



# Societal fragilities and resilience: The emergence of peoplehood in Belarus

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## Abstract

The article examines societal fragilities and local resilience strategies in Belarus with a particular focus on the notion of *peoplehood*. Premised on the idea of evolving forms of agency under the Anthropocene, and the emergent complexity-thinking in International Relations, the article draws on these approaches to societal fragilities and community resilience to understand and explain the unprecedented levels of mobilization occurring in Belarus since the disputed presidential election in August 2020. To this end, the article zooms onto the local communities to provide an analytical perspective on the study of *resilience as self-organization*. In line with complexity-thinking, it argues in favor of history-specific processual identities, shaped by the aspirations of a “good life,” and realized via local support infrastructures which lie at the heart of societal resilience in Belarus. Yet, the potential of all these elements to actualize into a sweeping transformative force, referred to as “peoplehood” in this article, is rare, and comes at a time of unprecedented crises and existential threats to the life of a community. The Belarusian society seems to be undergoing such a moment that not only makes it more resilient and adaptive to change; it also transforms it into a new form of *societal being*, self-aware of its worth, self-organized, and self-reliant on its inner capabilities to fight for a life of excellence. The article traces these moments of *becoming with*, and *societal being*, via a critical discussion of fragilities and the elements of resilience, actualized into peoplehood.

## Keywords

Belarus, community, fragility, “good life”, peoplehood, resilience, self-organization, “the local”

*And what is it, then, for which so long they pined,*

*Scorned throughout the years, they, the deaf, the blind?*

*To be called PEOPLE! (Kupala, 1905–1907)*

## Introduction: the awakening of Belarus’ resilient communities

While challenging for the entire international community, the year of 2020 hit Belarus particularly hard. The Covid-19 pandemic was not recognized by the Belarusian authorities, who refused to introduce the lockdown and to provide other Covid-19-related support measures to the population as advised by the World Health Organization (Astapenia & Marin, 2020). On the contrary, people responded bottom-up, by organizing neighborhood support platforms, and crowdfunding for the most vulnerable, and the affected. In this state of nascent mobilization, the society approached

the presidential election of 9 August 2020, which was marred with a wide-spread intimidation campaign by authorities, ensuing in disputed results. Unprecedented levels of peaceful mass protests lasting for nearly a year followed. The authorities responded with escalating violence leading to a standoff and an ongoing political crisis. The deteriorating socio-economic conditions have worsened living standards for the majority of people even further, with many losing jobs and seeking refuge abroad. Taken together, these events of 2020 seem to have exacerbated societal fragilities making them central to survival and

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resilience in Belarus. At the same time, this difficult year also marked a long-brewed *awakening* of civil society, with many observers reporting extraordinary levels of mobilization of Belarusian communities (*supol'nasts'*) across the country and beyond immediate neighborhoods. People seem to have taken a firm stance to address societal fragilities wishing to be the architects of their own future (Astapenia & Martin, 2020; Korosteleva, 2020; Shraibman, 2020).

These developments in Belarus during 2020 serve as a testimonial to the remarkable resilience of the Belarusians in the form of their self-organization and self-reliance: they demonstrate how global challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and repressive government have been met with bottom-up self-governance and strong resistance by local communities. Resilience, however, “is always more” (Bargués-Pedreny, 2020), and it is remarkable to observe, given this deep and abrupt change, how not just resilient but also *transformational* these developments are, turning a hitherto atomized and apolitical society into a powerful political force of change, or what we refer to in this article, the *peoplehood* (Sadiki, 2016). Building on these observations, this article asks the questions of what makes local communities in Belarus so resilient, and what has enabled them to turn into “peoplehood” when facing existential threats and growing societal fragilities, such as Covid-19 and authoritarianism.

Following the recent advancements of the concept of resilience (Korosteleva & Flockhart, 2020a), this article uses resilience as an overarching framework to address the above questions and to explain the ongoing transformation in Belarus. It understands resilience both as a *quality of a complex system* that through mobilization of inner strengths and capacities, enables it to become more adaptive and responsive to adversity. At the same time, it is also an *analytic of governance*, meaning that this adaptability based on self-organization and self-reliance for survival requires a different approach to governance to ensure sustainability of a complex system. Tracing the awakening of Belarusian society to its socio-cultural underpinnings, the emergence of networks of self-help and the remarkable levels of ongoing mobilization will allow us to understand how local communities deal with fragilities, and how best they could respond to these challenges via resilience-building measures. This way, the article adds a “societal” perspective, conceptually, as a new level of analysis; but also, practically, by allowing us to focus on horizontal societal dynamics in the recent political developments to understand what makes a “peoplehood.” While focusing on a one country case study, the article aims to draw broader implications for rethinking governance based on complexity- and resilience-thinking, thus contributing to both (complex) International Relations and post-development studies.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present a critical overview of the discourse of fragility from its deeply

entrenched modern liberal and contemporary neoliberal understandings to a newly emerging complexity perspective via resilience-thinking, adopted in this article. The threefold conceptual framework is then developed outlining identity as a processual element of resilience shaped and driven by a sense of “good life” and supported by local infrastructures, culminating in “peoplehood,” if and when all the main components of resilience as self-governance come to an alignment, allowing a transformative force to form. This section also outlines the methodology and data sources for the subsequent empirical discussion of Belarus’ societal resilience as a case study,<sup>1</sup> exploring the emergence and endurance of resilient communities in the country in the pivotal year of 2020. The conclusion puts the findings into a broader context and outlines the contributions to the existing academic literature on resilience and governance, highlighting the avenues for rethinking governance from the perspective of “the local.”

## Understanding fragility in times of complexity

In the Fragile States Index, Belarus was ranked 103 out of 178 in 2020 (FSI 2020). One would assume that the post-election turmoil must exacerbate fragility even further. However, as mentioned above, the societal drive for resilience-building has become more prominent in the country. To understand what makes Belarusian local communities resilient to fragilities, it is first important to clarify the meaning of “fragility” and “resilience,” particularly given that these terms have been deeply contested in the past few decades. This section will trace the conceptual evolution of “fragility” (sometimes also referred to as “vulnerability”) as it lies at the heart of a broader discourse on power and governance. By showing how the meaning of fragility shifted throughout the major analytical paradigms, this section aims to underscore the links between our understanding of fragility and the modes of governance associated with it, including the relevance of resilience-thinking.

The liberal paradigm dominating political discourse up until 1970–1980s and still largely inscribed in our thinking, sees fragility as a property of an external world. Being “fragile” means to be threatened or damaged by exogenous factors, such as natural disasters or pandemics. Hence, fragilities can be dealt with by addressing their consequences. Given that a human is seen as a rational choice-maker in this paradigm, another way to deal with societal fragilities is by developing ways to eliminate or contain potential threats through scientific knowledge and continuous man-made progress (Chandler & Reid, 2016). Positivist belief in knowability of the world and universality of natural and social laws maintains that a solution to fragility lies in better understanding and controlling potential threats through developed solutions and best practices. It is the state who acts as the authority above society deciding who can be

seen as fragile and what measures to be taken to address them. In line with this paradigm, socio-economic fragilities in Belarus would be tackled by the state through economic development and mitigation of potential threats.

On the contrary, the neoliberal paradigm, as argued by Chandler with the reference to Hayek and Giddens, is best understood “as a theory and practice of subjectivity” (Chandler and Reid, 2016, p. 2). Neoliberalism shifts attention from the external (the world) to the internal (the subject/the person) dimension, where fragilities are perceived as an internal feature. Affected by endogenous factors, subjects are said to be fragile when they are unable to adapt to external pressures. This “inability” to adequately respond to a challenge or crisis is explained by the limits of our knowledge: not perfectly rational, the humans are seen as possessing bounded rationality which might hinder their adaptability thus making them vulnerable to the external environment. Given these substantial limitations of the human agency, the neoliberal discourse operates with the notion of “change,” replacing the liberal idea of progress and emphasizing that, essentially, one can only adapt to change, rather than build a sustainable future. Focusing on the subject and the internal dimension, the neoliberal discourse on fragility aims to construct the subject to make it more adaptable to potential threats. The focus therefore shifts from addressing the consequences of a threat to its prevention through developing certain qualities. According to the neoliberal paradigm, it is possible to identify what makes humans vulnerable, for example, obesity and smoking cause certain diseases, therefore promotion of a healthy lifestyle by state and its internalization by the subject is a form of neoliberal governmentality addressing societal fragilities. Governance in this paradigm becomes increasingly about “sense-making,” “capacity-building” and “empowerment” of the subject and society, that is, constructing an adaptable subject. As this paradigm foresees indirect state intervention, in the case of Belarus it would imply shaping the public beliefs that would facilitate adaptability to fragilities, for example, some of the ideas promoted by the state in the past decade include diligent work, patriotism and political non-participation, as citizen activity has been framed as a source of instability, hence, a source of fragility itself.

The neoliberal understanding of fragility has been debated in the recent critical scholarship on several grounds. First, while acknowledging bounded rationality, this paradigm still relies on the idea of knowability, which, as will be discussed below, is problematic. Second, the identification of who is considered to be “fragile” and the solutions to tackle these fragilities often come from the outside, that is, the state in the national and states and international organizations in the international contexts, decide who are to be labeled as fragile social groups. They therefore come up with external templates and solutions to be internalized by those perceived “vulnerable,” resulting in the problem

of responsabilization of the subject/society by the state. Third, and connected to it, externally waged solutions may result in temporary, unsustainable, and sometimes perceived as forced measures (Chandler, 2018; Joseph, 2013; Korosteleva, 2019).

This article suggests moving beyond the neoliberal understanding of fragility and governance, by adopting the emerging complexity-thinking. Complexity-thinking describes natural and social processes characterized by the absence of linearity among the elements of a system. Non-linearity implies that an input cannot directly define an output due to the absence of direct causality and the large number of elements in a system. As a result, even a very small input can lead to drastic outcomes, just as a butterfly flapping its wings causes a tornado in the famous butterfly effect. On the contrary, a substantial input not resulting in any significant outcome may also be a product of non-linearity. Hence, the key features of complexity-thinking are unpredictability and uncertainty (Bousquet & Curtis, 2011). To understand the ongoing processes in a complex system—and a society is undoubtedly a case of a complex system—one needs to closely trace the unfolding processes which link multiple elements of a system together in various networks of relations. Relations can be relatively stable and entrenched, but there might also be multiplicity of more fluid, subtle relations which emerge as a reaction to a particular problem and may dissolve thereafter. These myriads of relations develop into what is called “emergence” or self-organization, which allows the system to respond to a particular challenge in a processual manner. Given non-linearity, uncertainty, and emergence, it was argued by complexity-thinking scholars that instead of trying to order chaos and uncertainty and to manage and control a complex system through our bounded knowledge, we should instead rely on the natural processes of self-organization which tackle the problem at source, through the creativity of means/capacities available—hence, the vision of *resilience* as an analytic of (self-) governance (Gell-Mann, 1995; Dooley, 1997; Korosteleva & Petrova, 2021).

Fragility in this paradigm cannot be foreseen in advance and, all the more, no predefined solutions to tackle fragilities can guarantee effectiveness. Rather, the implications of complexity-thinking for governance and international affairs, inter alia, shift the attention from the planned governmental programs to the local societal processes of self-organization. In the past three decades, this thinking has spread into non-Western approaches to development, economy, production, environment, and so on. The motto “think globally, act locally” summarizes these multiple approaches mushrooming across various disciplines and localities shifting the attention from the global responses to the local societal solutions with a view of the global picture in sight (Kothari et al., 2019). This trend has been captured by post-development scholars, arguing that “notions of community are making a comeback in diverse epistemic-political

spaces” (Escobar, 2018, p. 176). It is essential to once again stress the radical difference between the understanding of fragilities in neoliberal and complexity-thinking approaches. While in the former fragilities are defined and dealt with from outside (by a state or international organizations for the person), in the latter what matters is the internal views and perceptions on fragilities by communities themselves. “The right to opacity,” as argued by Glissant (1997) and Chandler (2021), is the key to resilience:

This approach then may view communities as themselves changing in the ways they see the world and respond to it . . . In such a framing, relations of openness come prior to any closure of a homogenous, fixed or determined identity as the “norm” . . . Relations make a resilient community; one based upon the free play of difference, rather than assuming any *a priori* subject. Autonomy is thus a process of becoming-with others, but without assuming unity over difference. (Chandler 2021, p. 7)

The focus on a community, defined as a group of people united by certain criteria, allows to trace the processes of self-organization and emerging relations targeted at addressing fragilities at the source. Such an approach is an alternative and a complementing perspective to the mainstream approaches focusing on a state level of analysis, formal institutions and rational-choice behavior. The focus on “the local,” community and processual dynamics also differs from the neoliberal approach to society adopted in the mainstream literature on societal development. The latter concentrates on civil society organizations and institutional enablers, seen as a mouthpiece of society in general. Yet, this neoliberal approach has a number of limitations, including reductionism, a focus on official structures, and a Western-bias in a sense that a certain Western-type structure is expected from a civil society organization (formal hierarchy, official status, clearly defined roles, budget, etc.). Adopting a community perspective as a self-reliant and self-organizing entity, as will be shown on the case of Belarus, allows for a more horizontal and all-encompassing framework to the study of society, and governance, as a nexus between “the local” and “the global” to encourage more sustainable, diverse, and cooperative models of ordering to emerge. This in turn would allow us to capture the subtlety of relations developing for the solution of a problem and as such to get a sense of the fluid and informal processes of emergence and self-organization, which lie at the heart of resilience as self-governance.

### **What makes communities resilient: identity, the good life, support infrastructures, and peoplehood**

Linked to these critical discussions of fragilities, which understanding has evolved with a shifting perception of

how complex the world has become around us, and how more salient an intuitive role of “the person” (individual or collective) should be in it, this article treats resilience as intrinsic *govern-mentality* which we argue, better equips the person for engaging with and handling the fragilities of life. This is because resilience is about inherent strength and local capacities of the person or community, thus enabling them to solve the problems more efficiently, by dealing with them at the source, locally, rather than through top-down, centralized, or external solutions.

The comprehensive framework of resilience as analytic of governance was developed elsewhere (Korosteleva & Flockhart, 2020b) and has lately been elaborated further, introducing an intuitive mesh of its fundamentals which contributes to societal resilience-building through practice, bottom-up and horizontal (Korosteleva & Petrova, 2021). This article unpacks some elements of this conceptual framework further, to test its explanatory value on the case of Belarus, proving its further relevance to complex International Relations and post-development studies.

Unlike liberal-thinking that treats “the person” as an autonomous subject albeit deprived of the freedom for action unless governmentalized and directed externally (Joseph, 2013); and in contrast to the neoliberal mentality that endows “the person” with the subject-related properties but circumvents their ability to resolve problems locally (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Corry, 2014), the post-neoliberal paradigm of complexity-thinking adopted here places resilience as self-governance at the heart of living in a complex world and managing life fragilities, bottom-up and in a self-help manner, with external support only as necessary. Resilience in this case appears to be a more optimal tool of (self-)governing, to rediscover “the person” and its ability to respond to fragilities in an adaptive and agile way; and to redefine the role of community in enabling the person, through *becoming with the others*, in the process of relational interaction (Chandler, 2021; Glissant, 1997), to withstand and even transform their environment to achieve a life worth living. Resilience as a framework, thus, presupposes an assemblage of many fundamentals—identity; a sense of “the good life”; local support infrastructures; personal inner qualities; solidarity; emotions; and so on (Plough, 2021)—which conjointly help “the person” not just cope, and survive, but more essentially, to strive for a betterment, through intra- and inter-action (Kurki, 2020), in a world of uncertainty, and many challenges, commonly referred to as the Anthropocene (Chandler, 2018), with limited control over it.

This framework is selected based on the following considerations. First, it follows the urge by a number of community resilience scholars to use frameworks for integration. In particular, Berkes and Ross (2013) argued for an integration of system and psychological approaches to the sources of resilience. Korosteleva and Petrova’s (2021) framework complements these psychological factors (i.e., identity and

good life aspirations) and system factors (i.e., support infrastructures) with an additional temporal dimension of *becoming* when faced with adversity, occasionally leading to “*a moment of being*” referred to here as “peoplehood.” It thus provides a comprehensive analytical framework to understand and grapple with the ongoing change. Second, it builds on the literature focusing on community resilience and includes most of the relevant factors that facilitate it. Third, it provides a broader categorization which can be flexible for different case studies. Notably, local support infrastructures, depending on the case, may include formal and informal institutions, community competences, social capital, human development and capabilities, external/internal resources, and so on.

In this article, we shall review the three most visible components of resilience (or at least the way they come to manifest themselves in Belarus)—identity, the good life, and local support infrastructures—to help us understand the process of *becoming with*, and turning it into a moment of *being a peoplehood*, a kind of coherent transformative force, that intensely rejects previous order arrangements, and enables new ideas for bottom-up governance to take hold and shape a community’s direction for future development.

Much has already been said about identity (Hall, 1999; Newman & Newman, 2001; Ohad & Bar-Tal, 2009; Wendt, 1994), so much so that it has led to an “identity crisis in social sciences” (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). At the same time, exploring it from a perspective of “rational dreaming” (Berenskoetter, 2011) or a sense of a “good life” that shapes and drives identification processes forward (Flockhart, 2020), linking it to resilience as an ability to survive and transform, leaves much room for exploration and creativity. In simple terms, identity is a human attempt, individual or collective, to “establish a sense of Self in time” (Berenskoetter, 2011, p. 648). Conventionally, it is construed as being shaped by *the past* via a shared understanding of history, and traditions; and being embedded in *the present* in the form of shared culture, values, and norms (Copeland, 2000). What is often missing, but is crucial to understanding the role of identity in resilience-building, are the temporal and rational dimensions of *the future* for constructing the Self, and *the shared purpose* of becoming, which occurs through a collective struggle for a good life. Notably, as Berenskoetter (2011) argues “identity is [only] manifested through the future” where the latter is a “source of anxiety” and uncertainty; and “it renders being incomplete” (p. 652) thus acting as a “pull factor” providing Self “with an opportunity to move on, or ahead, on a certain purposeful course” (p. 653). This makes the future the most significant parameter of being/becoming, with identity being its processual part, in an effort to achieve a shared meaning of a “good life.” Identity and aspirations for a good life thus form a common foundation for communal resilience-building. They

are seen both as a *set of qualities*, ideas, expressions, symbols, and ambitions, which bring people together, in their struggle for a good life, bound by shared values, traditions, culture, mentality and purpose; and as a *dynamic process of becoming* with others, as a foundation for a community of relations (Chandler, 2021).

These qualities and aspirations are maintained by community *support infrastructures*, including formal or informal ties, local practices, and resources. Community support infrastructures may include leadership, trust, reciprocity, social networks, families, kinship, neighbor networks, and so on. They could be of formal or informal nature; established or emergent; virtual or physical. Their purpose is to offer affective solidarity when necessary (Babaev & Abushov, (forthcoming) 2022; Pravdivets et al., 2021), care and support (be it financial or moral), upbringing and socialization, and “a shoulder to cry on” when in crisis. In short, these support infrastructures help people to cope, adapt, and recover, by enabling a tangible “we-feeling” of togetherness, and a sense of community of relations, to weather the storm. It is worth noting that on their own, these structures may not enable transformation, but they do help to endure, adapt, and overcome some complex challenges of life.

Building on these structures, and an aspiration for a “good life” when hit with crisis or gross injustice, as attested by the case of Belarus, there may emerge a moment of alignment of the core components of resilience—and their list is not exhaustive at all!—into a powerful force of what Sadiki (2016) calls “peoplehood” (*al-harak*), which turns adaptation into transformation, ceasing connections with the institutional past and edging toward rational imaginaries of the future. Peoplehood signifies the emergence of a new quality for a community of relations, equated to a realization of rational aspirations moving “the person” from *becoming* to *being*, ensuing in the processes of self-organization and self-determination, and transformational soul-searching.

Peoplehood is a rare and palpable *moment of being*, and it is deeply political (Edkins, 1999), stirred by the effort to break with the politics of an established order, in search of a new and shared purpose. This is a relatively new concept in social sciences and has been shaping up with the intensifying levels of people’s engagement in politics and scholarly reflections of the existing phenomena—from the Arab Spring in Egypt; to the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine; and the current extensive protest movement in Belarus, to name but a few. Smith (2015), for example, contended that peoplehood was more than just becoming “political people”: it was about “conveying senses of meaning and value, defining political goals, prescribing institutions and policies, and sustaining or failing to sustain support for political communities and their leaders, institutions and policies in difficult times” (p. 3). Lie (2004) in turn argues that peoplehood is “not merely a population [or ethnicity], but rather a people—a group, with an internal conviction, a self-reflective

identity, . . . and a putatively shared history” and aspirational purpose (p. 1).

Peoplehood is not just a moment of *being*, it is about “*being together*, not merely in similar ways” (Brown and Kuling, 1996/1997, p. 43); it is a representation of otherness reinforced through symbols (e.g., white-red-white flag in Belarus) and/or acute feeling of injustice (e.g., Black Lives matter campaign); it is more than a society: it turns into a transformative political entity, encapsulating the pain of crisis, and the fragilities of life, calling for an urgent need to “interact in ways other than through force or imposition” (Anderson, 2014, p. 19). It is exactly this “transformational phenomenon” (Sadiki, 2016, p. 339) that one currently observes in Belarus in the variety of forms, including student protests; women’s marches; doctors, artists, workers, pensioners’ angst and remonstrations; mass rallies for dignity and solidarity; partisan war of symbols and imageries; astounding creativity and the mushrooming of neighborhood units of resistance to the brutality, and lies of Lukashenko’s regime, that has turned people’s endurance into a transformational force.

What follows below is a concise engagement with the components of resilience in practice using Belarus as a case study. While not aiming to provide a comprehensive account of modes of self-organization and solidarity, which goes beyond the scope of this study, the empirical analysis here intends to trace the developments during 2020 to pinpoint the shift toward the post-neoliberal reading of fragility and resilience—that is, how Belarusian communities defined their own fragilities and how they addressed them through self-organization. What follows below therefore, is the empirical analysis of the elements of societal resilience to explain what has enabled the society to turn into “peoplehood.” We aim to make a snapshot of a relatively brief period in time—the year of 2020—to zoom in on the critical juncture where society has undergone substantial transformation, partially due to Covid-19 and later due to protests. For this purpose, we base our analysis on (i) a participant observation by the authors during the years 2019–2020 (prior to 9 August 2020), (ii) interviews and textual analysis of witnesses’ accounts of post-August events, and (iii) focus groups, conducted during May–June 2019 under the auspices of the GCRF COMPASS project (Global Challenges Research funded project ES/P010849/1) as well as secondary data available from other verified sources (see note 2). The six focus groups (FG) were conducted in all regional centers of Belarus, including Brest, Gomel, Grodno, Minsk, Mogilev, and Vitebsk. Each focus group involved up to 11 participants, totaling 54 respondents who took part in the focus groups representing all the socio-demographic groups (by gender, age and level of education) in equal proportions. The obtained data provided an opportunity to consider the state of the Belarusian society on the eve of the turbulent events examined below, to study the elements of fragilities and resilience experienced in the

country to date. The data enable a better understanding of the origins, modalities of the course, and the implications of the political crisis for the societal response to it—thus shedding a new light on the emancipatory power of communities of relations (Chandler, 2021; Glissant, 1997) to shape “the local”, and to affect “the global”, through the relational process of becoming. To grasp the change, we compare the manifestations of identity, good life aspirations and local support infrastructures with the pre-2020 period, mainly shaped in the three post-Soviet decades, to understand how the historical societal structures and practices then resonated with the emerging peoplehood. These observations of this research thus draw on previous findings related to the analysis of social capital conducted by the authors (1999–2001; 2008–2011; 2016),<sup>2</sup> and other available secondary data.<sup>3</sup>

### How does “peoplehood” work in Belarus: from endurance to transformation

The moment of Belarusian peoplehood has not emerged overnight. While it was clearly triggered by the lack of state measures to protect the people from the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>4</sup> and mobilized further due to the brutal actions by the incumbent authorities against peaceful mass demonstrations disputing the results of the 9 August 2020 presidential election; the awakening of the Belarusians has been brewing for years. The protest movement actively drew on the symbols and elements of Belarusian identity manifested in the previous decades. Thus, the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia (the flag and the coat of arms of Belarus in 1918–1919 and 1991–1995) became major symbols of the protest, the cornerstone myth of the “Great Patriotic War” (1941–1945), as shown by Kazharski (2021), has been successfully reappropriated by the protest movement, and the vociferous desire to be called “We, the People” [*Lyudzmi zvatstva*], powerfully expressed by a Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala in 1905–1907, found substantial resonance in the unfolding social dynamics:

And, say, who goes there? And, say, who goes there?

In such a mighty throng assembled, O declare?

Belarusians!

And what do those lean shoulders bear as load,

Those hands stained dark with blood, those feet bast-sandal shod?

All their grievances!

And to what place do they this grievance bear,

And whither do they take it to declare?

To the whole world!

And who schooled them thus, many million strong,  
 Bear their grievance forth, roused them from slumbers long?  
 Want and suffering!  
 And what is it, then, for which so long they pined,  
 Scorned throughout the years, they, the deaf, the blind?  
 To be called PEOPLE!

Peculiarities of Belarusian identity formation, including a relatively late start of nation-building in the second half of the 19th century, geopolitical and geocultural in-betweenness (stark Orthodox Russian influence on the one hand and Catholic Western on the other), devastating effect of the two world wars and intensive socio-economic development in the framework of the USSR (Bekus, 2010, 2014; Buhr et al., 2011; Ioffe, 2003; Kazharski, 2021; White and Feklyunina, 2014) have fostered if anything, some very modest aspirations in the Belarusians—those of quietness and peace, non-interference and fortitude shaped by a phrase “as long as there is no more war,” which was painstakingly rehearsed by the post-war generations as a daily mantra. As the 2019 focus groups revealed, stability, above all, remained “the most important value” for the Belarusian respondents, through which they appraise the notions of “family, work, no debt, stable income” (female, 51 years old, Vitebsk), and “the desire to live your own *little quiet life*” and “the wish to avoid any changes even on a daily basis” (male, 65 years old, Gomel). This is further reinforced by a sense of “moral satisfaction” (of self-realization) and ontological security (feeling safe, stable, and financially protected from the adversity of life)—as part of a “good life” aspirations that many respondents mentioned as shaping their lives. It is important to note that for many it is the moral aspects of their vision of a “good life” that topped up their priority “list”: “A good life is an opportunity for self-realization, dignity and preservation of our culture and a certain subjective well-being” (male, 55 years old, Grodno); while another noted the salience of “health, and a decent life” (male, 63 years old, Gomel).

These aspirations come in such stark contrast with the waves of mass protests occurring daily in Belarus since the August election 2020, which suggest that these people must have found themselves on a real precipice that has led them to break with the very foundations of their cherished stability for the sake of dignity and a better future for their children. These unfair elections and especially the subsequent state violence (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [ODIHR, OSCE], 2020) mobilized every strata of the population: from the young to the old, and people of all walks of life, views or faiths (Douglas et al., 2021; Gapova, 2021). It seems what has mattered the most to them, after all, is not stability, but a sense of *dignity of life*

to be called and treated as “people”—*lyudzmi zvatstva*—and a sense of *justice*, which so starkly was denied to the Belarusians in the recent election, and when raised—so brutally responded by the incumbent regime (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Wanting to be justly treated as “*hramada*” (coherent community) and “human,” rather than “*narodets*” (demeaning of the notion of people), “*bydlo*” (animals), “*ovtsy*” (sheep), “*narkomany i prostitutki*” (drug-addicts and whores), which is a repetitive narrative of the Lukashenko’s administration (see, e.g., Kryzhanovskaya, 2020; Postimees, 2020), has pushed the Belarusians to swap their illusion of stability and rise up to the regime. This single moment meant moving beyond adaptation and endurance, to a new transformation and a new vision of life becoming “peoplehood,” post-August 2020, with no turning back.

As mentioned above, peoplehood means more than a civil society, and much more than a movement of national defining. It precisely symbolizes *the moment of being* that seems to have erupted so suddenly, through relational sharing of pain and grief, and through fostering of future ideas, dreams, and desires, especially in the face of a crisis and/or gross injustice and suffering. It brought out a palpable sense of *community of relations*, which hitherto was hidden, obscure, and even dormant. It was facilitated by societal support infrastructures which seemingly emerged from out of nowhere, in a society one thought was so urbanized and devoid of any vivid connections, that it was difficult to imagine that these communal relations would ever exist (see note 3 for further reference). Yet, they did and do: triggered by the state’s denial of Covid-19—the infamous commentary by Lukashenko “There are viruses here, you didn’t notice them flying? I don’t see them either” (RT, 2020), went viral on the internet—it seems to have awoken the dormant structures of the communal past—*supol’nasts’* (immediate neighborhood), *talaka* (togetherness/working together), *hramada* (cohesive society) and a sense of *tuteishyya* (“the people who live here”). Crowdfunding emerged through various digital platforms, to support the needy and most vulnerable during the pandemic; virtual doctors’ advice/consultations were made available to anyone; support units for food and medication deliveries were organized to assist those who could not afford it or became incapacitated by the virus (Astapenia & Marin, 2020; Douglas, 2020; Shraibman, 2020) demonstrated an unprecedented level of self-organization in Belarus, at least in the past few decades.

This burgeoning sense of community, emerging in response to Covid-19 in the early 2020, came timely for the moment of protests, literally erupting into a network of *self-organization* and self-help across the neighborhoods (*supol’nasts’*). What came forth is the incredible tenacity, resolve, determination, and most of all, creativity of the Belarusians, who peacefully stood up to the pain, abuse, injustice, and violation of dignity, unleashed by the

Belarusian authorities in an effort to thwart the revolt and restore previous order. What has emerged, through the simmering desire for a “good life,” and a myriad of hitherto hidden and newly formed *community relations*, “the bonds and networks,” is “this new sense of meaningfulness—as well as a shared experience of living through grief and pain” that “cannot be undone in Belarus” (Minchenia & Husakouskaya, 2020), or what is referred to in this article, the moment of *being* “peoplehood.”

In a short space of time—several months—this moment of “being in peoplehood” not just simply brought people together in their resistance to violence; it has changed them in a qualitatively new community, including their understanding of their own fragilities and ways to address them through shared perceptions of life, and banishing fear bringing out a new “we-feeling” of “togetherness,” solidarity and collectivity, and constructing a new political identity that “encompasses diverse political ideals, visions of a new Belarus . . . and, importantly, community identity” (Minchenia & Husakouskaya, 2020). This was clearly not in terms of the civil unrest or “the awakening of the nation,” “but in terms of people coming together in times of great uncertainty, horrendous state violence, and the sense of urgency, solidarity and mutual aid” (Minchenia & Husakouskaya, 2020; see also Kazharski, 2021).

In 2020, Belarus saw instantly emerging multiple communities of relation, some stable, some subtle shaping and dismantling and re-shaping again—for instance, women holding hands un-intimidated in front of the armed OMON (state security forces); the elderly led by Nina Bahinskaya with a white-red-white flag, as a symbol of rebirth for a new Belarus, which has been taken away and broken so many times, and yet, every day it appeared again; the memorials and festivities organized to raise the spirits up—with music, lights and cheering; unstoppable graffiti art, and thematic protests on a daily basis; and an intoxicating shared feeling of grief and pain at the death of Roman Bondarenko and other victims, that people came out to commemorate with Roman’s last words: “I am coming out!” These emerging relations of community were manifested in various *symbols* using Belarusian *vyshyvanka* patterns, white-red-white flag and colors, flowers, umbrellas, a giant model of a cockroach representing the incumbent, white laces on fences, murals, and famous gestures displayed by Maria Kolesnikova, the campaign chief for Victor Babariko in the shape of the heart; Veronika Tsepkalo, wife of a barred candidate Valeriy Tsepkalo, showing a victory sign; and of course, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a leader of the opposition, famous for her punched fist (see, e.g., Moscow Times 2020). The songs of Victor Tsoi “Peremen” (Changes), performed by the two DJs on 6 August in front of the crowds; Polish-Belarusian songs “Mury” (Walls) and “Three Tortoises,” and even a Russian song “They beat us up, but we are flying” performed by Alla Pugacheva became like an anthem for the

Belarusians, every Sunday continually drawing bigger and bigger crowds (see, e.g., Abdurasulov, 2020; Gabowitsch, 2021).

In terms of community support infrastructures, it is worth noting a particular role of digital means of communication especially including platforms such as telegram, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber, and more. The telegram communities in Golos, Honest People, Byson, Nexta, Lukhta, and so on—in the early summer had a few thousand subscribers, and by the end of August 2020 they reached over several millions, whose influence for a country of 9.5 million was hard to underestimate (Voice of America [VOA], 2020). It is important to note that beside the large online communities listed above, self-organization was largely facilitated by micro-chats arranged by many apartment blocks, allowing for the communities of neighbors to form, keep together and coordinate their activities.

A year on, since the 9 August 2020 election, the moment of peoplehood as a qualitatively different community of relations is still there experiencing the ongoing transformation—that is, a watershed process of self-organization without any central authority to drive it. How did it become so mobilizing, and why now? After all, Belarusians have always been resilient as a nation, surviving despite all the odds, but allegedly, never to this level of almost irrational stubbornness and mass mobilization, in times of peace. A sense of collective identity and an aspiration for a “good life” of dignity and good neighborliness have always been there too, perhaps subdued but inherent. The forms of support infrastructures, yet again, may have been hidden but present to an extent to enable people to survive and adapt, quietly, without much resistance. So, why now—to stand up and shout in full voice—“we, the people?”

The sense of *togetherness*, accelerated through digital communication and broke out the boundary of silence; of *pain* and *grief* that have been growing into an enormous burden that only a peoplehood could carry; or “Mury” (walls), the song that become so motivational—all these together—that suddenly came out into the open, turning these resilient people into a truly transformational and transformative force. This, however, requires some further research, which goes beyond the scope of this article.

## Conclusions

The case of self-organization developing from bottom-up without any central authority and resulting in a new quality of a system, as argued in this article, is an added-value analytical framework to explain societal fragilities and transformational resilience of local communities in Belarus in the turbulent year of 2020. Based on the critical overview of the notion of “fragilities” and ways to tackle them, this article has argued for rethinking of fragility and governance in line with the tenets of complexity-thinking. Notably, it

posited that in a complex world in which we find ourselves today, liberal and neoliberal conceptions do not guarantee sustainable solutions to societal fragilities. The new framework of resilience as self-governance drawing on relations of community is developed here as an alternative explanation to the recent events in Belarus, and elsewhere across the former Soviet space.<sup>5</sup>

Exploring what makes Belarusian local communities resilient, and what has enabled them to turn into “peoplehood” when facing existential threats (e.g., Covid-19; regime’s violence and brutality) and growing societal fragilities, the article suggests a new conceptual perspective. Rather than seeing fragilities through the eyes of a state intervening into society directly (in line with the liberal paradigm), or indirectly through construction of the person (neoliberal paradigm), we suggest adopting a societal, communal perspective which recognizes “the right to opacity” for a community to decide for itself how it sees its own fragilities and ways to address them. The 6 months of peaceful protests in Belarus have demonstrated the strength of people claiming back their autonomy, as a process of becoming-with others (Chandler, 2021). Drawn by the shared identity and crystalizing perceptions of a good life, Belarusian society in 2020 exposed an unprecedented scope of community of relations. As shown in the empirical analysis, a myriad of stable and fluid relations, shaping, dissolving, and re-shaping again, passing through feedback loops and hence becoming stronger with each passing moment, resulted in the process of emergence or self-organization, and even transformation of society into peoplehood, facilitating societal resilience and embracing change.

While explaining a single case study, our findings have broader resonance in critical scholarship. First, in line with the proliferating transition discourses (Escobar, 2018), the analytical framework developed here shifts attention from the state and inter-state relations in addressing global challenges posed by Covid-19 and repressive regimes to “the local,” “the person” and local communities. Giving primacy to the societal level of analysis and putting communities front and center we are able to reveal the drivers behind the social dynamics and trace the process of self-organization turning citizens into peoplehood. While this community approach has been applied in the post-development and peace-building literature, it has not yet entered the mainstream political regimes literature, still monopolized by the liberal and neoliberal frameworks.

Second, the article contributes to burgeoning critical literature on rethinking governance and resilience. Both are largely understood in the neoliberal paradigm by policy-makers of major international institutions and a range of academics. This article contributes to the critical scholarship which urges to go beyond the understanding of resilience as promotion of the “successful” “Western” policy templates either through intervention or through

capacity-building and empowerment. We develop the concept of resilience as self-governance introduced elsewhere (Korosteleva and Flockhart, 2020a, 2020b) and add to a range of case studies seeking to demonstrate the functioning of community resilience in Central Eurasia (Korosteleva & Petrova, 2021).

Third, while not in the scope of this article, its findings pave the way for further rethinking and research of international cooperation. As demonstrated by the case of Belarus, a range of global challenges are being addressed at the source, building on the local perceptions of good life and the understanding of own fragilities. Given inefficiency of a range of global templates and solutions, our findings suggest to problematize and revise international cooperation from the perspective of “the local,” putting into the heart of analysis the processes of self-organization.

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### Notes

1. Please note that “societal” and “communal” may be used in this article interchangeably to connote the relational nature of “togetherness” of people’s assemblies.
2. For more information see the Global Europe Centre research, conducted by the authors in 2013 and 2016 available at: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/global-europe-centre/research/>; 2009–11, available here: <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/850613/> and 2002–4 published by the Global Europe Centre, University of Kent, available at <https://research.kent.ac.uk/global-europe-centre/research/>
3. See research conducted by the Centre of European Transformation in Belarus, in particular “Belarus in times of the pandemic COVID-19” (December 2020); “New groups and the social structure of Belarusian society” (May 2021); and a monitoring of “Local telegram-chats” (summer - autumn 2020 and November-December 2020); and “Voices of the streets” (August -September 2020 weekly monitoring); for more information, visit <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/?themaLibraryID=1>
4. <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/12/20/belarus-v-situatsii-epidemii-covid>. For more information, see Egorov and Shelest (2020) research report “Belarus in the situation of the pandemic,” available here: <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/12/20/belarus-v-situatsii-epidemii-covid-19-harakter-reaktsii-na.html>
5. See, for example, recent Navalny protests across Russia: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-55790699>;

or protests in Kyrgyzstan: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-54422884>.

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