': March of People with Disabilities in Minsk."

<sup>12</sup> Gabowitsch, "Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination."

their doors open for those hiding from the police, and support groups were created for those both directly and indirectly affected by state violence.

The state has managed to suppress the majority of protest activities. The special police forces dispersed all demonstrations and imprisoned opposition leaders, human rights defenders, and independent journalists. As a result, the protests gradually diminished in size and frequency over time as the threat of arrest became increasingly apparent, until eventually ceasing completely. Those who participated in or supported the protests continue to face imprisonment, exile, or legal consequences.

### **Artistic Responses to the Protests**

Amid the political unrest in Belarus, contemporary art was adopted as a form of political resistance. Artists and workers of cultural institutions used their creativity to critique the government and highlight the experiences of protesters facing state violence.<sup>13</sup> This emerging artistic protest movement was not, however, confined to professional circles. The protest art was widely represented by anonymous and grassroots creativity that manifested in graffiti, digital collages, improvised neighborhood concerts, performances, and digital posters. As Siarhiej Hrynievich, an artist from Hrodna, noted, grassroots artistic response to the political events in Belarus was even greater than one of the artists': "Such an incredible surge in creative energy was so timely and natural that artists were unable to match that. [...] In a way, we, artists, were overshadowed."<sup>14</sup> What was common for both professional artists and grassroots creative initiatives was the themes explored in their creative works. The protest art produced during this period focused on solidarity, state violence, and the emotional state of those involved in the resistance.<sup>15</sup>

The cultural sector became involved in the protest activity in June 2020, two months prior to the elections. In preparation for the elections, Belarusian authorities confiscated a valuable art collection from a Belgazprombank-owned gallery Art-Belarus.<sup>16</sup> As the gallery director was Viktor Babarika, a key opponent of A. Lukashenka, the seizure of artworks was deemed politically motivated. In response to these events, artist Nadzia Sajapina staged a performance called "The Heritage," highlighting the confiscated collection.<sup>17</sup> Volunteers stood in the gallery with images of

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<sup>13</sup> Касуялович, "Арышт «Евы» і выхад мастацтва на вуліцы."

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Korsun, "Art as a form of Protest," 135.

<sup>15</sup> Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance, an exhibition curated by Aleksei Borisionok, Andrei Dureika,

<sup>16</sup> Belsat.eu, "Мастачка Надзя Саяпіна выйшла на волю."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the missing artworks on their backs. Curator Aliaksandr Zimienka conducted a performative tour, providing information about the missing pieces. This event brought attention to the regime's restrictive actions and marked the beginning of the artistic community's participation in resistance. One of the artworks from this collection, Chaim Soutine's "Eva" (1928), later became a significant symbol of the Belarusian protests, being often printed on T-shirt and other clothing items.

In August, after the election results were announced, workers from state cultural institutions joined the rest of the protesters. The state-run Janka Kupala National Academic Theater released a video in which the theater cast demanded an end to state violence.<sup>18</sup> In response, the government fired the theater's director, Pavel Latushka, and the theater season was cancelled.

Around the same time, the Free Choir, composed of Belarusian musicians, emerged to express their reaction to the election results. The choir joined the street protesters and performed songs that became popular during the protests every. The group appeared at the weekly marches on Sundays and at various locations around the city, such as underground metro passages, informal neighborhood concerts, shopping malls, railway station, and the national library.

To comment on the state violence during the first days of the protests and targeting of cultural workers, a group of Belarusian cultural workers staged a protest action called "The Art of the Regime" in front of the Palace of Arts in Minsk on August 15, 2020.<sup>19</sup> Participants lined up in a chain of solidarity, while holding up photographs of beaten protesters to draw attention to state-sanctioned brutality. Artist Arciem Pronin undressed to reveal the bruises and wounds inflicted on him, representing the physical and emotional damage that many protesters were left with. The photographs were later displayed on the billboard of the Art-Belarus Gallery.

As many artists chose to participate in the protests, a significant number became politically convicted. These artists often reflected on their detention experiences in their work, which they created during their time in prison. One of such artists was Nadzia Sajapina. She was given 15 days of detention for organizing the "Heritage" performance back in June 2020. As part of "Dollhouse" multimedia project, Sajapina presented sketches of her female cellmates from Akrescina,<sup>20</sup> where she was detained.<sup>21</sup> Her artworks exhibited the daily experiences of solidarity, care, sisterhood,

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<sup>18</sup> Vasil'eva, "Адрозу два беларускія тэатры запісалі відэазвароты супраць гвалту і парушэння правоў."

<sup>19</sup> Kopenkina, "No Time for Art?"

<sup>20</sup> *Akrescina* is a pre-trial detention center in Minsk, where most of the protesters have been taken to. Among the protesters, it is known for the beatings that take place there.

<sup>21</sup> Belsat.eu, "Мастачка Надзя Саяпіна выйшла на волю." <https://belsat.eu/news/mastachka-nadzya-sayapina-vyishla-na-volyu-paslya-15-sodnyau-aryshu>.

support, and interpersonal intimacy that emerged among the women against the backdrop of jail conditions. The title "Dollhouse" alludes to the surrealness of the situation, suggesting how human lives became mere play puppets in the hands of the system. It also refers to detained women's ability to create a secure fantasy space within a violent prison system through their mutual support.

Volga Shparaga, a detained academic, also explored the themes of sisterhood in her prison drawings, depicting her prison experiences. In her book, "The Revolution Has a Woman's Face. The Case of Belarus," she reflected on the surprising effect that massive arrests of women protesters could have on gender equality: "Sisterhood in prison also showed how important it was for Belarusian society to build horizontal relations in this revolutionary moment and the huge role played by women; society places responsibility on them for empathy and caring for others. As Julia Mickiewicz<sup>22</sup> pointed out in a conversation, while the women were in prison, the men — our partners and friends — began taking care of things more. I hope this will promote gender equality, without which the democratic transformations our society is so keen on will hardly be possible."<sup>23</sup>

The connection between artistic expression and political resistance is further illustrated in the works of Ulyana Nevzorova. The artist has actively engaged with the political situation in Belarus through her art since the protests began in August 2020. One of her most famous performances involved holding a poster in a subway car that read, "This Poster Could Be The Reason For My Detention." This action highlighted the severe limitations on freedom of speech in Belarus and the government's extreme measures to suppress public dissent. Nevzorova's later work, "Street Art Battle" (2021), commented on the censorship in Belarusian public spaces. Her political graffiti, unlike other apolitical street drawings, often faced rapid erasure by municipal authorities, which happened with the piece that depicted protesters waving a white-red-white flag,<sup>24</sup> symbolizing freedom for Belarus. When authorities damaged this artwork, Nevzorova incorporated the damage into her work, adding information about the persecuted individuals of the Belarusian protest movement. Following this, the government sent residents a text message threatening criminal prosecution for graffiti, which Nevzorova integrated into her art with the

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<sup>22</sup> Yulia Mickiewicz is a feminist political activist and co-founder of the Femgroup of the Coordination Council of the Belarusian opposition.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in "Every Day. Art. Solidarity" exhibition booklet, 59.

<sup>24</sup> The white-red-white flag is a historical flag first used by the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918. Although it was adopted after Belarus regained independence in 1991 until 1995. It has lost its official status Alexander Lukashenka's government, and its display has since been restricted. The flag remains a symbol in opposition protests and among the Belarusian diaspora.

statement “Long Live Belarus”<sup>25</sup> to emphasize her defiance. In her statement, “I’ve spent my whole life in a dictatorship; at this point, my role as a citizen and my artistic practice overlap,” she stressed that her identities as a citizen and an artist are inseparable.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, her artistic practice has absorbed and reflected the changes in the political situation.

Building on the theme of women’s role in resistance, Alena Davidovich created a piece "Fight Like a Girl" (see Appendix, image 1), which was exhibited as part of "Belarus. Art of Resistance" in Amsterdam. It is a large wall painting that combines the visual style of street art and protest posters. The painting features a female figure with flowers and the phrase "Fight Like a Girl" in red against a white background, emphasizing a nuanced strength found in the perceived weakness that Belarusian women utilized in their nonviolent resistance.

### **Textile Use During the Protests**

The use of traditional textiles, both as a form of personal and artistic expression, visibly increased during the protests. This chapter describes the various ways in which textiles were used during the protests and how they became an unofficial symbol of Belarusian resistance. In particular, I focus on the presence of traditional clothing at protest rallies, textile rituals and artistic projects.

One of the most represented examples of textile use during the protests was the protesters' wearing of various forms of *vyshyvanka*, a traditional embroidered shirt. In his analysis of the use of textiles, LaVey states that Belarusian textiles are attractive to Belarusians because they carry cultural and historical associations, providing a direct connection to the community.<sup>27</sup> In his analysis, LaVey references M.M. Shchakatsikhin’s 1928 *Essays on Belarusian Art*,<sup>28</sup> in which Shchakatsikhin argues that traditional art forms like embroidery have uniquely preserved “a national identity in all manifestations of material and spiritual culture,” resisting the Russian influences, present in the rest of the art forms in Belarus. Wearing a *vyshyvanka* on election day, as LaVey observes, was “a sign of national identification and a performative act of civil duty.”<sup>29</sup> Wearing *vyshyvanka* during the protests, on the other hand, signified the rejection of the state’s

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<sup>25</sup> “Long Live Belarus!” or “Жыве Беларусь!” is a political slogan that became a symbol of the 2020 protests, aiming to consolidate the people in defense of their freedom and independence. In Belarus, the slogan is officially recognized as an anti-state slogan and is illegal to proclaim.

<sup>26</sup> ERSTE Stiftung, “Ulyana Nevzorova: Street Art Battle – ERSTE Stiftung.” <https://www.erstestiftung.org/en/events/ulyana-nevzorova-street-art-battle/>.

<sup>27</sup> LaVey, “Reading Belarus,” 190.

<sup>28</sup> Shchakatsikhin, “Narysy z historyi belaruskaha mastatstva.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

attempts to co-opt national symbols and asserted an independent from the state Belarusian cultural identity.<sup>30</sup>

Traditional forms of textiles have also been used in protest rituals. On August 14, 2020, architecture students from the Belarusian National Technical University carried a long stretch of white cloth across *Praspekt Nezalezhnasti* in Minsk. Their act was meant to express solidarity and establish protection in the face of state violence. The ritual was reminiscent of *Abydzionnik* ritual, whereby women traditionally wove and carried ritual towels around the village to safeguard their communities from various threats, such as wars and famine.

The student's take on the *Abydzionnik* ritual was similar to the efforts of a small group during the times of COVID-19. Eleven Belarusian women and one Belarusian man wove a three-meter-long towel over 12 hours in order to protect the city of Minsk from COVID-19. Instead of the traditional method of carrying the towel around the city on foot, they drove it around Minsk and performed a ceremony near an ancient stone known as *Dzed*, to protect their hometown from the disease.

Numerous artists turned to textile art during the protests to convey political messages. One example was Anna Bundeleva's "Zero Percent" (2020), an embroidered mask performance that represented the dissent after the death of Raman Bandarenka. On November 11, 2020, Raman Bandarenka was confronted by plainly dressed individuals near his house in Minsk. The individuals attempted to remove the opposition white-red-white ribbons, and Bandarenka approached them to inquire about the reasons for their actions. After making a remark, Bandarenka was pushed, beaten, and taken away in a van. He later died in the hospital from severe injuries. The state's version of events stated that Bandarenka died as a result of a fight while intoxicated. However, according to Bandarenka's emergency room doctor's report, there was 0.0 percent alcohol in his blood. The events angered the public, leading to a series of protests called "Zero Percent," which Bundeleva reflected in her performance work, commenting on the state's violence and story manipulation.

Collective embroidery projects also played a significant role during the protests. Various galleries and art collectives held collective embroidery gatherings to build solidarity and provide emotional support for those directly or indirectly affected by the state violence that accompanied the protests. For example, the Ÿ Gallery invited the public to collectively create an embroidered

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 188.

canvas, as part of a collective embroidery project "Tomorrow is Every Day" (see Appendix, image 2). At these collective embroidery events, the participants shared support with each other, which had a therapeutic and meditative effect on them. Coupled with emotional support, this collective embroidery initiative helped the participants cope with the political uncertainty and the presence of state violence.

Another protest embroidery project was created by an artist duo DY. Their "Zastolle" (see Appendix, image 3) embroidery project consisted of references to Belarusian protests of 2020 sewn into fabric stretched across a table, mimicking a traditional Slavic feast. The fabric exhibited a torn passport, referring to the act of a Belarusian female political leader Maryja Kalesnikava, who tore her passport after being kidnaped, refusing to be taken over the Ukrainian border back in 2020.<sup>31</sup> The blue hand represented Aliaksander Lukashenka's hand, who had previously said that he was not going to hold onto power until his fingers turn blue, meaning he was not going to desperately try to maintain his grip on power.

Rufina Bazlova's series of artworks, "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," emerged within the same context as the other textile artistic initiatives discussed in this chapter. It was one of the first embroidery projects to gain widespread attention and go viral during the protests. This project will be analyzed in detail in the first part of "Analysis" chapter.

## **Theoretical Framework**

To investigate the potential of artistic practices to challenge authoritarian states through non-traditional means, I primarily rely on Eva Majewska's concept of "weak resistance,"<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler's theory of vulnerability in resistance,<sup>33</sup> and bell hooks concept of solidarity.<sup>34</sup> This theoretical framework is further supplemented by the recent works of scholars such as LaVey,<sup>35</sup> Sasha Razor,<sup>36</sup> and Tatiana Shchyttsova,<sup>37</sup> which provide a broader cultural and political context for understanding protest artistic practices.

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<sup>31</sup> Razor, "The Code of Presence," 84.

<sup>32</sup> Majewska, "Feminist Antifascism."

<sup>33</sup> Butler, "Vulnerability in Resistance."

<sup>34</sup> Hooks, "Feminist Theory from Margin to Center."

<sup>35</sup> LaVey, "Reading Belarus."

<sup>36</sup> Razor, "The Code of Presence."

<sup>37</sup> Shchyttsova, "The Strength of the Strengthless."



In *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott produced an in-depth analysis of Southeast Asian peasants, focusing on their everyday acts of resistance.<sup>38</sup> In his analysis, he concludes that the resistance of subordinate classes, considering their impossibility of mobilizing in more traditional ways of protest, manifests itself in ordinary, non-confrontational, subtle collective acts of disobedience that nonetheless prove effective in the long run. These acts do not aim at broad ideological changes but instead focus on achieving realistic goals like gaining work, land, and income. According to Scott, it is not the act itself that makes it resistance but the intent with which the act was done.<sup>39</sup> The conclusions of his research thus allow for a rethinking of what resistance and political agency can look like, demonstrating that they do not have to be represented by heroic acts and confrontation with authority to be effective.

In her analysis of Polish workers' union *Solidarność* (1980–81) and recent women's protests in Poland in, Eva Majewska extends James Scott's theory of resistance, forming a similar concept that she calls weak resistance.<sup>40</sup> Unlike traditional notions of political resistance that emphasize visible, confrontational, and heroic acts as the most effective, her concept of weak resistance focuses on unheroic and everyday forms of protest. Weak resistance includes often overlooked aspects of protest work, such as solidarity, endurance, and failure.<sup>41</sup> Majewska's approach also highlights the participation and agency of oppressed and marginalized groups, including women, and thereby expands our understanding of what protests can look like.<sup>42</sup>

According to Majewska, weak resistance is not about quick-fix strategies — one-off or short-lived gestures that can be easily stopped and may not be as accessible for vulnerable social groups.<sup>43</sup> Instead, weak resistance represents sustainable practices, such as creating networks, building long-lasting solidarity, and working collectively to build a better future. Majewska thus also emphasizes failure as an essential element in the historical process of making change — the process that consists of "rehearsals and failures, including our own fatigue or despair."<sup>44</sup> Following Rosa Luxemburg, she stresses that accepting failure does not equal excluding effective strategies or celebrating collapse; it means recognizing the unavailability and necessity of failures to

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<sup>38</sup> Scott, "Weapons of the Weak."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>40</sup> Majewska, "Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 26.

eliminate oppression.<sup>45</sup>This perspective underscores that setbacks mark the path to substantial change, and these should be viewed as part of the learning process rather than as definitive endpoints.

Another overlooked aspect of political resistance, according to Majewska, is solidarity. Writing about counter-publics, Majewska employs bell hook's solidarity concept.<sup>46</sup> Solidarity, as hooks defines it, is not just about being there for someone; it is about forming a "community of interests, shared beliefs, and goals" around which people unite.<sup>47</sup>Solidarity involves a reciprocal relationship whereby individuals are bound together by common causes and a shared vision for change. It is about sharing not only resources but also experiences, strategies, and knowledge in the common struggle. In contrast, support, while valuable, is depicted by hooks as more sporadic and less reliable.<sup>48</sup> It can be given and taken away easily, lacking the enduring quality that defines solidarity. Support can sometimes be one-sided, with one party giving and the other receiving without a lasting mutual connection.

Butler's "Vulnerability in Resistance" supports Majewska's concept of weak resistance by providing a framework that reconceptualizes vulnerability as an integral part of political resistance.

<sup>49</sup> For Butler, vulnerability is not the opposite of but is at the center of political resistance.

According to Butler, vulnerability is not merely a state of weakness that needs to be overcome to show resistance. Vulnerability is a relational condition that enables both receptivity and responsiveness, which counters the idea of vulnerability as being passive: "As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable, vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments in a sequence."<sup>50</sup>In practices of nonviolent resistance (e.g., marches, walks, pickets), the vulnerability of a body is mobilized as part of its own power to assert existence, claim public space, and oppose violence by authorities. In some cases, as Butler notes, "continuing to exist, to move, and to breathe" can also be forms of resistance experienced by marginalized groups and communities.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>46</sup> Hooks, "Feminist Theory from Margin to Center."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Butler, "Vulnerability in Resistance."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 26.

I draw my further theoretical inspirations from works that deal with topics of Belarusian protests and protest art created as a response to them. In "The Strength of the Strengthless," Tatiana Shchytsova (2024) examines the political agency of particularly vulnerable yet prominently present groups in the Belarusian protests of 2020, such as women, disabled people, and pensioners.<sup>52</sup> She focuses on the protest potential inherent in these groups' vulnerability, demonstrating how they used their "weak bodies" as tools for resistance. Shchytsova argues that their exposure to police violence during the protests highlighted their vulnerability and allowed them to use this "weakness" as a powerful argument for the necessity of ending the current political regime in Belarus. In other words, by staging their bodies in opposition to police forces and exposing themselves to violence, these groups brought the critical lack of basic social security within the Belarusian socio-political order to the attention of ordinary people. The vulnerability of their bodies thus underscored the ethical and existential reasons for dismantling the violence-based political system.<sup>53</sup> Similar to Butler (2016), Shchytsova describes the vulnerability of women, disabled people, and pensioners not as a lack of agency but as an example of it, demonstrating how they utilized it for a powerful "subversive force" against the patriarchal authoritarian regime.<sup>54</sup>

Another inspiration for my research was LaVey's (2021) study, "Reading Belarus: The Evolving Semiosis of Belarusian Textiles," which examines the cultural and semiotic importance of Belarusian textiles.<sup>55</sup> I was particularly interested in his exploration of the intersection of textiles, protests, and identity. By tracing the history of textile use in Belarus, LaVey demonstrates how traditional embroidery patterns were recontextualized to convey ideas about fashion, national identity, and political messages during the protests. Writing about the diversity of uses of embroidery, LaVey asks, "How can pieces of cloth and age-old traditional art be seen both as dangerous, subversive, and counterhegemonic, but also the opposite?"<sup>56</sup> This question refers to the dual nature of embroidery, which can have both conservative and subversive meanings. LaVey argues that throughout history, embroidery has been used by "both the powerful and the powerless," giving it the capacity to convey infinite meanings.<sup>57</sup> LaVey further exemplifies this

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<sup>52</sup> Shchytsova, "The Strength of the Strengthless."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>55</sup> LaVey, "Reading Belarus."

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

integration of traditional art forms into political discourse through several artistic projects, including Bazlova's work, *History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka*.

Building on LaVey's insights, Sasha Razor (2022) explores a political function of Belarusian embroidery art in her exhibition report "The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns,"<sup>58</sup> which relates directly to my topic of research. In particular, Razor analyzes twelve textile projects created in response to the events that followed the 2020 Belarusian presidential election. These political art projects were part of an exhibition curated by Razor under the same title. In her discussion of embroidery art projects, Razor situates them within the global Craftivism movement,<sup>59</sup> noting that while not all artists identify with this concept, their works align with its principle of combining activism with craft. In the context of the Belarusian protests, these projects combined political statements with traditional embroidery to rediscover and strengthen Belarusian identity, bring the community together, or provide therapy and support for those affected by the state-imposed violence during the protests. The exhibition title references Valiantsin Akudovich's work, "The Code of Absence" that discusses the challenges of defining Belarusian ethnic identity. While, as Razor states, "predominantly male Belarusian intellectuals" argue that Belarusian identity has been marked by a passive "I do not exist" attitude, Razor's exhibition, in turn, highlights the firm presence of Belarusian political art.<sup>60</sup>

## **Method**

### *Research Questions and Sample*

This study explores the political and personal function of Rufina Bazlova's art projects. Bazlova is a Prague-based Belarusian artist, known for her unique blend of traditional Belarusian folk art with contemporary political critique. She is also the author of an embroidered comic "Zhenokol" [Feminnature], which explores feminist themes within folk traditions. Like many other Belarusian artists living abroad, Rufina Bazlova remains actively involved in the political discourse in Belarus by sharing her work online. Most of her art projects are presented on her Instagram art page.<sup>61</sup>

In this study, I address two research questions concerning Bazlova's art projects, "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" and "#FramedInBelarus," which were presented together in a single

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<sup>58</sup> Razor, "The Code of Presence."

<sup>59</sup> The term "craftivism" refers to the use of crafts for the purpose of making a political statement or as a form of protest.

<sup>60</sup> Razor, "The Code of Presence," 73.

<sup>61</sup> Bazlova's Instagram page: @rufinabazlova

exhibition. The "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" project consists solely of artworks, while "#FramedInBelarus" includes both artworks and letters written by participants upon completing their embroidery.

The first research question focuses on the "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" project. In my analysis, I ask "how can collective folk embroidery art-making challenge the authoritarian state in non-confrontational, sustainable, and non-heroic ways, particularly when direct political expression is not possible?" More specifically, I investigate the project's ability to present alternatives to the state's representations of recent events in Belarusian history, thereby subverting the authoritarian regime without direct confrontation.

The second research question pertains to the letters from the "#FramedInBelarus" project: In the context of continuous political repression, forced migration and failures, what influence does embroidery art-making have on the lives of protesters? I examine the personal impact of collective embroidery art-making on participants, considering their experiences of political repression, migration, and frustration as expressed in their letters. Analyzing these letters, I aim to understand how the act of creating embroidery art as part of a collective project can provide emotional support, maintain a sense of identity, and sustain engagement in the protest movement.

The questions, as well as the analysis, are grounded in the concept of "weak resistance" as articulated by Ewa Majewska. By examining Bazlova's projects through this perspective, I aim to demonstrate how collective embroidery art-making can serve as a form of everyday sustainable resistance while also supporting those who protest in maintaining their resistance within a repressive political environment. This study thus aims to expand the understanding of what resistance and political artistic practice may look like, as well as the role cultural practices can play in political resistance, while demonstrating the potential of non-heroic, everyday acts to bring about change in repressive contexts.

In December 2023, I had the opportunity to see #FramedInBelarus and the artwork cycle "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" in person at the contemporary art gallery GASK in Kutná Hora, Czech Republic, where Bazlova's exhibition titled "Threads of Resistance" (see Appendix, image 4) took place. Although part of the same exhibition, the two projects were exhibited separately.

I chose to analyze "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" and "#FramedInBelarus" together, as these projects share thematic and stylistic elements, both utilizing traditional Belarusian folk

embroidery to engage with contemporary political issues in Belarus. While "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" provides a visual representation of protest events, "#FramedInBelarus" includes, in addition to the artworks, personal letters from participants, which offer unique insights into the emotional experiences and perspectives of those involved in creating political art. Analyzing these two projects together, this thesis offers a comprehensive understanding of how embroidery art-making can not only challenge authoritarian narratives but also foster community, resilience, and continued engagement in protest activities.

"History of Belarusian Vuzhyvanka" is a series of artworks that uses the aesthetic of Belarusian folk embroidery to record the events of Belarusian recent history of protests and create alternative to the state's depictions of these event. All embroideries represent real-life events and real people. The title of the artwork series comes from a combination of three different words. "Vyshyvanka" refers to a traditional Belarusian embroidered shirt. The name originates from the word "vyshyvac'," which means to stitch or embroider in Belarusian. "Vyzhyvac'" means to survive, which refers to the state of the country under the regime in which Belarusian people are forced to survive. The first artworks of "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" cycle was created by Bazlova on the first days of the protests, when the country was experiencing the Internet blackout. In order to ensure timely reporting of the events, Bazlova used vector graphics to create the artworks. The project's description, as well as the artworks can be viewed on the project's online page at [vyzhyvanka.com](http://vyzhyvanka.com).

The "Threads of Resistance" exhibition presented a select number of Bazlova's works, including "Autazak," "Solidarity with Salihorsk," "The Government House," "Flags in Kaskad District," "Manure," and the most recent piece, "Fuck War!"<sup>62</sup> Given that the exhibition did not include many of her well-known artworks that circulated in the media during the protests, I decided to expand my analysis by including additional artworks displayed on [vyzyvanka.com](http://vyzyvanka.com). I thus selected eight artworks: "Minsk-Hero City Stella," "MZKT workers," "Female Solidarity," "People with Unlimited Abilities," "Autazak," "Prometheus of Belarusian Revolution," "Taxi Savior," and "DJs of Changes."

In selecting the artworks for my analysis, several factors informed my decision-making process. One primary criterion for artwork selection was the relevance of the artworks to the socio-political landscape of the 2020-2021 protests. Therefore, I did not include Bazlova's new body of

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<sup>62</sup> The artwork "Fuck War!" refers to the Russian aggression in Ukraine since February 24, 2022.

work that addresses Russian invasion of Ukraine, despite their current political relevance, as they fall outside the scope of my research focus. Additionally, I wanted to include Bazlova's artworks that depicted and emphasized the "weak resistance" within the protests of 2020. One of such artworks was the artwork "People with Unlimited Abilities."

The second art project, #FramedinBelarus, is described as a social art project dedicated to political prisoners in Belarus. The project started in 2021, responding to the growing numbers of politically convicted people in the after-math of 2020 protests, and is a continuation of Bazlova's "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" cycle. The project participants received an email with the name of a political prisoner and an embroidery pattern created by Rufina Bazlova. To embroider the portraits and names of the political prisoners, the participants used a traditional Belarusian technique of embroidery with red thread on a white canvas fabric, identical to the style of "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka." The project's website, [framedinbelarus.net](http://framedinbelarus.net), provides a view of several of the project's artworks. However, the participants' letters can only be accessed at physical exhibitions.

Documentation was an essential part of the project. The participants were instructed to document their process of embroidering, photograph the final piece, and reflect on their experience with embroidery in a letter. As stated on the website, the project's final form will be one large canvas made up of all the embroidered portraits stitched together. As more than 1420 political prisoners have been recognized and are currently behind bars, and the number is rising,<sup>63</sup> the project is far from being finished.

At the exhibition, the embroidered canvases were arranged according to the cases of arrests. Most of them were associated with the post-election protests in different regions of Belarus in 2020. Among the mentioned cases were the case of arrested students, *khorovody*<sup>64</sup> in Brest, riots in Pinsk, and workers strikes *Rabochy Ruh*. There were also two recent anti-war cases of arrests related to Belarusian involvement in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These include the case of the "railway partisans," who impeded the transportation of Russian military hardware,<sup>65</sup> and the information war case, involving those convicted for leaking INTEL on the movement of Russian

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<sup>63</sup> As of June 27, 2024, 1420 persons in Belarus are considered political prisoners, according to Viasna Human Rights Center.

<sup>64</sup> *Khorovody* ["circle dances"] case refers to one of the most massive cases of arrests in Belarus, whereby the protesters sang songs and danced in a circle at an intersection in the center of Brest, on Sep. 13, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Sly, "The Belarusian Railway Workers." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/23/ukraine-belarus-railway-saboteurs-russia/>.

military equipment through Belarus. Each case had from 12 to 20 embroidered portraits, all hung close to each other. The descriptions of the political cases for which the embroidered protesters were convicted were placed below the canvases. The artworks were exhibited on a square red background painted over white walls, matching the colors of the embroideries (see Appendix, image 5).

In the center of the exhibition, a stand stood with a folder containing letters, some handwritten and some printed, in Belarusian, English, Russian, Polish, Czech, or German languages. Photographs of the embroidery process in various contexts (e.g., at home, on public transport, in an office setting, in nature, etc.) created by the participants accompanied most of the letters (see Appendix, image 6). Several postcards expressing gratitude for the project were also included.

In my analysis, I chose not to include the artworks from #FramedInBelarus and focused solely on the participants' letters. Several reasons influenced my decision. Firstly, the primary aim of #FramedInBelarus is not centered on the artistic value of the works, unlike Bazlova's earlier project, "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka." Instead, #FramedInBelarus aims to create visibility, foster solidarity, and offer a collective platform for participation. As the project's page states, "One of the main goals of the "Stitchit Collective" is to actively involve different communities and individuals in the creative process, seeking to unify and deliberately blur traditional boundaries of authorship."<sup>66</sup> This approach means that the embroidered artworks look quite similar, making individual analysis of each embroidery less meaningful. While there is a political perspective communicated visually in the embroideries, I focus on visual aspects of events' representation in my analysis of "History of Vyzhyvanka." Therefore, in my analysis of #FramedInBelarus, it is more useful to concentrate on the direct, personal perspectives of the protesters and how the project influenced their lives.

Thus, for my analysis, I selected 30 letters by Belarusian participants out of 120 letters that were presented in an exhibition folder.<sup>67</sup> In citing the letters from participants of the #FramedInBelarus project, I adhered to the principle of preserving the original way each letter was

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<sup>66</sup> "#Framed in Belarus — About Us." <https://framedinbelarus.net/AboutUs>.

<sup>67</sup> While it would be useful to analyze the impact of this project also on its international participants, I chose to focus on its role in the lives of Belarusian participants, both based in Belarus and abroad. These individuals are directly affected by the challenging political situation in Belarus and may face potential political persecution for supporting political prisoners, which is different for participants from Western European countries who can express their political views more freely.



signed. Most letters included the participant's name along with the case number of the political prisoner they embroidered. For example, a typical citation would appear as: "Ludmila, Minsk 2022. 166. #DzianisZhuk\_Brest\_Riots." In instances where a letter did not mention the name of the participant, I cited the letter as "anonymous." When a letter contained only the participant's name without a case number, I also reflected it in the citation.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

To analyze Rufina Bazlova's art projects, #FramedInBelarus and the "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," I approached each as a case study. According to Yin, a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used".<sup>68</sup> By framing this research as a case study, I was able to make use of all relevant information, which allowed me the flexibility to explore interdisciplinary connections between historical inquiry, contemporary art, feminist theory, and politics.

I started by documenting the exhibition to ensure all materials were available for my research later. Specifically, I photographed the exhibition space, the presented artworks of the "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," as well as the accompanying descriptions and letters from the #FramedInBelarus project.

To address my first research question, "How can the collective folk embroidery art-making challenge the authoritarian state," I conducted a critical visual analysis of several pieces from Bazlova's series "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," contextualizing the pieces and interpreting the meaning behind their visual components. This involved examining media documentation of the events depicted in the artworks, systematically reviewing news articles, photographs, and videos of the events depicted to understand the socio-political context of the pieces, while looking into how it was represented in the artworks. I also incorporated several insights from Bazlova's interviews to understand the perspectives she aimed to convey in her artworks. Finally, I consulted and critically assessed scholarly works on Belarusian folk and protest art and Belarusian political history to situate Bazlova's work within broader theoretical frameworks. Having completed the analysis of the artworks, I categorized them into four distinct groups, each containing two artworks, based on

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<sup>68</sup> Yin, "Case Study Research," 23.

the themes they represent. Crucial Events of the Protest History of 2020, The "Power of the Weak," "Solidarity with the Victims of the State Violence," and "Small Protest Initiatives."

For my second research question, "what influence does embroidery art-making have on the lives of protesters," I inductively coded the letters of #FramedInBelarus based on their themes and meanings. I then analyzed the identified themes and organized them into subchapters according to the meanings they presented. Three subchapters thus emerged: "Copying with Frustration and Pain that Accompany Weak Resistance," "Solidarity with Political Prisoners: Two-Way Support," and "Re-discovery of Connections with Home."

## **Limits of Research**

The scope of my case study of Bazlova's art was limited by the volume of primary source material, specifically letters by Belarusian participants of #FramedInBelarus. As only 30 letters were submitted by Belarusian participants, it is likely that Belarusian context of repression discouraged broader participation, which also highlights the risks faced by those engaging in political resistance in Belarus. Despite the relatively small number of letters available for research, the content of those letters has nevertheless provided valuable information on the impact of #FramedInBelarus on the lives of its participants. Analyzed together with the artworks from "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," the insider perspectives of protesters reflected in these letters have greatly supplemented my study. It is my hope that these insights can inspire future studies on the Belarusian protest movement, political agency, and contemporary political art.

Additionally, while my position as a Belarusian researcher in migration provided a deep understanding of the Belarusian protest context, as well as access to various resources in English, Belarusian and Russian languages, it also introduced biases that could potentially affect the objectivity of my analysis. To minimize these biases, I made sure to use a diverse array of resources, such as academic articles from different fields of study and interviews, while critically approaching and cross-referencing all literature. This research strategy helped to ensure the reliability and validity of my findings.

## **Analysis**

### **"History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka"**

In this chapter, I analyze Rufina Bazlova's art cycle "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," focusing on how her works document and respond to the events surrounding the 2020 protests in Belarus. As my analysis demonstrates, Bazlova offers an alternative narrative to the state's version of events, positioning her art as a form of weak resistance. Despite working in non-confrontational and non-violent ways, Bazlova creates a significant impact through her artworks.

Bazlova's use of traditional embroidery techniques in her artworks is deliberate and strategic. By recording the events of the protests in a cultural code familiar to Belarusians, the pieces, according to Bazlova, were meant to evoke a stronger emotional response than words alone could: "The events that are taking place now can be seen as the formation of the nation. When such a powerful historical and cultural code depicts current events, it makes an impression on people."<sup>69</sup>

The visual language of embroidery also allows for these events to be communicated and understood globally without words, enhancing the visibility of the Belarusian political situation. Additionally, by utilizing a traditionally female practice<sup>70</sup> for political purposes, Bazlova challenges the state-perpetuated notion that women should remain apolitical,<sup>71</sup> thereby subverting traditional gender roles and highlighting the significance of women and other often excluded groups, such as pensioners and people with disabilities, in the protests.

The analysis in this chapter is structured around several key themes and events depicted in Bazlova's works. The first section explores how several important events of the Belarusian protests' history of 2020, such as large protest gatherings and significant moments of opposition, are portrayed in her artworks. The following section "The Power of The Weak" focuses on the ways Bazlova's works highlight the contributions of women, the working class, and disabled people in the protests. These groups, often thought to be excluded from the political environment, are represented as playing key role in resisting the authoritarian regime. By highlighting their involvement, Bazlova underscores how perceived weaknesses can be transformed into a subversive act of resistance. In the section "Solidarity with the Victims," I analyze Bazlova's portrayal of stories of known victims of state repression. In my analysis, I argue that Bazlova's depictions of incidents involving police violence and state brutality are a response to the state's silence or state media's portrayal of victims as unlawful and dangerous individuals. Instead, Bazlova's artworks present them as martyrs and symbols of the resistance. Finally, the chapter

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<sup>69</sup> Cited in Razor, "The Code of Presence," 93.

<sup>70</sup> LaVey "Reading Belarus," 180.

<sup>71</sup> BBC, "Belarus Election: Women Form 'solidarity Chains' to Condemn Crackdown."

examines Bazlova's representations of smaller protest initiatives during the protest, which illustrate how ordinary people's everyday actions contributed to the larger movement of resistance, countering the state's claims of little social support for the protests.

### **Crucial Events of the Protest History of 2020**

#### *"Minsk-Hero City Stella"*

Rufina Bazlova's "Minsk-Hero City Stella" (see Appendix, image 7) illustrates one of the largest peaceful protest gatherings at a symbolic site connected to the memories of the World War II, a core element of the national identity promoted by the Belarusian government. Utilizing this site as a protest location can be seen as an act of reclamation by the protesters, which Bazlova depicts as peaceful and organized act of resistance.

The Belarusian government has long utilized the memory of the World War II to construct a national identity rooted in Soviet history and victory over Nazism. This investment is evident through, among other things, the revitalization and construction of extensive memorial complexes, including the newly renovated Museum of the Great Patriotic War<sup>72</sup>, which plays a crucial role in official events and symbolizes Belarusian identity. When the protesters began using the location of the Minsk-Hero City Stella, the state media portrayed the protesters as violators of national sanctities who attempted to undermine the sacred narrative of the World War II.

In the artwork, contrary to the state's version of events, Bazlova depicts the event as peaceful. The obelisk stands tall and central in the composition, surrounded by figures of protesters arranged in neat, orderly rows. This organized arrangement symbolizes the interconnectedness and like-mindedness of the gathered people. At the top of the obelisk, Bazlova included birds, a Belarusian embroidery symbol of peace, suggesting the protesters' aspirations for peace and freedom. This depiction emphasizes the peacefulness of the protests, countering state narratives that describe them as destructive.

Bazlova's work can also be linked to an iconic image from August 16 that widely circulated in the media. The image showed a mass gathering of protesters in front of the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, with a white-red-white flag wrapped around the bronze statue titled "Motherland Calls." David Pergl, in his analysis of the photo, argues that the protesters used

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<sup>72</sup> Talking about the WWII, the Belarusian government often uses the term "the Great Patriotic War," which refers to the period from 1941–1945. The term was inherited from the USSR and is used to glorify the USSR's involvement in WWII by excluding the global narrative.

these historical and cultural references to victory to assert their own oppositional identity and strengthen solidarity (2023, 36). By blending symbols associated with the Soviet victory over Nazism, previously monopolized by the Belarusian state, with symbols of opposition, the protesters reframed the dominant official narrative of the World War II to signify their own "victory" over the authoritarian state.

#### *"MZKT workers"*

"The MZKT Workers" (see Appendix, image 8) depicts a significant moment on August 17, 2020, when factory workers from the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT)<sup>73</sup> publicly opposed President Lukashenka during his visit. He attempted to appeal to the protesting factory workers, but they responded by repeatedly shouting "leave" during his speech. This reaction was unexpected for Lukashenka, who had claimed consistent support from the working class.

"The MZKT Workers" represents the active participation and significance of the working class in the protests, highlighting their role in opposing the authoritarian state. The central element of Bazlova's artwork is a MAZ vehicle with workers standing on top, holding a cockroach high. This image references Lukashenka, whom the workers defied during his speech. The cockroach metaphor was popularized by Siarhiey Cichanouski during his election campaign, with the motto "stop the cockroach," referring to Lukashenka.<sup>74</sup> The cockroach symbol draws from Kornei Chukovsky's famous fairy tale poem "Tarakanishche" ("The Monster Cockroach"), in which an insect assumes power by bullying other characters. This parallel resonated with the Belarusian people, representing their perception of Lukashenka's regime.

### **The "Power of the Weak"**

#### *"Female Solidarity"*

On July 16, 2020, representatives from the three main opposition groups, Sviatlana Cichanouskaja, Maryja Kaliesnikava, and Vieranika Capkala, held a meeting where they decided to unite their oppositional efforts. This collaboration led to the rise of the female triumvirate led by Sviatlana Cichanouskaja, who, along with her colleagues, stood in opposition to Aliaksandar Lukashenka.

In "Female Solidarity" (see Appendix, image 9), Bazlova highlights the pivotal role of these women in the protests while also depicting grassroots initiatives such as solidarity chains led

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<sup>73</sup> MZKT is a manufacturer of heavy off-road vehicle based in Minsk.

<sup>74</sup> Roth, "Belarus Blues: Can Europe's 'last Dictator' Survive Rising Discontent?"

by women, workers of different professions, and other segments of society. The artwork is rich in detail and depicts various forms and symbols of solidarity and resistance.

This work has three important elements: the government building at the top of the artwork with three female figures above it, two autazaks in the middle with three figures between them, and the protesters surrounding all of these elements. The three women depicted above the government building represent Sviatlana Cichanouskaja, Maryja Kaliesnikava, and Vieranika Capkala. Their elevated position symbolizes the leadership and hope they represented for the Belarusian people, highlighting their pivotal role in the opposition movement while countering the state's comments on their insignificance.<sup>75</sup>

In the center of the artwork, standing between two autazaks, is a figure with a robust and assertive stance, suggesting they represent state power. On both sides of this figure are two female figures offering flowers. The flowers symbolize peace and resistance through non-violence and refer to real-life events when female protesters offered flowers to police officers, attempting to appeal to their humane side. The autazaks represent the oppressive force of the state. This juxtaposition reflects the peaceful intentions of the protesters against the backdrop of state repression.

Solidarity chains led by women, workers of different professions, and pensioners surround the autazaks, emphasizing the broad support for the opposition across various segments of society. In the center of one of these chains is a small figure holding the white-red-white flag, representing Nina Baginskaya, a pensioner who became a symbol of the protests. Her inclusion underscores the theme of "the power of the weak," or the protest potential inherent in vulnerability, demonstrating how women, disabled individuals, and pensioners used their "weak bodies" as tools for resistance.

Common in Bazlova's works, birds appear in this artwork as well. Their presence aligns with the overarching theme of the peaceful nature of the protests and the protesters' hope for a harmonious future.

### *"People with Unlimited Abilities"*

Rufina Bazlova's artwork "People with Unlimited Abilities" (see Appendix, image 10) refers to the marches of people with disabilities during the protests in Minsk from October 15, 2020, to the end of November.<sup>76</sup> Central to the artwork are figures in wheelchairs and individuals with crutches,

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<sup>75</sup> BBC, "Belarus Election: Women Form 'solidarity Chains' to Condemn Crackdown."

<sup>76</sup> Belsat.eu. 2020. "Жаночы марш і акцыя людзей з інваліднасцю."

with one figure in the middle of a wheelchair holding the white-red-white flag, a symbol of the protest movement. The figures are depicted facing the viewer, standing straight and resolute, highlighting their determination to stand up against the regime.

Connecting this artwork to Shchytsova's analysis (2024), it becomes evident how the physical vulnerability of these protestors was transformed into a powerful form of political agency. Shchytsova argues that the exposed vulnerability of groups like women, disabled people, and pensioners that took to the streets served as a stark contrast to the regime's violence, turning their "weakness" into an argument against the oppressive system. Shchytsova describes it as a subversive force whereby the protestors' exposed bodies highlighted the regime's brutality and the critical lack of social security.<sup>77</sup> Their exposure to police violence during the protests highlighted their vulnerability and allowed them to use this "weakness" as a powerful argument for the necessity of ending the current political regime in Belarus.<sup>78</sup>

### **Solidarity with the Victims of the State Violence**

*“Autazak”*

On August 9, 2020, during the first night of the protests, initial reports indicated that Yauhen Zaichkin had been struck by a police vehicle, known in Belarus as an *autazak*.<sup>79</sup> A video of the injured Yauhen lying on the ground was broadcast widely, and the media reported that he died in the hospital. However, it was later confirmed that Zaichkin was alive. The independent media outlets clarified that that the individual hit by an *autazak* was someone else, and Zaichkin's injuries resulted from police beatings during his detention. State media, however, claimed that Zaichkin inflicted the injuries on himself by attacking a police officer while under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

The artwork (see Appendix, image 11) depicts the initial version of the events that circulated in the media. The three main elements of the artwork are the protesters at the bottom, the OMON<sup>80</sup> [riot police] at the top, and the *autazak* with the figure of Zaichkin lying in front of it. In the artwork, a contrast is drawn between the protesters and the police. The protesters are shown as

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<sup>77</sup> Shchytsova, “The Strength of the Strengthless.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> *Autazak* is a special police vehicle, famously known in Belarus for transporting large numbers of protesters. The image of *autazak* has become representative of state oppression, and has been used in artworks, as magnets, and as t-shirt prints.

<sup>80</sup> *OMON* refers to a “Special Purpose Police Detachment,” and is usually called to break up large gatherings of protesters. Belarusian *OMON* is known for being violent towards the protesters.

active, dynamic figures moving with urgency to save the figure of Zaichkin, symbolizing the solidarity and humanity of the protest movement. In contrast, the OMON figures are portrayed as static and emotionless. They appear monolithic and unresponsive, standing still and showing no signs of care or concern for the event unfolding. The vehicle, an *autazak*, which is central to the composition, appears large and impersonal, symbolizing the oppressive force of the state. This clear contrast conveys the artist's perspective on the incident, portraying the protesters as humane and the state police forces as a cold, indifferent machinery of state repression.

*“Prometheus of Belarusian Revolution”*

On the second night of the protests in Belarus, on August 10, a peaceful protester, Aliaksandr Taraikousky, was killed by the riot police. Authorities initially claimed that Taraikousky died from the explosion of an unknown device he allegedly intended to throw at the riot police. However, surveillance footage released later revealed that he died from two gunshots. A people's memorial was erected at the site of his death, repeatedly destroyed by public utility services and rebuilt by protesters.

As Bazlova mentions in one of her interviews, the events of the first days of the protests were in ambiguity, which was reflected in her artworks. She said, “I was bombarded with information from various sources, which influenced my way of working. During the first days after the elections, the internet was shut down throughout Belarus, and people in the country didn't know what was happening. It was difficult to obtain accurate information.”<sup>81</sup>

Bazlova also highlighted the changing information about the death of Aliaksandr Taraikousky, which depended on newly discovered video evidence. She adapted her artworks to these changes, aiming to create a more accurate representation of the events. “The death of Aliaksandr Taraikousky was shrouded in uncertainty, which influenced my drawing. Based on the available information, I created the triptych 'Prometheus of the Belarusian Revolution,' representing the first victim of the protests. Later, when images were released showing that he had been shot, I created a second version of the picture showing how it actually happened. The work

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<sup>81</sup> Bazlova, Rufina. “Protest as if Stitched.” Interview by Sabina Ježková for sportin.art. <https://www.sportin.art/en/article-detail/protest-as-if-stitched-rufina-bazlova-captures-the-fates-of-political-prisoners-in-belarus-through-embroidery>.



was created on the go, and even though my view of events changed, it remained preserved in my artistic work.”<sup>82</sup>

The artwork (see Appendix, image 12) consists of three separate images. In the first image, Taraikousky’s figure is central to the composition, representing the impact of his death on the movement. He is positioned between two police cars on his right and left and between the protesters and the police forces at the top and bottom, highlighting his significance. A notable element in Bazlova's "Prometheus" is the contrast between the protesters and the police. At the top of the composition, the protesters are depicted holding hands, symbolizing unity, solidarity, and collective strength. This gesture emphasizes the peaceful and cohesive nature of the protest movement. In stark contrast, the bottom of the artwork features static, uniformed police figures, representing the rigid and oppressive force of the state. The police figures, devoid of individuality and motion, highlight the stark divide between the dynamic, united protesters and the monolithic, unresponsive state apparatus.

In the second image, Taraikousky’s figure is replaced by a large spark of fire. In the third image, the OMON is no longer present. Instead, a cross, referring to Taraikousky’s memorial, is surrounded by a large group of mourning protesters, candles, and *valoshka*<sup>83</sup> [knapweeds] ornaments.

In this artwork, Bazlova draws a parallel between Taraikousky and the mythological figure Prometheus, who is known for his defiance against the gods and suffering for the benefit of humanity. Taraikousky is depicted as a modern-day Prometheus, symbolizing the sacrifice and suffering of the Belarusian people in their struggle for freedom and justice. Like Prometheus, who brought fire to humanity despite severe punishment, Taraikousky's actions inspired greater determination and solidarity among the protesters.

### **Small Protest Initiatives**

#### *“Taxi-savior”*

This four-part comic (see Appendix, image 13) illustrates an act of solidarity by a Yandex taxi driver, documented in a viral video from September 23, 2020. In the video, a Yandex ridesharing taxi driver takes in a protester fleeing from the riot police. While standing on the road, the driver

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<sup>82</sup> Bazlova, “Protest as if Stitched.” Interview by Sabina Ježková for sportin.art. <https://www.sportin.art/en/article-detail/protest-as-if-stitched-rufina-bazlova-captures-the-fates-of-political-prisoners-in-belarus-through-embroidery>.

<sup>83</sup> *Valoshka* [knapweeds] is considered an unofficial symbol of Belarus. It is used in many embroidery patterns, traditional clothing, as well as by a Belarusian state-owned flying company *Belavia* in their logo.

makes an instantaneous decision to help the protester, lets him into the car, and maneuvers his vehicle around other cars and police officers, even driving onto a lawn to facilitate the escape.

In the first panel, a figure is depicted running away with a white-red-white flag, pursued by three identical police figures armed with batons. The second panel portrays a Yandex taxi with a white-red-white flag attached to it, trailing the running protester. The third panel features the Yandex taxi with two flags attached, indicating that the protester has been taken into the car. The police figures continue their pursuit. In the final panel, the police officers are placed at the bottom, they are no longer running and instead are shown standing still, with their batons on the ground, which symbolizes their defeat. The taxi car, on the other hand, is depicted at the top of the image, surrounded by birds on both sides. The white-red-white flags now resemble wings in movement, portraying the taxi driver as an angelic savior.

This comic effectively utilizes symbolism to convey its narrative. In reality, neither the driver nor the protester carried the flag, but the artwork employs the flag as a protest symbol to signify their mutual support for the resistance. The transformation of the taxi into a winged vehicle represents the driver's act as heroic, elevating him to a savior status, which also corresponds with the artwork's title. The juxtaposition of the static defeated police figures with the elevated, dynamic taxi records the event as the victory of solidarity over state repression.

### *“DJs of Changes”*

Rufina Bazlova's artwork "DJs of Change" (see Appendix, image 14) pays tribute to the actions of Belarusian DJs Uladzislau Sakalouski and Kiryl Halanau, who played a banned song "Changes!"<sup>84</sup> by a Soviet singer Viktor Tsoi at an official event in Minsk's Kyiv Park several days before the elections.<sup>85</sup> As Sakalouski later explained to the journalists, the song was played to protest the actions of Belarusian authorities who hindered the demonstration in support of Sviatlana Cichanouskaja. Following the event, the DJs were arrested, and were later forced to leave the country. In support of the arrested, widespread protest activities took place the same evening. The car drivers honked and played "The Changes" to express solidarity with the protesters. A mural, depicting two DJs, was painted in the center of the public space at the intersection of Charviakova,

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<sup>84</sup> In 2011, the song "Changes!" by Tsoi was repeatedly played by participants of civil protests in Belarus, called "Revolution through Social Networks," protesting against the financial crisis caused by the authorities. Subsequently, the song was banned. During the 2020 protests, the song was very often played and sang by the protesters. Those who were caught by the police playing the song in their cars were often arrested.

<sup>85</sup> Pilecki, "Суд арыштаваў на 10 сутак дыджэяў." <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30771068.html>.

Kahovskaja, and Smorhauski streets in Minsk, what later became known as the "Square of Changes." The "Square of Changes" emerged as a center of protest culture. The mural not only honored Sakalouski and Halanau's protest actions, but also stood as a symbol of artistic and cultural resistance against authoritarian oppression.

The artwork depicts two DJs behind a DJ station embellished with Belarusian ornaments. They are depicted symmetrically, with interwoven arms, which conveys unity between the protesters. Surrounding the DJs are two birds that represent the peacefulness of their resistance. A small heart above the DJs symbolizes love and perhaps hope amidst the changes. The piece thus highlights the transformative power of art and cultural initiatives within the protest movement. By playing a censored song, the DJs used music as a form of resistance. Bazlova's work emphasizes the role of cultural expressions in mobilizing and unifying people against oppressive regimes.

### **“#FramedinBelarus”**

#FramedInBelarus began during a period of increasing state repression following the 2020 protests, when it became evident that most protest methods were not effective against the authoritarian regime. Unlike Rufina Bazlova's first protest embroidery project, "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," which started at the onset of the protests, when the outcome was not yet known, #FramedInBelarus emerged in 2021 in a post-protest, increasingly difficult political situation in Belarus. Since #FramedInBelarus, like "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," represents a form of weak resistance, it also means that there is growing frustration within the protest community, as weak resistance entails sustained participation, an acceptance of potential failures, and a lack of quick results.

Taking these factors into account, it is interesting to investigate how protesters continued their resistance. Analyzing the participants' letters, I found that #FramedInBelarus, being a political art project, also played a significant role in sustaining the participants' resistance. Therefore, the primary focus of this analysis is to understand the influence of #FramedInBelarus on the lives of protesters amid continuous political repression, forced migration, and their experiences of failure and frustration. I begin by examining the motivations behind the participants' involvement and then demonstrate the various ways in which the project helped them persist in their resistance.

Many participants articulated their motivations to participate in #FramedInBelarus as stemming from a refusal to accept political injustice and an aim to raise international awareness about the political prisoners in Belarus. Many letters also expressed a desire to support political prisoners. One participant expressed that although many forms of political expression have become illegal in Belarus, it was impossible for them "to remain indifferent to the lawlessness being carried out by the illegitimate president in [their] native Belarus." [anonymous]. Consequently, they chose to convey their political position through embroidery, which they perceived as a safer and more accessible means of expression. Another participant shared their belief that the way to change is composed of many steps, asserting that embroidering a political prisoner's story could contribute to democratic reform in Belarus: "I want to hope that even a small deed like this will contribute to our country becoming democratic and free, and to the return of all political prisoners back to their homes." [anonymous]

Participants also highlighted the importance of international awareness in ending the oppressive regime. As one participant noted, they took part in the project "to show the world the problem of political prisoners in Belarus, who serve time in inhuman conditions for their civil position, having done nothing evil." [anonymous] Through their embroidery and letters, participants aimed to humanize the statistics by sharing personal stories of those affected by state repression. Additionally, many found the combination of embroidery technique with political critique appealing, as it offered an opportunity to utilize their existing craft skills for a social cause. One participant, who had practiced cross-stitching before, found the project to be a meaningful way to raise awareness and express support for unlawfully convicted Belarusians, stating, "I was happy to hear about the project #FramedInBelarus dedicated to political prisoners. I've always loved cross-stitching and today it turned out that this is the only thing I can do to draw attention to unlawfully convicted Belarusians." [anonymous]

While perhaps it was not what motivated the participants to take part in the project, "#FramedInBelarus" also provided emotional support. It allowed participants to feel a sense of solidarity through the collective nature of the project, reconnect with their lost home of Belarus, especially for those who were displaced, and cope with the frustration and pain stemming from the lack of immediate results from their political actions. Importantly, it helped them maintain their motivation and hope for a better future. This chapter will demonstrate these aspects.

## **Coping With Frustration and Pain That Accompany Weak Resistance**

The state repression, represented by arbitrary detentions and physical violence following the 2020 protests, left Belarusians who continue to protest feeling powerless and defeated. This period created a need for solidarity, collective healing, and trauma processing. At the same time, sustained motivation and hope are crucial to keep the protest movement alive. Change does not happen fast, and it is difficult to continue resisting state repression when the impact of one's actions seems unimportant and nonexistent, and the actions themselves seem too small to enact change. Many artists thus found themselves in search of therapeutic art practices, with embroidery becoming a choice medium for some. Artist Vasiuchenka, for instance, shared that embroidery helped her to get through the uncertain times of protests: "As protests broke out, the level of anxiety in 'our swamp' drove me to explore new techniques and means of artistic expression. [...] embroidery and handicraft help me calm my nervous system, relax, and process my emotions here and now."<sup>86</sup> The Ź Gallery in Minsk, when organizing a collective embroidery project during the 2020 protests, also emphasized the therapeutic effect of the embroidery: "Besides the fact that we will create a large work of art together, the process of embroidery represents excellent therapy and meditation that helps us to live through and process everything that touches us."<sup>87</sup> Similarly, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, "Framed in Belarus" provided a therapeutic outlet through embroidery, enabling participants to express and process negative emotions, and maintain their motivation for change despite the slow and unseen progress.

### *Stories of Personal Struggle*

Many participants expressed mixed feelings about their participation. While they acknowledged the small impact of their actions, they also recognized the importance of continuing to highlight the stories of political prisoners. One participant, having received the name of a political prisoner, Dzmitry, who had already served his sentence, wondered why they should embroider his name if they could not undo or change his sentence. They found the answer in understanding that while they could not influence Dzmitry's sentence, problematizing the state's decision to convict him by creating visibility for his and other political prisoners' stories can be one of the steps toward changing the authoritarian system in Belarus:

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<sup>86</sup> Cited in Razor, "The Code of Presence," 80.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 83.

I received the political prisoner Dzmitry Kachurka, who has already served his sentence, and I suddenly had a question: "Why do it?" But this thought didn't stay long in my head because I understand how important it is to acknowledge every victim of this regime. Even if a person receives a short sentence, it is still a stolen time and a shattered life. It was enjoyable to join the #framedinbelarus project and make my own small contribution." [AK\_ Warsa, 2023. 479.  
#DzmitryKachurka\_Brest\_Circle\_Dances\_Group\_Bel]

Dusya, a participant from Minsk, also expressed sadness that her efforts, along with those of other protesters, did not influence the duration of the time served by the political prisoner she embroidered. In the letter, they stressed the interconnectedness of all protesters and the responsibility of those who still have their freedom before those who had to part with it:

"While I was working on this piece, Yelena was released in January 2023. This is a great joy. But she fully served her sentence. We were not able to free them :( We owe it to them." [Dusya. 391. #AlenaLyskovich\_Brest\_Circle\_Dances\_Group\_Rus\_2]

Similarly to the previous letter, Daryja, one other participant, shared her feelings of regret that came from her inability to make a more significant impact: "I feel emptiness inside. It's hard to write. Words don't form sentences. All I could do was embroider Polina's story. But I am left with a sense of regret that I could do so little." [Daryja. 260.]

Many letters emphasized how embroidering for a socially significant cause impacted how they thought about the issue of political prisoners. The tangible medium of embroidery, coupled with prolonged contact with it, seemed to bring about deeper reflection on the injustice faced by the political prisoner they were embroidering:

"Embroidering something not just for the final image, but as a symbol of something socially significant – that's a completely different kind of embroidery. While the thread runs through the canvas, thoughts run through your head: how can this be? We live in a civilized world, and this person simply expressed their opinion and didn't harm anyone." [Liza, 29. #PavelBialinik\_Zeltser\_Group\_1(Rus)]

### *Coping with the Reality*

While many participants of the project felt frustration and failure due to the slow process of bringing change, most participants acknowledged that despite the emotional hardships and relatively small impact, it was necessary to continue highlighting the situation with political prisoners in Belarus:

While embroidering, I thought about Maryia's talent and her youth behind bars. It was painful for me, but at the same time, it seemed important to reflect such a strong example in this work. I hope Maryia will like it." [Dar'echka P. 196. #VictoryiaHrankouskaya\_Students]

Similarly to the previous letter, another participant expressed that embroidering a political prisoner enhanced their emotional response to the issue, making it challenging to finish the project. Nevertheless, they were glad to mobilize their negative emotions into the work and complete it, as the problem of political prisoners only intensified with the Russian invasion of Ukraine<sup>88</sup>:

Regarding my feelings, it's hard to say, as all the events inside and around me have intertwined into a tangled ball. There was even a time when the unfinished work seemed to look at me judgmentally, and I wanted to hide it. But I'm glad I returned to it and finished it because, for me, it brings attention to the issue of political prisoners and their pain, which, with the onset of the war, did not disappear but, on the contrary, feels even worse." [anonymous]

At the same time, As Liza, one of the participants, emphasizes that while change in the political situation in Belarus will not happen quickly, the situation with political prisoners should not be accepted as a new norm, even for the sake of coping with the restricting political conditions:

The worst thing is that despite all these thoughts, this reality already seems completely familiar and almost doesn't evoke any emotions. This is our reality: if you do one wrong "like," the police will knock on your relatives' door. And it's very important to remind ourselves that we shouldn't get used to this reality and shouldn't consider it something inevitable, even if those in power will harshly punish any attempts to change something [about it]. [Liza. 29. #PavelBialinik\_Zeltser\_Group\_1(Rus)]

### *Finding Motivation, Maintaining Hope and Building Community*

One of the letters illustrated a participant's initial fear that came to them while engaging with the protester's story. However, the very same story ultimately led to Alena's realization of the importance of overcoming fear to express disagreement with the state's actions, which, perhaps, gave that participant motivation to continue:

While embroidering, of course, I was thinking about the political prisoners and injustice that they – the innocent people – have to face, and that makes it even scarier. [...]. As

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<sup>88</sup> The project's participant refers to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022.

soon as I received the embroidery pattern, I looked up the history of my political prisoner. I was surprised by how beautiful this young person was. And then I was shocked by the fact that he lost his freedom literally for his words, for his thoughts, for his [political] position. And then I thought that if a word can be considered a crime in this system, what can I even say? How much prison time do they give you for embroidery, for support, for not being indifferent? I finally realized that we shouldn't always be scared. If the only thing that is left is fear, then life loses its colors and taste. [Alena. 207]

Participants of the project also revealed how it gave them hope and allowed them to share this hope with others. One participant found a connection between the longevity of the embroidery process and the continuity of life, stating, "Life continues; that is why embroidery still has a long red thread." [40. #AliaksandrHaurylik\_Zeltser]. This metaphor of the long red thread symbolically represents the ongoing nature of the political struggle and the hope that sustains it, despite the slow and often unseen progress inherent in weak resistance.

Nadzeja captured the idea of hope and resistance through their reflection on the project:

I am stitching a new Belarus! Indeed! Belarus that is free, without bars and deception...Belarus, that wants to do something real, and it does it. Everything will be fine! I can feel it! Thank you very much! Doing this work, you begin to understand that it is possible to resist and fight with the help of art, creating something beautiful and simple. Just like our grandmas were stitching health, harvest, good work, and happy destiny for their relatives. [Nadzeja]

The phrase "stitching a new Belarus" is particularly interesting, as it merges the slow, meticulous process of a traditional art practice with the act of creating political change. In their letter, the participant expresses their belief that it is possible to resist and fight against oppression, creating a vision of a better future through art and simple, beautiful acts. The letter thus represents the possibility of shaping of a hopeful future through subtle, non-violent artistic forms of protest.

Another participant shared their belief in eventual justice: "I, even though it may be naïve, want to believe that soon all political prisoners will be free and all those responsible for what's happening will receive fair punishment." [anonymous]. Despite the lack of immediate outcomes, the participants' belief in future justice, perhaps brought about by the project, provides motivation to continue their political resistance.

The importance of a sense of community in sustaining motivation that #FramedInBelarus provided is expressed in another letter by Alena: "I don't know what I should hope for or believe in,



but what I know for sure is that the most important thing is to stay together and not let fear consume you.” [Alena. 207]

### **Solidarity with Political Prisoners. Two-way Support**

According to bell hooks, solidarity involves a reciprocal relationship where individuals are bound together by common causes and a shared vision for change. Specifically, hook’s concept of solidarity encompasses the sharing of resources, experiences, strategies, and knowledge with each other within the common struggle. This exchange involves both the victims and those who support them, highlighting the interactive two-way quality of solidarity. According to bell hooks, solidarity is thus grounded in a deeper, more sustained commitment than the more transient and often one-sided notion of support.<sup>89</sup> This concept of two-way solidarity, as this analysis will demonstrate, was reflected in the letters from participants in the #FramedInBelarus project.

Many participants noted that the project’s collective effort of expressing solidarity with political prisoners through embroidery also provided them with a feeling of support from being part of a larger community. As one participant states in their letter, due to the collective nature of the project, even in isolation, they felt connected to a broader community of like-minded Belarusians, including both the political prisoners and those continuing the resistance on the outside:

The only thing that I would want to say to him if he was near is that life doesn't end there; there is +1 person who thinks of you. I want him to see it because it is very important to know that he was never alone in this. I am very grateful to everyone who came up with this idea [of the project], made it a reality, and participated in it because this [the project] also became my support. [40. #AliaksandrHaurylik\_Zeltser]

This quote from Ekaterina pointed out that the political prisoners did not simply fall victims of the regime. As Majewska cleverly observes in her reading of hooks, those who have faced severe oppression or violence often share their survival strategies and recovery methods with others in similar situations.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the oppressed are not merely passive recipients of aid, but they contribute valuable insights and tactics that can help others avoid and resist similar traumas. Ekaterina thus expresses her belief that the stories of political prisoners’ expressions of protest will provide crucial lessons for future generations:

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<sup>89</sup> Hooks, “Feminist Theory from Margin to Center.”

<sup>90</sup> Majewska, “Feminist antifascism,” 18.

Each stitch is a symbol of remembrance for all Belarusians who have died and suffered under tyranny. We remember you, we see you, we will read about you in history books. [...] And when the regime falls, we will throw a party together on its ruins under the white-red-white flag. Hang in there! [Ekaterina. 566. #AlanaGebremariam\_Students\_Group\_Bel]

The promise of a collective future celebration "under the white-red-white flag" aligns with hooks' definition of solidarity, which is based on shared goals, beliefs, and a sense of unity and purpose among those who are under repression.

For many participants, the political prisoners and stories of their political expression became something to look up to and find motivation to continue the political struggle, even if the possible outcome could be persecution. Ekaterina also finds role models in politically imprisoned and draws strength from their example. In addition to that, her acknowledgment that "any of us could be in their place" highlights the shared risk and thus interconnectedness among the protesters:

While I was embroidering, I thought about how any of us could be in their place. I asked myself, how would I act? Would I have the courage to fight for the truth even if its price were prison and my life? I think I would because I have role models to look up to. If, despite all the pain and fear, young people (and not only young) resist the dictatorship, then it is worth it." [Ekaterina. 566. #AlanaGebremariam\_Students\_Group\_Bel]

### **Re-discovery of Connections with Home**

The intensified state repression following the 2020 protests led to a wave of migration out of Belarus. The reports suggest that up to 500 thousand Belarussians have left the country since 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Forced to leave their homes due to potential or existing threats of persecution, many Belarusians found themselves in foreign places, detached from their cultural roots and struggling to adapt to a new environment. In her letter, Tacciana expresses these struggles:

I spent the last few months in my motherland at Akrescina and at Frunzin RUUS<sup>92</sup>. [...] When this project started, the most difficult task was to find canvas and the thread. For I

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<sup>91</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Belarus: Decree Puts Exiled Citizens at Risk." <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/08/belarus-decree-puts-exiled-citizens-risk>.

<sup>92</sup> Frunzin RUUS, officially known as the Frunzensky District Directorate of Internal Affairs of Minsk is the district-level police authority for the Frunzensky district of Minsk. It has been reported for human rights abuses, particularly during the protests of 2020.

just moved to Warsaw, I didn't know anybody, and the language was foreign to me.  
[Tacciana. 205. #VitalRohach\_Zeltser]

The durational aspect of embroidery meant that the project followed the participants through their displacement and in their search for new meanings. For one of the participants, the last stitch has symbolically marked the geographical end stop of their displacement journey:

I started embroidering it in January 2022 when it seemed that the worst had already happened, and all that remained was to wait for her [the political prisoner] and the other students and gather strength to warm them up when they could finally be within reach. I embroidered it while sitting on the shore of the Black Sea in Batumi and among the snowy mountains of Svaneti. Then the [Ukrainian] war happened, and everything that wasn't on the front line seemed meaningless. It took some time to start embroidering and writing again. While searching for meaning, I moved to Sweden and made the last stitch here. It felt like I made a cross-stitch around Belarus as if encircling the place where Katya is now. [anonymous]

Several participants expressed that in the difficult circumstances of migration they found themselves in after 2020, embroidery became a way for them to reconnect with their lost "home" by regaining a connection with the Belarusian community. The collective and borderless nature of the project facilitated this reconnection. For one participant who recently moved to Turkey, the project inspired them to connect with their new local Belarusian community, which had a therapeutic effect on them:

I embroidered for the first time in my life, and it was a therapeutic activity for me. With each embroidered cross-stitch, I felt more connected with other concerned Belarusians. I had a strong desire to organize a meeting of our diaspora in the small town in Turkey where I now live. At first, I was worried that no one would come, but everything worked out. We had a wonderful meeting, wrote letters to political prisoners, spoke in Belarusian, shared our experiences, and simply learned that we have each other. I wish to continue doing something good and useful; our time will come. Freedom to political prisoners!  
[anonymous]

Victoria told a personal story of how she had moved out of Belarus long before the protests, leaving friends behind in the country. With limited connections to their homeland and few ways to help from afar, she found #FramedinBelarus to be a meaningful way to reconnect with their roots by contributing to a better future for their family and friends there:

I have not lived in Belarus for a long time, but I have friends and relatives there. And I really want them to be able to go outside without fear, talk about anything, and make plans with joy. [Viktoria. 83. #AndreiKastsou\_Zeltser]

It was not only the collective participation in the project that allowed the participants to reconnect with their cultural roots, but it was also the very medium of embroidery itself. The use of red on white, reminiscent of Belarusian cultural symbols, and traditional ornaments offered many participants comfort and familiarity and restoring their sense of belonging:

The very fact of embroidering in red on white touches some deep strings of the soul. The last time I embroidered a picture was in school (with colorful threads). When I started the project, I felt that it was somehow so right and familiar (even though embroidery is not my strong suit). There is some magic in it. Perhaps traditional ornaments are encoded in our subconscious, so each encounter with them (or their variations) resonates with the warmth of home." [385. #AntonSomau\_Zeltser\_Group]

As it can be seen from the analysis in this chapter, the participants of “#FramedinBelarus” mobilized their vulnerability of being detached from their homes through these embroidery acts for community-building and resilience. As their letters demonstrate, the embroidery project #FramedinBelarus provided the means of coping with their displacement by preserving cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has examined the role of Belarusian political embroidery art as both a form of resistance against authoritarianism and a source of support for those engaged in political protest. By focusing on Rufina Bazlova's projects, "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" and "#FramedInBelarus," the study demonstrated how collective embroidery can serve as a non-confrontational, sustainable, and subtle means of political expression when direct opposition is not possible.

The analysis of "History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" revealed that Bazlova's use of traditional embroidery techniques to document the events of the 2020 protests can create alternative narratives to the state's version of events. Depicting the events of protests, Bazlova highlights the scale of public dissent and the peaceful nature of the protest gatherings, countering the state claims that there was little support for the opposition, the protests were destructive, and the protesters themselves were inadequate, violent individuals. For instance, works like "Minsk-Hero City Stella" and "MZKT Workers" counter the state's portrayal of the protests as violent and chaotic, instead emphasizing the solidarity and unity among protesters. These alternative narratives of events can, in theory, potentially challenge political stance of people who support the current Belarusian government.

Bazlova's art also highlighted the contributions of marginalized groups, such as women, disabled individuals, and pensioners as the key actors in the protest movement, in pieces like "Female Solidarity" and "People with Unlimited Abilities." These groups, often excluded from political narratives, are instead depicted as central figures in the resistance, which also opposes the state narrative's that women cannot be in politics. Additionally, Bazlova's art made visible instances of state violence and reclaims the dignity of its victims. Her artworks "Autazak" and "Prometheus of Belarusian Revolution" portray victims not as criminals, as the state media claims them to be, but as martyrs and symbols of the peaceful resistance. Her art also captures smaller yet significant acts of resistance by ordinary people, as seen in "Taxi Savior" and "DJs of Change," illustrating how everyday actions can make a significant social impact.

In the analysis of "#FramedInBelarus," I presented a detailed examination of the letters written by participants of the project. The analysis revealed the project's significant impact on their lives. Many participants described how the collective nature of "#FramedinBelarus" provided emotional support, helping them cope with the frustration and pain that accompany weak resistance in a repressive political environment. Specifically, the project fostered a sense of community and solidarity, allowing participants to feel connected to a broader network of like-minded individuals. The act of embroidery a political prisoner also allowed the participants to process their emotions and maintain their motivation for continued resistance.

Finally, "#FramedInBelarus" allowed participants to reconnect with their cultural roots and regain a sense of belonging, especially for those who were displaced due to the state repression. The medium of the project, namely the traditional embroidery, provided comfort and familiarity in a foreign environment. This reconnection was important for keeping up resilience in the face of ongoing political repression.

Through the exploration of Bazlova's work, this thesis has shown how traditional textiles and collective art-making can be powerful tools of political resistance and personal resilience. Not being immediately targeted by the state, due to its perceived "low" impact, Bazlova's weak resistance artistic projects helped create alternative to the state's cultural memories, establish worldwide visibility of the political situation in Belarus, build long-lasting solidarity, and support those who continue to protest. While Belarusian protests of 2020 are often potrtrayed and thought of as large single gatherings, there is more to the protest movement. As the example of Bazlova's art projects has demonstrated, it is possible to protest through slow, traditional, non-confrontational artistic practices like embroidery.

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## Appendix



*Image 1. Fight Like a Girl. A wall painting by Alena Davidovich, 2020.*



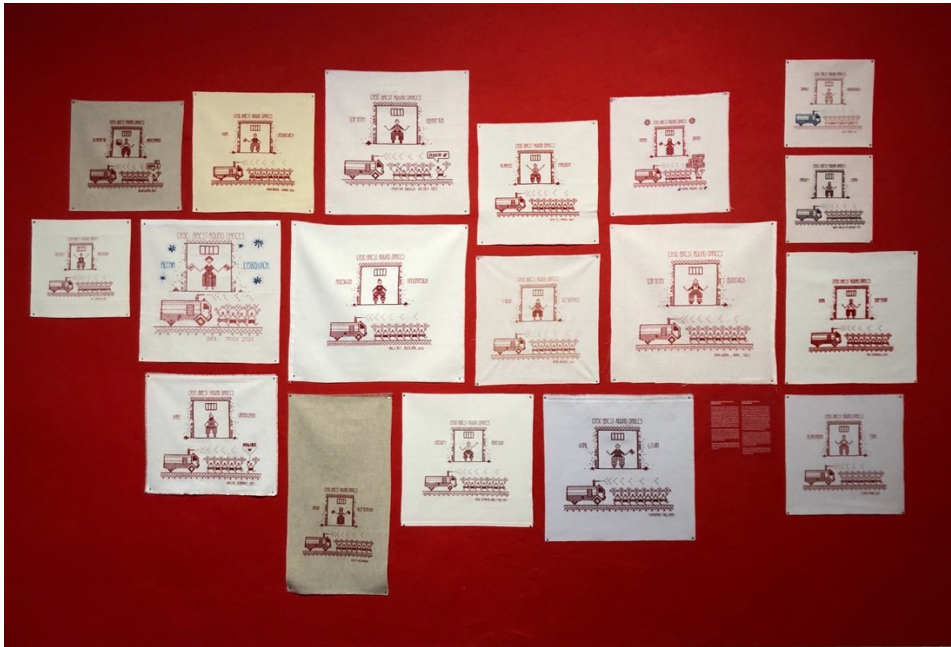
*Image 2. Tomorrow is Every Day. Collective embroidery project by anonymous participants, 2020. Minsk, Belarus.*



*Image 3. Zastolle. Embroidery performance by DY artist duo, 2021. Bremen, Germany.*



*Image 4. Threads of Resistance, an exhibition of work by Rufina Bazlova, curated by Richard Drury at GASK gallery in Kutna Hora, CZ. 7 October 2023 - 21 January 2024.*

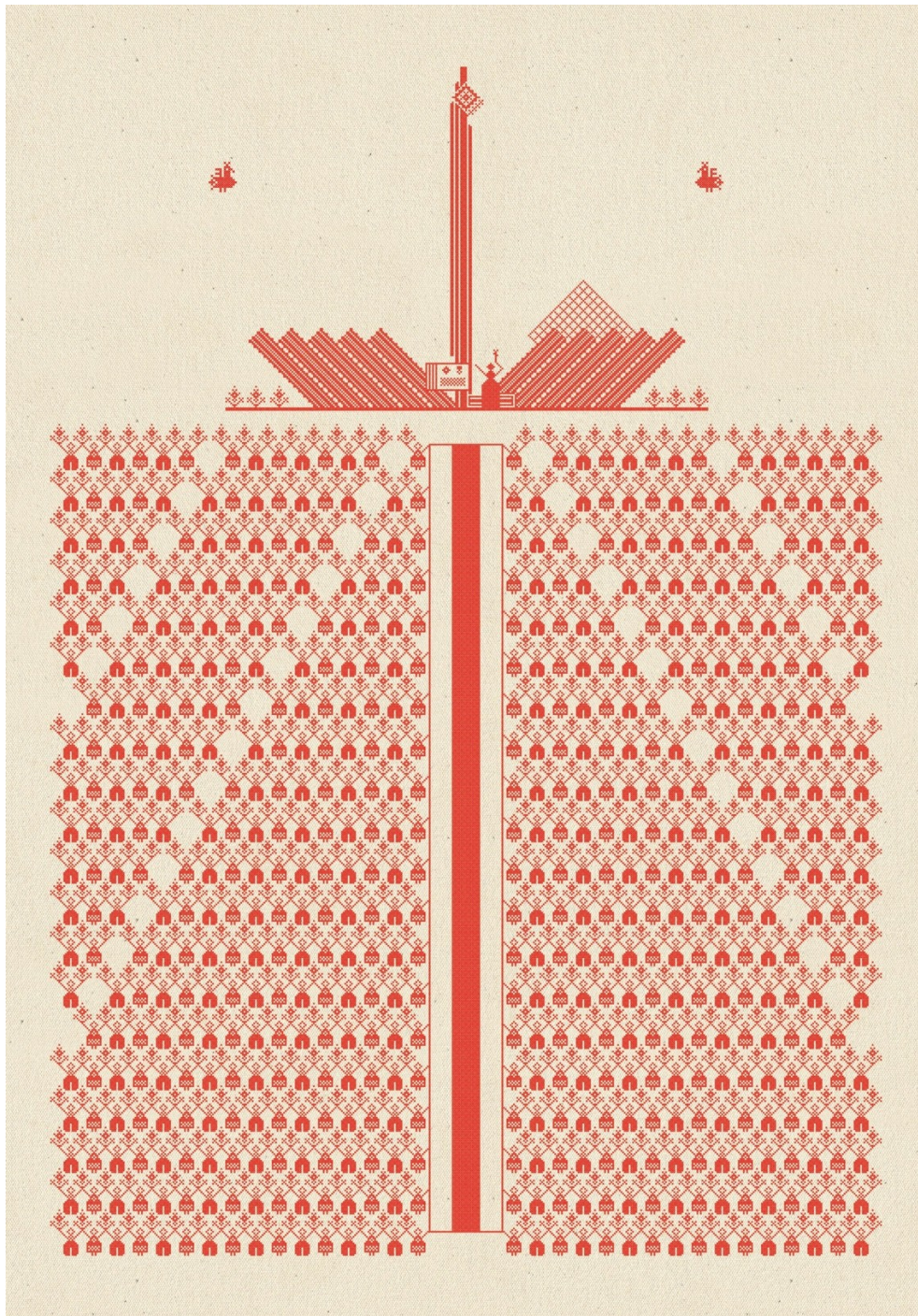


*Image 5. Embroidered canvases of “#FramedinBelarus” at “Threads of Existence” exhibition of Rufina Bazlova’s body of work. GASK gallery in Kutna Hora, CZ. 7 October 2023 - 21 January 2024.*





*Image 6. Embroidered canvases of "FramedinBelarus" in context. A photograph by a participant of the project, presented as part of "Threads of Existence" exhibition of Rufina Bazlova's body of work. Kutna Hora, CZ.*



*Image 7. Minsk-Hero City Stella. An artwork by Rufina Bazlova, 2020. Accessed from vyzhyvanka.com.*





*Image 8. MZKT Workers. An artwork by Rufina Bazlova, 2020. Accessed from vyzhyvanka.com.*



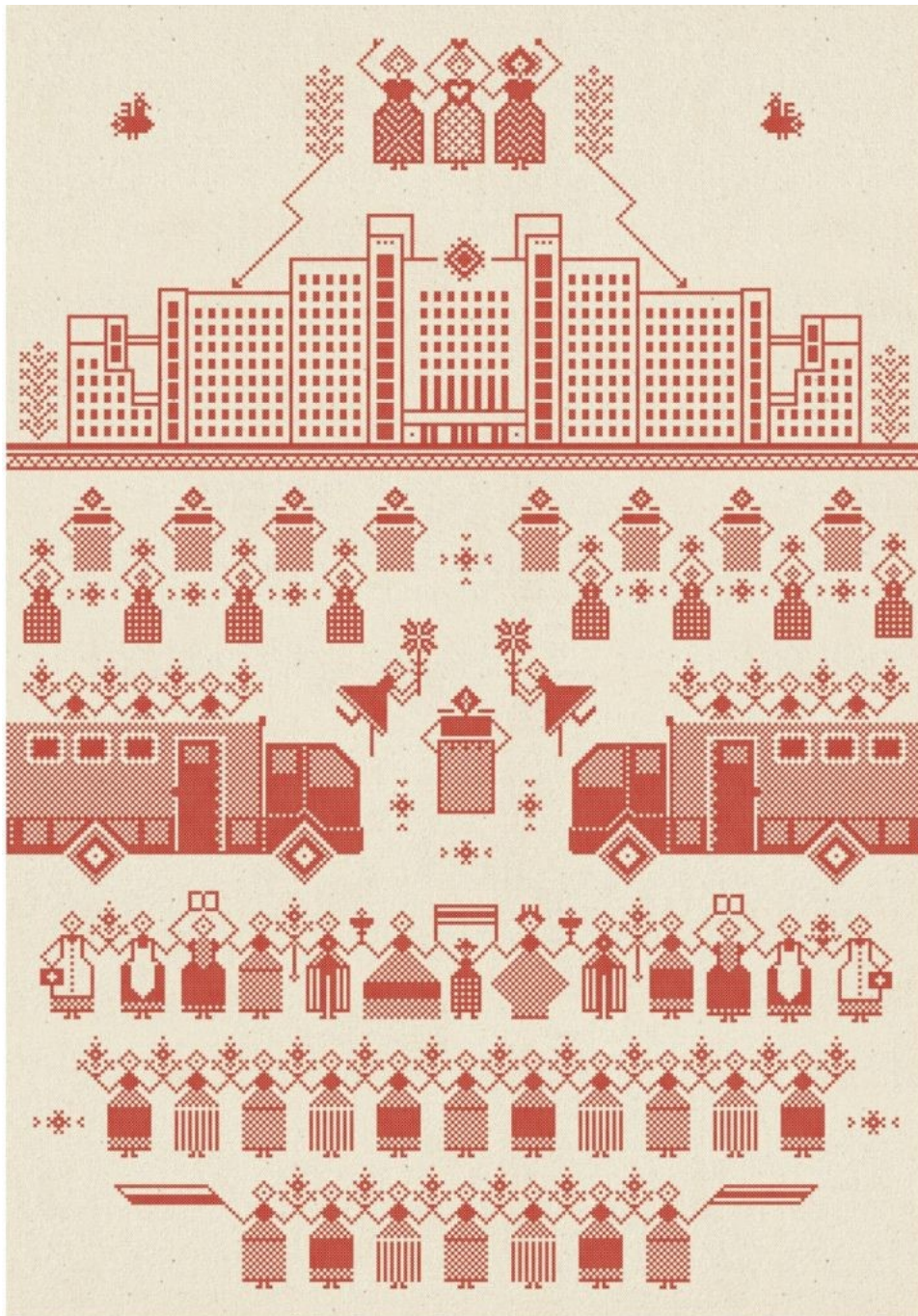


Image 9. Female Solidarity. An artwork by Rufina Bazlova, 2020. Accessed from [vyzhyvanka.com](http://vyzhyvanka.com).





Image 10. People with Unlimited Abilities. An artwork by Rufina Bazlova, 2020. Accessed from vyzyvanka.com.









Image 12. Taxi-savior. An artwork by Rufina Bazlova. Accessed from [vzhyvanka.com](http://vzhyvanka.com)



Image 13. DJs of Changes. An artwork by Rufina Bazlova. Accessed from [vzhyvanka.com](http://vzhyvanka.com)