

PUBLIC SPACE IN THE SOVIET CITY: A SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE ON MASS PROTESTS IN MINSK

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Abstract

In many capitals, the central public square is the place where people go en masse when they wish to voice their discontent. The squares used for such collective actions are diverse. Each square has its unique combination of symbols and history; they are used in different ways by the public; and they often have distinct physical characteristics. Yet, in social sciences, when determining what makes collective actions successful, space is often overlooked.

In this article, I present an approach for analysing public space in relation to mass protests. I then apply this approach to the Belarusian capital Minsk, where virtually no protests have been successful during the post-Soviet period. In what ways are mass protests in Minsk affected by the perceived (symbolic), social and physical elements of the city's public spaces? I examine the centre of Minsk in general, and analyse two central squares in particular. The article is based mainly on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with protesters, observers and opposition leaders; research literature; and on my own fieldwork and experiences from living in Minsk.

I conclude that space is contributing to the difficulties facing the Belarusian opposition in several ways. 1) The perceived elements of Minsk and the two main squares do not have a preferable symbolic value to the opposition. 2) The social elements of the city show that the political centre is avoided by the public, thus making protests less noticeable. 3) This latter point is important, given that the physical elements of the squares makes policing particularly easy and swift. The physical elements of the squares also limit the protesters' communication, movement and flexibility. I argue that a spatial perspective should be included in research on collective actions.

Keywords

Belarus; Minsk; Collective action; Colour revolution; Demonstration; Kevin Lynch; Independence square; October square; Protest; Public space

In the concept of democracy, the *square* has a central position. Historically, when people started to live in urban societies, the town square often became the natural meeting place – a space in which people deliberate, make policies and decide on a course of action. We find examples of this on the ancient Greek *agora*, the medieval Scandinavian *ting*, and the Slavic *vecha*.

In our day and age, most of the decision-making has moved from the town square into political institutions, and the squares have been given other uses, such as for recreation and celebration. Yet, ever so often, people return to the square's original function. We have, to mention just a few recent examples, seen people gather on and occupy several squares in modern history: from the Tiananmen in 1989; to the squares of many post-Soviet cities during the wave of 'colour revolutions' in the 2000s. We saw massive



uprisings starting on squares throughout the Arab world from 2010; and from 2011, there were Occupy-protests in many large cities in the West. In Kyiv, protests in the winter of 2013-14 led to a regime change in Ukraine, for the second time in less than a decade.

Belarusians, as well, have taken to the central squares of Minsk to protest against Aliaksandr Ryhoravich Lukashënka,¹ the country's only president since 1994. Most notably, thousands of Belarusians went to the Kastychnitskaia square in 2006, and to Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnasti squares in 2010. However, these and many other similar actions have quickly been suppressed by the authorities.

The success and failure of mass protests

In social sciences, several theories are offered to account for what makes collective action (un)successful. The sociologist Susan Olzak (1989) describes the factors used to analyse events, such as a mass protest or a revolution: the duration of the event, the number of participants, and the presence or lack of violence. The importance of such factors has been the subject of much discussion in the research literature.²

During the wave of colour revolutions in the early 2000s, new research was made on the conditions of why some of these protests had led to a regime change. Political scientist Michael McFaul (2005) lists seven external conditions necessary for a colour revolution to occur.³ Others analyse the internal conditions, such as the political scientist Joshua Tucker (2007), who focuses on motivation, and argues that electoral fraud was a main trigger for all the colour revolutions.

Yet, one aspect of mass protests has not been thoroughly analysed, namely, that of public space. In what ways does public space affect collective actions?

A spatial perspective

Public space is diverse. From one city to another, the characteristics of urban public space differ greatly. Firstly, every square has its own unique history, traditions, ideological symbols; secondly, spaces are used differently, based on their connection and proximity to infrastructure, buildings, landmarks, and so on; thirdly, there are physical differences such as shape and size, elevations, monuments, layout, entrances, and much more.

In the research relating urban public space with mass protests, authors are mostly concerned with either urban spaces of protest in general, or the uniqueness of some urban space in particular. The former usually leads to a discussion of modern political philosophy, referring to Habermas's *public sphere* – the space in which people meet to talk and deliberate; to Arendt's more physically oriented *public space*; or to Lefebvre's

¹ In Belarus, there are three written languages: Russian and Belarusian, both of which are official languages, and the classic Belarusian Tarashkevitsa. The name of the president could be transliterated as *Aleksandr Lukashenko* (Russian); *Aliaksandr Lukashënka* (Belarusian); and *Aliaksandar Lukashënka* (Belarusian Tarashkevitsa). I use the official Belarusian (*Aliaksandr*) for proper nouns, in accordance with the American Library Association & Library of Congress ALA-LC Romanization table.

² See for example Chenoweth & Stephan (2011) on nonviolent resistance.

³ 1) The regime has to be semi-autocratic, rather than fully autocratic; 2) there has to be an unpopular incumbent; 3) the opposition needs to be united and organised; 4) there must be independent electoral-monitoring capabilities available; 5) there must be a modicum of independent media; 6) the opposition must have the capacity to mobilize significant numbers of protesters; 7) and there must be a split among the “guys with guns.” In other words, the opposition must have some support in the state apparatus.

right to the city.⁴ Discussions also tend to centre on aspects, such as privatization and/or exclusion of space for some parts of the public (i.e. homeless people, youth, drug users).⁵ The latter appears in literature that analyses the uniqueness of certain public spaces, which focuses on one or several attributes of a public space.⁶

What I believe to be missing in the literature, however, is a general approach on *how* to analyse public spaces, and evaluate how they enable (or fail to enable) public protest. My current research project, which this article forms part of, aims to establish and develop such an approach.⁷ The aim is to demonstrate that space is, potentially, an important condition for collective action. This is the context for my following analysis of the public space of Minsk, which asks in what ways the central squares in the Belarusian capital do affect the course and nature of mass protests, and how Minsk's central squares do facilitate and/or inhibit protest.

Research question, approach, methodology

In an earlier study, I applied the architectural theory of Lynch (1960) to describe how people in Kyiv relate to the Maidan square (Hansen 2016). This approach is identifying and describing the different 'elements of the city' (paths, nodes, landmarks, edges and districts), and using interviews to find out how these elements affect the day to day life in the city: how people employ landmarks to navigate the city, what paths they take, and so on. For the current article, I have expanded on Lynch's theory in order to better suit a perspective on mass protests. I have added several new elements and divided these into three categories: perceived elements, social elements and physical elements.⁸ In what way are these perceived, social and physical elements affecting stationary mass protests in Minsk?

Between October 2015 and March 2017, I had many conversations and discussions with Belarusians from my extended circle of contacts (I elaborate on this below). From amongst these, I chose 9 observers, organisers and protesters for eleven qualitative interviews.⁹ The interviews were conducted in Russian and Belarusian via Skype,

⁴ See Goodsell (2003); Frenzel, Feigenbaum & McCurdy (2013); Göle (2013); Harvey (2012). Also relevant is Howell (1993) on historical geography; and Parkinson (2012) on public space, political institutions and democracy.

⁵ See Kohn (2013); Mitchell (1995); Mitchell (2017); Köksal (2012).

⁶ See for instance Örs (2013) on the history and symbolic importance of the Taksim square in Istanbul; Hansen (2016) on the Maidan square's perceived role as a safety valve in the Ukrainian society; Gillham et al. (2013) on the policing of Occupy protests; Ramadan (2013) on the importance of Tahrir square in Egypt; Lee (2009) on the making of Tiananmen square a political space.

⁷ My background is in Slavonic area studies, and my PhD project, which analyses three post-Soviet capitals, Kyiv, Minsk and Moscow, is interdisciplinary, straddling cultural studies and social sciences. In a wider context, my PhD project is part of the research group RSCPR (Russian Space: Concepts, Practices, Representations) at UiT – the Arctic University of Norway.

⁸ These elements have been identified in my previous publications (Hansen 2015; 2016) and during my work on this article. Although I have tried to make this list as complete as possible, the list can never become exhaustive. During my work on Kyiv and Minsk, I discovered new elements, and I expect more will emerge in subsequent case studies.

⁹ I interviewed one Belarusian journalist (Vital'); five Belarusians who participated in protest actions (Dzmitry, Katsiaryna [twice], Piatro, Yaraslaŭ [twice], Paŭliuk [who is also a member of the LGBT-movement]); and three politicians (Stanislaŭ Shushkevich, Belarus' first head of state and presidential candidate in 1994; Aliaksandr Milinkevich, the joint opposition's presidential candidate in 2006; and Mikola Statkevich, a presidential candidate in 2010). The names of all respondents, except the politicians,

telephone, and email.¹⁰ All the interviews, except the email correspondence with Milinkevich, were in the form of semi-structured conversations with open-ended questions. I asked the respondents to tell me about the general situation in Belarus; Minsk and its spaces of protests; and about particular protests (mainly the mass actions of 2006 and 2010). I paid a particular attention to instances when the elements of the city were mentioned, then prompted the respondents with questions, such as “*How accessible was Kastychnitskaia square for you in 2006?*”

Perceived elements	Social elements	Physical elements
History	Paths	Location
Ideological symbols	Nodes	Size
Buildings	Buildings	Shape
Landmarks	Landmarks	Entrances
Monuments	Districts	Exits
History of protests	Traditions	Walls
	Official use	Floor
		Objects
		Obstacles
		Edges
		Public works
		Focal points

Figure 1 The elements of the city

In addition to the interviews, the current article is based on a recent fieldwork in Minsk;¹¹ research literature on the politics of Belarus, the history and architecture of the city; cinema and television documentaries;¹² my own experience of living in Minsk;¹³ and from working with the Belarusian opposition in Kyiv and Vilnius.¹⁴

I use these data to describe the city and the elements of its main squares, and I identify instances where the elements of the squares have affected the opposition’s conduct. I argue that Minsk is a particularly difficult place to protest in because: 1) the city represents Lukashënka and his success, as well as the mainstream and official view of history; and at the same time, alienates the pro-European opposition; 2) the two main squares (Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnastsı) are places most people tend to avoid,

have been altered. The interviews are referred to by the respondent’s surname or pseudonym either in-text or in brackets. The number of respondents is limited because this article is part of a bigger project including several cities. Nevertheless, I believe that my selection of an observer, politicians and protesters is sufficient to map how space is perceived in Minsk.

¹⁰ The interviews were conducted online or by phone, to minimize the risk of our contact being noticed by the government, potentially leading to repressions. The interviews were audio-recorded only after getting permission from the respondents beforehand.

¹¹ The fieldwork was conducted in October and November 2015.

¹² *Obyknovennyı prezident* (Khashchevatskiı 1996); *Lekcja Białoruskiego* (Dembinski 2006); *Ploshcha* (Khashchevatskiı 2007); *Belarusskaia mechta* (Kibal’chich 2011); *Banda* (Mikhaïloŭskaia 2015).

¹³ As a language student in Belarus in 2006–10.

¹⁴ During my internship at the Norwegian embassy in Ukraine (2011), I worked with many young people from the Belarusian opposition in Ukraine and Lithuania. They had been expelled from Belarusian universities for participating in the protests of 2006, and given funding by the Nordic Council of Ministers to continue their education in Ukraine and Lithuania.

making protests there hardly visible; 3) the squares give little shelter or safety to protesters, it is hard to communicate with each other there, and they are easily controlled from the outside.

Belarusian protests, from Glasnost' to Lukashënka

The first major protests in Belarus in the 1980s were enabled by Gorbachev's reform policies. The main concerns for protesters at the time were the effects of the Chernobyl disaster (1986); rising economic difficulties; and the question of independence – fuelled by the discovery of one of Stalin's killing fields in the Kurapaty forest on the outskirts of Minsk (Marples, 1994). Protests continued during the post-Soviet 1990s. More often than not they were concerned with economic problems and food shortages.

The current regime in Belarus is by and large personified by Aliaksandr Lukashënka – commonly referred to in the West as 'the last dictator in Europe', a phrase coined by Condoleezza Rice in 2005 (Nielsen 2012). Lukashënka won the first Belarusian presidential elections in 1994 with more than 80 per cent of the votes (Vardomatskiï 1995, 49). Initially he was regarded as an alternative to five other candidates who represented to the Belarusian electorate either inexperience or corruption, or both.¹⁵ Soon, however, new reasons for protest occurred. During Lukashënka's first term in office (1994–2001), one of these was the reintroduction of Soviet symbols, as well as the president's increasing authoritarianism and suppression of the political opposition.

It took Lukashënka ten years to consolidate his presidency: in two referendums in 1995 and 1996, he increased presidential powers and weakened the parliament (Wilson 2011, 168–86). Meanwhile certain political and ideological opponents disappeared or died under unclear circumstances (Bennett 2011, 70; Mikhaïloŭskaia 2015). Protests against Lukashënka increased as colour revolutions against authoritarian leaders spread through a number of post-Soviet countries. Large protests were staged against a proposed union with Russia, which was never realised (Statkevich); and in 2004, people protested against a referendum that removed the two-term limit on the presidential rule. Significantly, large numbers of people went out to protest against the alleged fraud in the presidential elections of March 2006 and December 2010, attempting to achieve a Belarusian colour revolution. Both attempts were brutally suppressed by the authorities.

David Marples (2006) points out that Belarus in 2006 was lacking every single of McFaul's (2005) conditions (see above), arguing that the president had a firm grip on the official ideology, and had been able to maintain his popularity in large segments of the population through his control over media, through his repressions of political opponents, and by maintaining close relations to Russia (Marples 2006). To this, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (2001) adds the (most) successful Russification under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and a weak Belarusian identity. By playing on the post-Soviet nostalgia of Belarusian citizens, Lukashënka has built an official national myth on the Soviet past of his country, which emphasises the special position of Belarusians in the narratives of the

¹⁵ Of his main opponents, campaigning for the presidency its worth mentioning three: 1) The prime minister Viacheslaŭ Kebich, who represented the status quo. 2) Zianon Pazniak, who represented the nationalist new political force, while promising a radical Belarusification of the society and government. 3) The former head of state, Stanislau Shushkevich, who was representing the more conservative new political force. Initially a very popular person, he lost because of the accusations of corruption (Shushkevich).

Soviet Union and World War II (known in the former Soviet Union as the Great Patriotic War). Lukashënka's Soviet-oriented and pro-Russian worldview has pushed the majority of the opposition into the pro-European camp. Yet in spite of its common contempt of Lukashënka and its shared pro-European values, the opposition shows little unity, answering to its description by Törnquist-Plewa as "weak and fragmented" (2001, 81). My own experience from working with members of the Belarusian opposition confirms this view.¹⁶

Since spring 2011, Belarus has faced mounting economic problems. The combination of a nationalised and planned economy, combined with poor decision-making (Romanchuk, 2011) and a weakened Russian rouble (from 2014), has led to several devaluations of the Belarusian rouble and to shortages of goods. In early 2017, protests erupted in many Belarusian cities against the economic hardship and the introduction of a new law 'on social parasites', which taxes the unemployed. However, since March 25, when a large demonstration in Minsk was suppressed by riot police and opposition leaders arrested, protests have, for now, ceased. (Bylina 2017)

My respondents repeat many of the observations presented in research literature regarding the situation in Belarus, such as: authority-controlled media and a Belarusian mentality similar to that of a Soviet citizen who values short-term stability over freedom. Statkevich agrees with Tucker (2007) that only presidential elections have the potential to unite the opposition and motivate large numbers of people to take to the streets: "A small chance appears at the night of the presidential elections [...]. Belarusians are a rational people, very rational. If there's no chance, why take the risk?"¹⁷ To this, my respondents are prone to add that Lukashënka has built a police state, which cannot be overthrown by a popular protest or revolution. "Here, the secret service KGB, a large police apparatus and the possibility to use internal troops work well to suppress any public actions."¹⁸ (Paŭliuk). Several of my respondents also emphasise differences in national character between Belarusians and Ukrainians: "We don't have the same mentality as Ukrainians. They are good at it." (Yaraslaŭ). "Maidan is the national character of Ukrainians, not Belarusians." (Piatro). "Our national identity is the same as [the identity] of people in Eastern-Ukraine [...]"¹⁹

Thus, there are many current arguments which, combined, offer plausible explanations of why the Belarusian opposition has failed to achieve success. Nevertheless, I wish to add space as another relevant factor in this picture. In the following section, I shall turn to the first group of elements of the city, and look into how these also affect the opposition's possibilities.

¹⁶ In spring 2011, after the violent crackdown of protests in December 2010, I arranged a meeting at the European Humanitarian University in Vilnius. The meeting was attended by staff members of the Norwegian embassy in Ukraine and the Nordic Council of Ministers, as well as Belarusian students studying in Kyiv and Vilnius. The different opposition groupings as represented by the students, appeared to be aggressively opposing each other, and showed few signs of unity between them.

¹⁷ "Маленький шанс придвигает ночь президентских выборов [...]. Белорусы – рациональный народ, очень рациональный. Если нету шанса, зачем рисковать?"

¹⁸ "Здесь хорошо работают спецслужбы КГБ, большой аппарат милиции и возможность использовать внутренние войска для подавления любых публичных акций"

¹⁹ "У нас нет такого менталитета, как у украинцев. У них это хорошо получается." (Yaraslaŭ). "Майдан является национальным характером украинцев, не белорусов." (Piatro). "У нас національна ідэнтычнасць, як у людзей ва ўсходніх абласцях Украіны [...]" (Dzmitry).

Perceived elements

Minsk is well known for looking ‘Soviet’ and a first-time visitor is struck by just how much of Soviet architecture has been preserved. The city is characterised by wide avenues, Stalinist architectural style, prominent red stars and Soviet slogans, huge squares and monuments to the 1945 victory.

There are several reasons why Minsk was infused with such a Soviet identity, but perhaps the most significant relates to the Great Patriotic War, which reduced the city to rubble. This enabled Soviet architects to rebuild Minsk as an example of what the socialist experiment could achieve (Bohn 2013, 6). With the building boom of the 1940s and 1950s, the infrastructure was developed further, with industry, educational institutions and more. Only a small proportion of the city’s original inhabitants returned to Minsk after the war, while Russians and rural Belarusians moved in. This contributed to a Russification of the city. In addition to the monumental celebration of Communist heroes, such as Lenin, Dzerzhinsky and Kalinin, the War became an important theme of the public spaces of Minsk – not least after it was granted the status of a hero city in 1974 (Bohn 2013, 30). Analysing the memory of the war, Per Anders Rudling states that “in no other country does the war occupy such a central place in the national historiography as it does in Lukashenka’s Belarus.” (2008, 57). 10 per cent of the toponymy of major streets, parks and squares in the city centre relate to the War, in addition to 60 per cent related to other Soviet events and persons (Titarenko 2008, 38). These names often replaced the ethnic ones (i.e. from the significant pre-war population of Jews and Tatars).

The city’s historic markers went through a similar ‘cleansing’. In an article on the phenomenon of Minsk, Larissa Titarenko and Anna Shirokanova describe how a majority of symbolic markers were either destroyed during the fighting or removed by Soviet architects. Prominent examples of this are the levelling of Zamchyscha (Castle Hill), where a wooden castle long had stood as a distinctive landmark, and the river Niamiha, now laid in pipes underground. (Titarenko & Shirokanova 2011, 31) The latter is especially noteworthy, since Minsk’s first appearance in a historical text is in the Primary chronicle for the year 1067, which reports a battle near Minsk on the river Niamiha (Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953, 145–46). The river Svislach has since taken Niamiha’s place and is now the main waterway of Minsk.

Most of the capital city’s official institutions are placed along the 15 km-long and eight lane-wide *Praspekt Nezalezhnastsi* (henceforth Independence avenue). The avenue runs from *Nezalezhnastsi square* (Independence square) in the western part of the city centre to the city’s border in the northeast, crossing four more squares after *Nezalezhnastsi*. The first of these is *Kastrychnitskaia* (October square), then the avenue bridges the river Svislach, becomes a roundabout when it crosses the square *Peramohi* (Victory square), passes the third, *Iakuba Kolasa*, and cuts through *Kalinina* (see fig. 2).

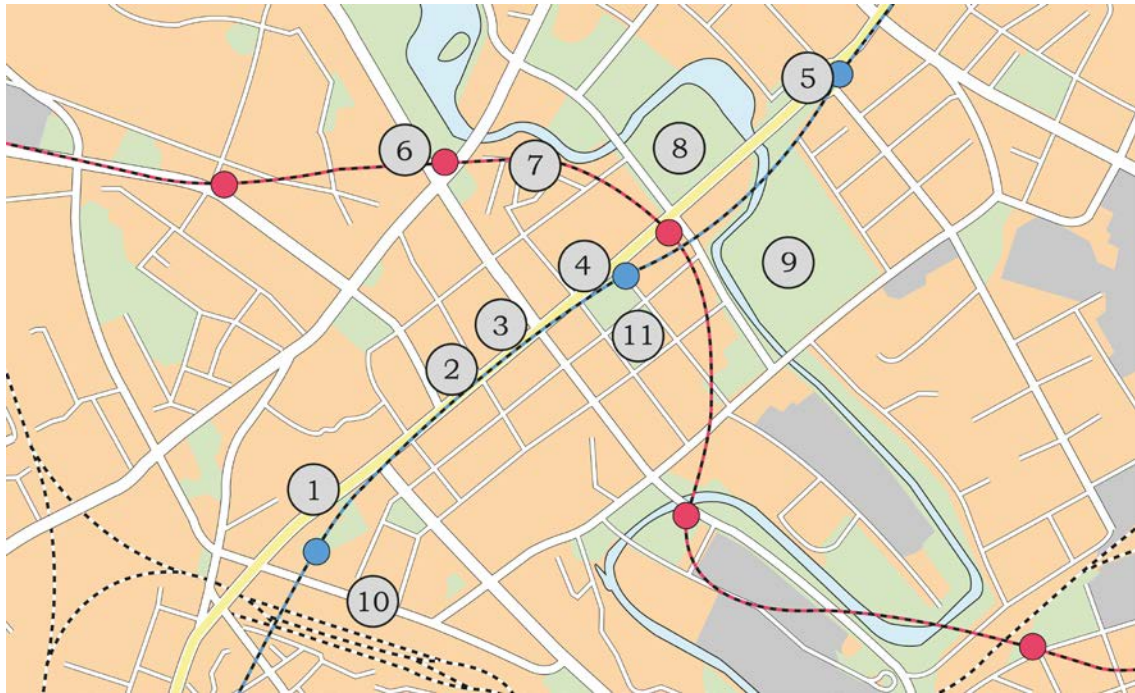


Figure 2 Minsk City Centre: Yellow: Independence Avenue; 1) Nezalezhnastsi; 2) KGB; 3) GUM Shopping centre; 4) Kastychnitskaia; 5) Peramohi; 6) Niamiha; 7) Zybityskaia; 8) Park Ianki Kupaly; 9) Gorkyi park; 10) Train station; 11) Presidential Administration. Illustration: Arve Hansen

Since Lukashënka came to power, a number of new monumental building projects have been launched. At Kastychnitskaia, the unfinished Palace of the Republic had stood untouched since 1984, when economic problems put a halt to the project. In 2001, after 17 years as a construction site, the building was completed and the square reopened. Even more grandiose projects include the National Library (2006), the Stalitsa shopping centre on Nezalezhnastsi square (2006), and the new museum to the Great Patriotic War (2014), to mention but a few. These building projects are similar to the Soviet brutalist monumental style. It could be said that the Lukashënkian architecture carries on the Soviet tradition of aiming to represent the success and prosperity of the country's leadership.

Nevertheless, capitalism has also made its mark with the introduction of advertising and brand names. Yet, compared to neighbouring capitals, such as Kyiv, Riga or Vilnius, Minsk has escaped the extremes of post-Soviet marketing. Sarna (2008) describes the current authorities' attempt to make Minsk a 'glamorous heaven', by removing everything unsanctioned and disorderly, such as intrusive advertising boards, garbage ... and even political dissent. In other post-Soviet countries, Minsk enjoys a reputation as a clean and orderly city.

Still, protests do occasionally occur in the city, and especially two central squares have been used by the opposition for mass protests: Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnastsi (I explain why below). In the following two sections, I shall look more closely at the perceived elements of these two squares.



Figure 3 The National Library. Photo: Wikimedia, Julian Nitzsche

The perceived elements of Kastrychnitskaia (October square)

Kastrychnitskaia is named after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. It is the most geographically central square in Minsk, and between 1949 and 1984, it was named Tsentral'naia (Central square), intended as the heart of the city (Bohn 2013, 49). Kastrychnitskaia and Minsk's position in the world is marked on the square's only monument, a tiny pyramid, called the 0-km sign, which shows distances from Minsk to other major cities of the world.

The centrepiece on the square is the Palace of the Republic, where officially sanctioned concerts and receptions of foreign delegations are held. This is also where Lukashënka has been inaugurated four times since 2001 (the 1994 inauguration took place in the House of Government) (Naviny 2015). The palace is perceived as a monument to the success and economic stability achieved during Lukashënka's first term in office, and Milinkevich calls it "almost a sacred place for the authorities".²⁰ The city's inhabitants like to call it *the giant sarcophagus*, because of its brutal but simplistic design – reminiscent of a giant coffin. Piatro confirms that the uneasiness of the metaphor is appropriate: "The Palace of the Republic evokes a feeling of horror. It's a sarcophagus that blocks the view to [Verkhni Horad]".²¹

²⁰ "амаль сакральнае месца для ўлады"

²¹ "Дворец Рэспублікі вызывае чувство ужаса. Это Саркофаг, который закрывает вид на [Верхний город]"

After the presidential elections in March 2006, on the appeal of Aliaksandr Milinkevich, people went to Kastychnitskaia in large numbers with the slogan “Freedom, Truth, Justice”²² (Milinkevich) to protest against alleged election fraud. In the West, the protests are known as the Denim revolution.²³ In Minsk, however, the protesters tried to change Kastychnitskaia’s association from Lukashënka and the October revolution, to something more ideologically appealing. They started to call the square *Ploshcha Kalinoŭskaha*, after Kastus’ Kalinoŭski – a key person in the 1863 January Uprising against the Russian Empire.



Figure 4 Palace of the Republic on Kastychnitskaia. Photo: Colourbox.com/Grisha

Usually, though, the square is simply called ‘Ploshcha’, which is Belarusian for ‘square’. By choosing a Belarusian word, the protesters distance themselves from the largely Russophone leadership. At present, when members of the opposition say “We’ll start the Ploshcha,” or “go out to the Ploshcha”, they mean starting a large protest at Kastychnitskaia, and the way the opposition uses the word is similar to how Ukrainians use the word ‘maidan’ (Ukr.: ‘square’) (Hansen 2016, 119).

‘Ploshcha’ that’s because of Maidan. In the beginning we called it Maidan, but Belarusian media has successfully used Maidan to scare everyone. Both in 2004 and later in 2013 [...]. For many people it has a negative association, therefore

²² “Свабода, Праўда, Справядлівасць”

²³ Wilson explains that the Belarusian ‘colour revolution’ was given the symbol of denim, because “it would be difficult for the repressive local police to victimise people for wearing it.” Wilson then criticises the symbol for being too common (2011, 211). Judging by my respondents, the name Denim revolution is rarely used.

we didn't call it Maidan. But at the same time we wanted to come up with something of our own. [...] The most simple solution was 'Ploshcha'.²⁴ (Piatro)

Despite these attempts of appropriating the space and change the association from the Bolshevik October revolution to a people's revolt against Russia, the Ploshcha of 2006 did not turn out like the Ukrainian Maidan of 2004, and the protests ended with massive arrests. According to Milinkevich, following the protests, 1500 people lost their jobs, 1200 were sent to jail and 500 students were expelled from their higher education institutions. Today, none of my respondents seems to have been associating the square with revolution. When I asked about their feelings for Kastrychnitskaia, several spoke of disappointment and failure. "[Kastrychnitskaia] is associated with the authorities, with failed desires, dreams, [...] yes, and with disappointment."²⁵ (Paŭliuk)

The perceived elements of Nezalezhnastsi (Independence square)

The next mass protests in Minsk happened on December 19, 2010, after yet another re-election of Lukashënka. Triggered by claims of election fraud, the opposition announced a new "Ploshcha" and marched to Kastrychnitskaia, where tens of thousands of people gathered. After staying at Kastrychnitskaia for a couple of hours, the protesters then decided to move the protest down to Nezalezhnastsi to protest outside the House of Government.²⁶ On the way to Nezalezhnastsi, the crowd grew, and several of my respondents claim that the whole kilometre of Independence Avenue linking the two squares was filled with people.

One attraction for the opposition is the square's symbolic name – *Independence square*, which could be interpreted as independence from Russia and Lukashënka. The Catholic *Church of Saints Simon and Helena*, commonly known as *The Red Church*, could also be considered as an ideological symbol, especially for the Polish and Catholic minorities in Belarus. Yet, the perceived elements of Nezalezhnastsi are problematic. Despite its 1991 renaming from Lenin Square to Independence Square, Lenin is still present as a 7-meter-tall statue looming in front of the House of Government. A bust of the Bolshevik leader also decorates one of the entrances to the metro station, which is still called the Lenin Square Station (Stantsyia Ploshcha Lenina). My respondent Paŭliuk perceives the square as a constant struggle for independence from Lenin, more than anything else. Even as a place for political protests, the square has lost much of its value after Lukashënka stripped the national assembly of political power. "The parliament [in the House of Government] is considered to be in the pocket [of Lukashënka]. They just wait for the president's

²⁴ 'Плошча' – это потому что Майдан. В начале называли Майдан, но Майданом успешно в белорусской медиа всех запугали. И тогда в 2004 и потом в 2013 [...]. Для многих это имело негативную ассоциацию, поэтому Майданом не называли. Но при этом хотели что-то свое придумать. [...] Самое простое это было 'Плошча'.

²⁵ "[Октябрьская] ассоциируется с властью, с неудавшимися желаниями, мечтами, [...] да, и с разочарованием."

²⁶ None of my respondents could give a concrete answer why. Several of them talked about going to protest outside the Central Electoral Commission in the House of Government, next to Nezalezhnastsi (Piatro, Yaraslaŭ, Katsiaryna), "where evil is being done" / "там дзе робіцца зло" (Katsiaryna). Statkevich suggested that marches are more effective than stationary protests. Dzmitry and Milinkevich talked about the possibility that KGB planted the idea among the protesters, so that they could carry out the well-planned police operation at Nezalezhnastsi and remove the political opposition, once and for all (see below).

orders.”²⁷ (Piatro). In addition to this, the Ploshcha of 2010 was even more brutally suppressed than the Ploshcha of 2006, adding failed protests to the associations citizens of Minsk have with the square.



Figure 5 Nezalezhnastsi (Independence square). CC-BY-3.0 Wikimedia, Alexander Groshev

Minsk’s two main squares of protest, Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnastsi, are associated by the city’s inhabitants with the success of Lukashënka, and with failed protests. The opposition’s attempted appropriation of Kastychnitskaia by changing the name of the square has not been successful; and Nezalezhnastsi still represent Lenin and Belarus’s Communist past, while the House of Government is not seen as the place where real power is positioned.

In sum, the perceived elements of Minsk are seeking to reinforce the authorities’ official version of history and Belarusian identity. The vast majority of the city’s main features represent Lukashënka and the Soviet past. Be it the architecture; the reputation as a clean city; or the many monuments to ideologically ‘correct’ people and events. As such, the city does not represent a particularly inviting place for the pro-European opposition, whose meetings easily appear alien and misplaced amongst the glamour of the socialist city, surrounded by the evidence of Lukashënka’s apparent success.

Social elements

Even though Minsk, as the perceived elements above demonstrate, might offer an uninviting environment for the opposition, people have turned to protest several times. I now turn to look at the social elements of the city and its protest spaces, in order to assess their visibility. My respondents all agree, that once you’re out to protest, your main objective is to be seen and heard. “We’re going to the square to show that we exist. [...]

²⁷ “[...] Парламент [в Доме правительства] считается карманным. Просто ждут указов президента”

That we are many, that we do not agree with what is happening in the country.”²⁸ (Dzmitry). This statement is typical for the respondents, but in a country where the media are controlled by the government, it is difficult to be seen, by authorities, by media and by fellow citizens. Therefore, the visibility of a location becomes decisive.

The political centre

The importance of being seen by the political authorities dictates what areas are suitable for a political mass protest. To be in, or in proximity to, the political centre is regarded as a necessity. There is also symbolic value to be gained from occupying a space close to where political decisions are being made. This helps demonstrators express that the space belongs to them as well; that they represent the people; and that the political institutions are not doing their job.

On this basis, it is not surprising that the largest political protests have centred in the vicinity of Independence Avenue, on Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnasti squares. The House of Government is situated on Nezalezhnasti; and Kastychnitskaia is close to the presidential administration. When asked why protests have been held at these particular squares, my respondents unanimously agree: “[Kastychnitskaia] is just a central square, on which the administration of Lukashënka is located.”²⁹ (Dzmitry)

The closest alternative to Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnasti is Svobody (Freedom) square, about 200 meters to the northeast of Kastychnitskaia. Freedom Square has been used several times by opposition leaders for protests, despite obvious shortcomings:

Freedom square is an uneven space [...] It is inaptly named, not square at all, with very little open space for mass gathering, and no focal point. People tend to collect on the pavements, steps and pathways and continually threaten to spill onto the roads [...]. (Bennett 2011, 233)

However, according to Milinkevich and Statkevich, two elements of the square still make it a suitable space for protest: “Protests occur on this Square when their organisers do not expect that there will be a large number of participants. In addition, it has a very attractive name.”³⁰ (Milinkevich). “Firstly, it has its symbolic value. Secondly, it is smaller than Kastychnitskaia. Because we don’t [always] see that there’s a chance that tens of thousands of people would come.”³¹ (Statkevich). Svobody is therefore mainly suited for smaller protests.

Still, it is possible to imagine other alternatives to Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnasti. There are several large squares located along Independence Avenue: Peramohi (Victory), Iakuba Kolasa and Kalinina. Some of these have a certain history of protest, but only Peramohi is in proximity of the political centre. However, Peramohi is archetypically Soviet, and can easily be blocked off from the political centre by closing the bridge over Svislach. Pryvakzal’naia in front of the main railway station has also been mentioned as

²⁸ “Мы збіраемся на плошчы, каб паказаць, што мы ёсць. [...] Што нас шмат, што мы не згодныя з тым, што адбываецца ў краіне.”

²⁹ “[Кастрычніцкая –] гэта проста цэнтральная плошча, на якой размешчана адміністрацыя Лукашэнка.”

³⁰ “На гэтай Плошчы адбываюцца пратэсты калі іх арганізатары не спадзяюцца, што будзе вялікая колькасць удзельнікаў. Акрамя таго, яна мае вельмі прывабную назву.”

³¹ “Во-первых, есть своя символика. А во-вторых, она меньше, чем Октябрьская [Кастрычніцкая]. Потому что мы не [всегда] видим, что есть возможность, что придут десятки тысяч человек.”

an alternative, but my respondents tend to talk of it as a place to gather before marching to the city centre. Being a lush and green city with several large parks, Minsk could potentially offer its green lungs as meeting places for large crowds. What makes parks less suitable for protests are trees and other objects which limit visibility and mobility. This leaves only a few public spaces suitable for mass protests. As my respondent Piatro states, “There are not many open public spaces. There are not many options for gatherings: Nezalezhnasti [...], Freedom square [...], yet Kastrychnitskaia is considered the main square of Minsk.”³²

The people’s centre

As we have seen, there are good reasons why political mass protests tend to be held at Kastrychnitskaia or Nezalezhnasti, in plain view of the ruling power. To what extent, then, are actions at these two squares visible to ordinary people? When out walking, citizens tend to use the city’s green areas or stroll along Svislach river, rather than along the avenues or across the large, empty squares of the city centre. The popular café district is also concentrated in a secluded area on Zybickaia street, down by Svislach, and in the Verkhni Horad district – a reconstructed part of the old town between Internationalists street and the Niamiha region. Only commercial businesses have some proximity to the squares (Stalitsa shopping centre is under Nezalezhnasti, the GUM warehouse two blocks from Kastrychnitskaia). Yet shopping is not limited to these areas.

Intended or not, the political centre, especially the area around Kastrychnitskaia, has become a district where people pass through only occasionally. Yaraslaŭ sees the city centre as “[...] a place you won’t go without an especially good reason. It’s a nonspace.”³³ Everything interesting, Katsiaryna confirms, is going on a safe distance from the political centre:

On central squares in Vilnius and in Kyiv there are some festivals, some fairs, people gather there. [...] They have stuff happening but we’ve only had something similar a couple of years. That is on the Karl Marx street, and it is so small, mobility is small [...]. To get to Kupalaŭskaia (metro), to Kastrychnitskaia square is far. And there is nothing going on there. (Katsiaryna)³⁴

My respondents state that their aim is to be seen, by the people and by the authorities. However, in a society with very little free media and a political centre that most people tend to avoid, the visibility of political protest is limited. Still, the largest protests in post-Soviet Minsk have been held in the political centre, at Kastrychnitskaia and Nezalezhnasti squares. I shall now take a closer look at the social elements of these two squares. How have they been used for protests? How are they used in the everyday?

³² “Не так много мест открытого публичного пространства. Собраться вариантов немного: Независимости [...], Свободы [...], но Октябрьская считается главной площадью Минска.”

³³ “[...] место, куда без особой причины не идут. Это ничейное пространство.”

³⁴ У Вільнюсе і ў Кіеве на цэнтральных плошчах праходзяць нейкія фэстывалі, нейкія кірмашы, там людзі збіраюцца. [...] У іх праводзяцца нейкія штукі, а ў нас толькі пару гадоў праводзіцца нешта падобнае. Гэта на вуліцы Карла Маркса і яна такая маленькая, рух маленькі [...]. Дабрацца да Купалаўскай, да Кастрычніцкай плошчы там далёка. І там нічога не праводзіцца.

The social elements of Nezalezhnastsi

Belarus' first head of state, Stanislau Shushkevich explains that up until the end of the 1990s, protests usually occurred outside the House of Government. One of the opposition leaders, Mikola Statkevich, on the other hand, claims that they arranged protests all over Minsk during the 1990s, not only on Nezalezhnastsi, but he agrees that many of the largest protests were on that square.

Some of Nezalezhnastsi's social elements might be perceived as those increasing visibility. Several paths cross Nezalezhnastsi or are in close proximity to it. Public transportation (trolleybuses, buses, and metro) is on and under it (the Lenin square metro station) and the main railway station is only 550 meters away; and several avenues and streets from the eastern and southern parts of the city meet next to where Independence Avenue begins. Students are also travelling daily to the Belarusian State Pedagogical University and to six of the Belarusian State University's faculties, located on and around Nezalezhnastsi. Hotel 'Minsk' and important landmarks – such as the House of Government, the Lenin statue and the *Church of Saints Simon and Helena* – are popular places to visit for tourists. This makes the square more visible than Kastychnitskaia.

However, although Nezalezhnastsi is a node for travel, it is only so for some people, such as students and tourists, less so for the ordinary inhabitants of Minsk. On the surface of the square, there are large flowerbeds, benches and fountains, but people don't tend to spontaneously gather there. Reasons for this may be the large walking distances involved, the fact that little recreational infrastructure is found and no protection from the elements (sun, rain, snow etc.) is offered. Between 2002 and 2006, Nezalezhnastsi was closed to the public, while Stalitsa – a huge 75 000 m², three storey shopping centre was constructed beneath the square. Although it now attracts some shoppers, it has not quite become the popular attraction its size suggests it was meant to be.

Nezalezhnastsi might therefore be characterised as a place where several paths meet, but as a node only for some people. Thus it offers less visibility than the opposition ideally would want.

The social elements of Kastychnitskaia

In 2006, by the completion of Nezalezhnastsi's reconstruction, the preferred space for protests had moved one kilometre up the Independence avenue to Kastychnitskaia square. This was made possible by the reopening of Kastychnitskaia in 2001, but the main reason was probably Lukashenka's moving into the former Communist party headquarters on the Karl Marx street shortly after becoming president, arguably because it was the tallest and most central point in the capital.

The square functions as a node for travel. Cars drive past it on the highly trafficked Independence avenue, and Minsk's two metro lines have their transit point under Kastychnitskaia. Still, people rarely stop at the square, merely pass by beneath any event on the surface above.

The buildings on Kastychnitskaia include the Palace of the Republic, the Palace of Culture; a construction site where the museum to the Great Patriotic War stood until

2014;³⁵ and a business centre. Across Independence Avenue, between Kastrychnitskaia and the presidential administration, lies Aliaksandraŭski skver, one of Minsk's oldest parks, dating from the 19th Century. In the area, there are several institutions of high culture: the Ianka Kupala National Theatre, the Music academy, the Palace of Culture and the House of Officers – now mainly used as a concert house. Some concerts are also arranged in the Palace of the Republic. The common denominator for virtually all the buildings on and around the square is that they are government-controlled.

Even though Kastrychnitskaia is large, central, and surrounded by several buildings of high culture, it is not widely used by people. It is a place where, except the 'giant sarcophagus' itself, there is nothing to look at, virtually nothing going on and nowhere to sit.³⁶ There are some cafés and a Belarusian language club in the Palace, but, as mentioned above, people prefer the cafes on Zybítskaia street.

On this basis, Kastrychnitskaia could be considered part of a small number of paths, rather than a node. Despite its central location, it is underused. Respondents describe it as empty, Soviet and cold, and less visible than Nezalezhnastsí.

To sum up, people tend to avoid the central parts of Minsk, along Independence avenue, where most of the political institutions are situated; and even though both of the two protest squares, Kastrychnitskaia and Nezalezhnastsí, are parts of the paths some people make, they are rarely used as nodes, i.e. few people are travelling to get there specifically. On this basis it can be concluded that the social elements of Minsk is not particularly helpful for putting protests in the spotlight.

Physical elements

In this final section I shall look at the physical elements of the two squares, Kastrychnitskaia and Nezalezhnastsí. I argue that the physical attributes of these squares have contributed to the failure of the mass protests in 2006 and 2010.

Kastrychnitskaia and Ploshcha 2006

As shown above, Kastrychnitskaia is a large square. 22000 of its approximately 27400 m² occupy an open, rectangular space in front of the Palace of the Republic. The square has two narrow openings to Internationalists street on either side of the Palace; the left side is bordered by Engels Street; the right, by two buildings and a construction site; and the fourth side, by Independence Avenue. The spaces on the left and right sides of the Palace are narrow, partly because of a parking lot on the left and a pool of fountains on the right. The virtually impenetrable facades on the left and the right sides limit movement on the square to Internationalists Street and Independence Avenue.³⁷

³⁵ It has now moved to the Victors' avenue (Praspekt Peramozhtsaŭ), and it is unclear what will take its place. One of the proposed projects is an administrative office centre in a traditional imperial style, similar to the style of the Palace of Culture (Onliner, 2016).

³⁶ A few times, while living in Minsk, I agreed to meet people by the 0-km sign. I vividly recall how boring the square seemed as a meeting place, especially if my friends were late.

³⁷ It is unclear if there are entrances to Kastrychnitskaia on the square's right. None of my respondents could say if there are ways to enter the square from this side. Yaraslaŭ recollects a tall fence between the buildings.

Milinkevich lists three reasons for why the protesters chose Kastrychnitskaia for their Ploshcha in 2006: “It is central, on it most of the authorities’ festive events [...] and in addition, it could fit up to 50 thousand citizens.”³⁸

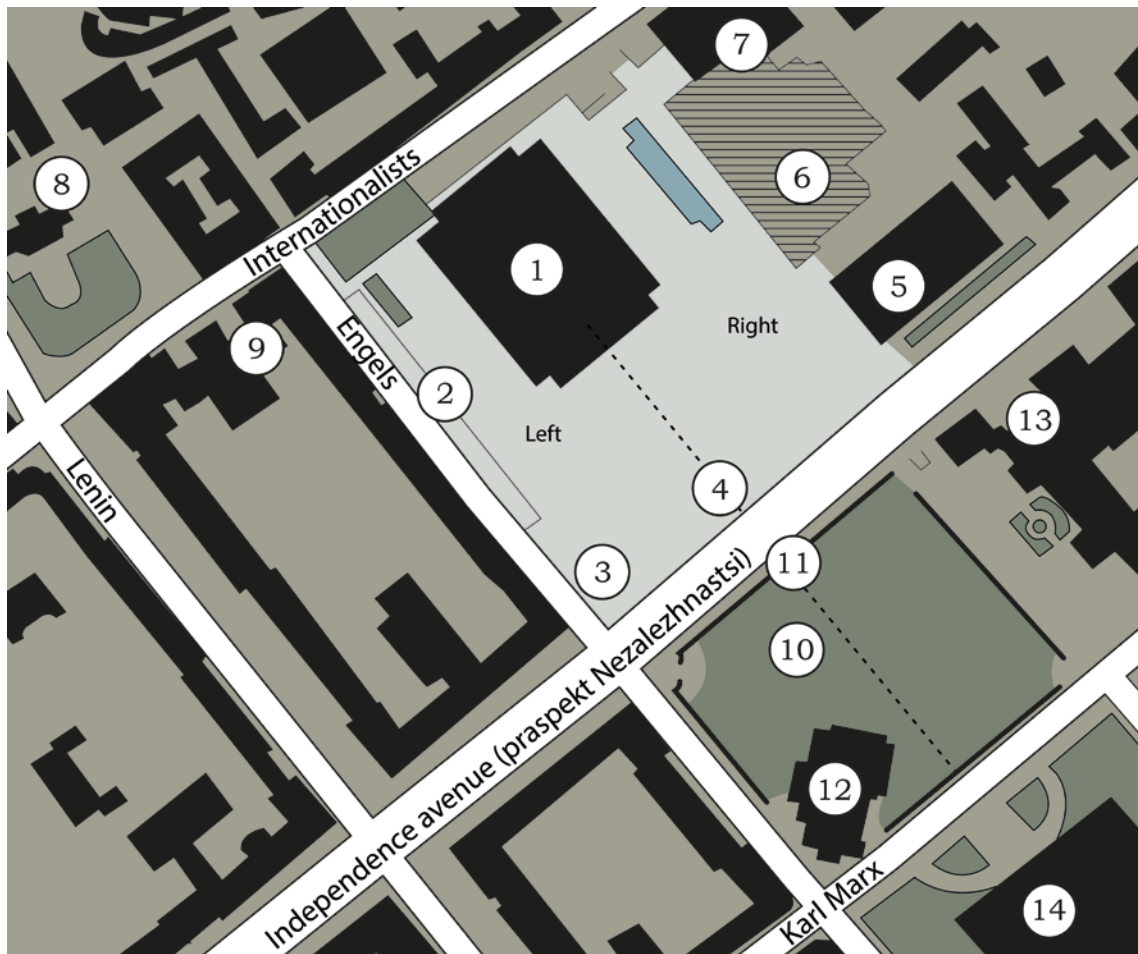


Figure 6 Kastrychnitskaia (October square): 1) Palace of the republic; 2) Parking; 3) Screen; 4) 0-km sign; 5) Palace of Culture; 6) Construction site; 7) Business centre; 8) Svabody (Freedom square); 9) Music academy; 10) Aliaksandraŭski skver; 11) Tribune; 12) Ianki Kupaly National Theatre; 13) House of Officers; 14) Presidential Administration. Illustration: Arve Hansen.

Because Kastrychnitskaia is empty of landmarks, there are few natural focal points. If one wants to address a crowd, the most central elevation points are a few steps up the stairs surrounding the Palace, between the massive columns of the building. This vantage point not only excludes the audience on the square’s right and left side, it also puts the speaker symbolically in the shadow of Lukashënka’s success. Probably because of this, the opposition decided to speak to the crowds from between the columns of the Palace of Culture instead (Khashchevatskiĭ, 2007), with similar problems of lateral visibility.

The Soviet architects had considered this lack of a focal point, and in 1957 they made an elevated tribune in the wall on Aliaksandraŭski skver, from which officials could address the people on Kastrychnitskaia on official occasions. Yet the tribune is only

³⁸ “[Яна] цэнтральная, на ёй адбываецца большасць святочных уладных мерапрыемстваў [...] і да таго ж там маггло змясціцца да 50 тысяч грамадзян.”

accessible through locked gates, and as will soon become apparent, the authorities can easily block access to the entire park.

Communication on Kastrychnitskaia is further hampered by a large screen, which faces the square from one of its corners. The screen usually shows one of the official news channels, and the loudspeakers are powerful enough to potentially drown out any challenge to the official propaganda. (Yaraslaŭ)

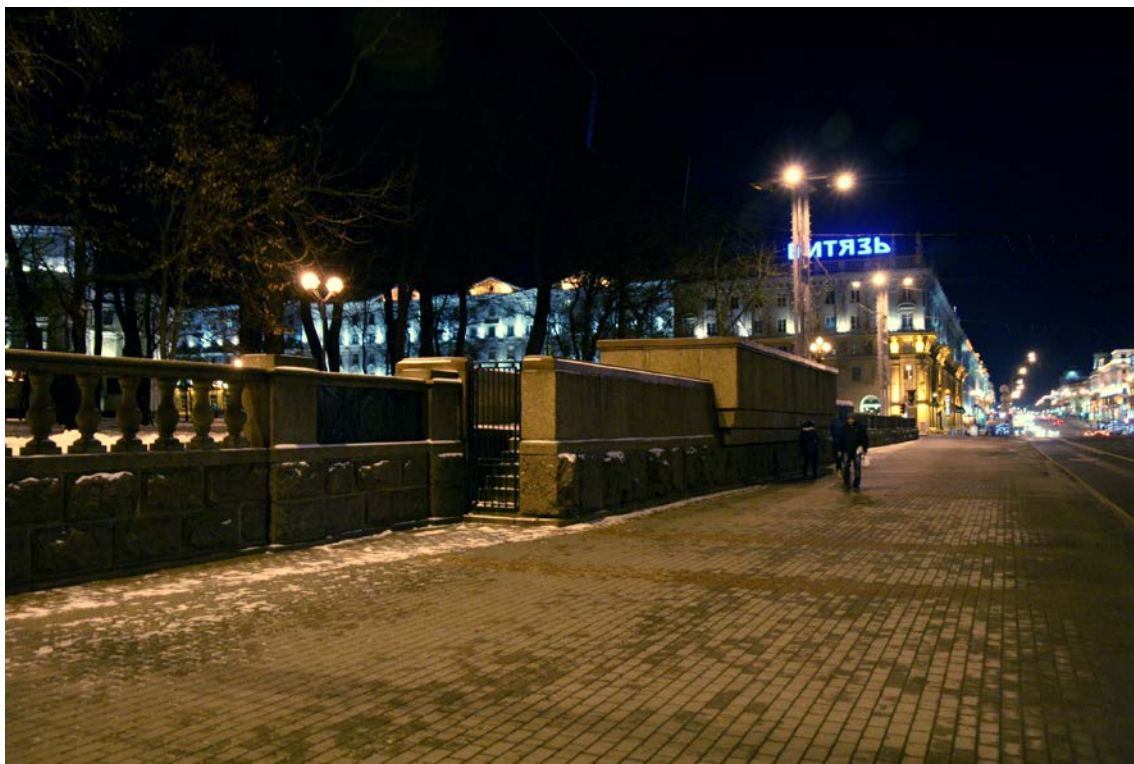


Figure 7 The Wall on Aliaksandraŭski. Photo: Anonymous

Milinkevich goes on to explain that the main reason for protesting at Kastrychnitskaia was its proximity to the president. One might expect, then, that protesters occupying Kastrychnitskaia would take the opportunity to demonstrate outside the presidential administration. However, such intentions face significant obstacles, the first of these being to cross the eight lanes of Independence Avenue. Next, the natural choice would be to walk straight through Aliaksandraŭski to the presidential administration. A convenient location to expand to, if protests outgrew the space on Kastrychnitskaia, Aliaksandraŭski is, however, closed off by its surrounding stone fence and the park's few entrances can be easily blocked by a few police officers. This in effect turns the park into an obstacle for the masses. An alternative path to the presidential administration is found on the right side of Aliaksandraŭski, but this path runs up several flights of stairs to a narrow strip of space between the walls of Aliaksandraŭski and the House of Officers. This makes the alternative route easily controlled as well. The only remaining option is to go via Engels Street, a predictable route which law enforcement personnel would easily be capable, and well prepared, to close off.

One evening [in 2006] the organisers led the crowd in the direction of the presidential administration [...]. Just as we got to the theatre, they turned us back

[...]. They were defending the administration well. Everybody felt the truncheons³⁹ (Paŭliuk)

Dzmitry (switching to Russian) recounts a similar situation in 2004: “We went there on the Engels street. We got to the corner of the administration, but buses with special forces had already arrived. They started to beat us, to detain, to thrash.”⁴⁰

On the other side of the Palace of the Republic, police could control movement by blocking the two ends of Internationalists’ Street. This area is well suited for police manoeuvres such as ‘kettling’ (surrounding) of the protesters, and limiting their movement to Independence Avenue. In 2006, police controlled all the sides surrounding the protests, and could stop and arrest people going to and from the protest camp. “They quite successfully blocked the square. They did not allow cars to stop, and they prevented people from bringing food.”⁴¹ (Piatro). During the night of March 24, riot police were deployed to the square, quickly removing the tents and arresting the protesters.

Nezalezhnastsi and Ploshcha 2010

As a protest space, Nezalezhnastsi has some assets worth mentioning. It is easy to get to, larger than Kastychnitskaia (approximately 40000 m²) and is surrounded by a few buildings of symbolic value to the protesters, such as The Red Church and the university. Still, the descriptions my respondents, as well as other observers, give of the square are less encouraging:

[Nezalezhnastsi] in Minsk, Belarus’s sad capital, is one of the most terrifying public spaces in Europe. It is nothing but concrete, steel, glass and fearsome horizons – no benches, shelter, or anything for people who might wish to do something so normal as to assemble and speak together. Where anything vertical rises from the ground, it bears a video camera, ensuring that any gathering can be observed by the Belarusian KGB. (Snyder, 2010)

Although Snyder might be mistaken about the benches (the square has quite a few), Nezalezhnastsi is indeed little more than hard surfaces and “fearsome horizons”. Statkevich also talks about the practical problems with the square after the 2006 reconstruction:

There is no single area there. There are separate places, disturbed by these domes. There are many of them and citizens of Minsk jokingly call the square *the Industrial Greenhouse*. It is possible to fit tens of thousands of people there, but it will be a little separated area.⁴²

³⁹ “Один вечер [в 2006 г.] организаторы повели толпу в направлении администрации президента [...]. Как только дошли до театра, всех там развернули [...]. Администрацию защищали очень хорошо. Дубинками получили все.”

⁴⁰ “Мы ходили туда [...] по Энгельса. Мы дошли до угла администрации, но туда уже подъехали автобусы со спецназовцами. Они нас начали бить, задерживать, молотить.”

⁴¹ “Довольно успешно блокировали площади. Не позволяли машинам останавливаться и запретили людям приносить еду”

⁴² “Единого большого пространства там нет, там есть отдельные места, разбитые этими куполами там. Их очень много и минчане называют в шутку эту площадь парниковый комбинат. Там можно разместить десятки тысяч людей, но это будет немного разбитое пространство.”

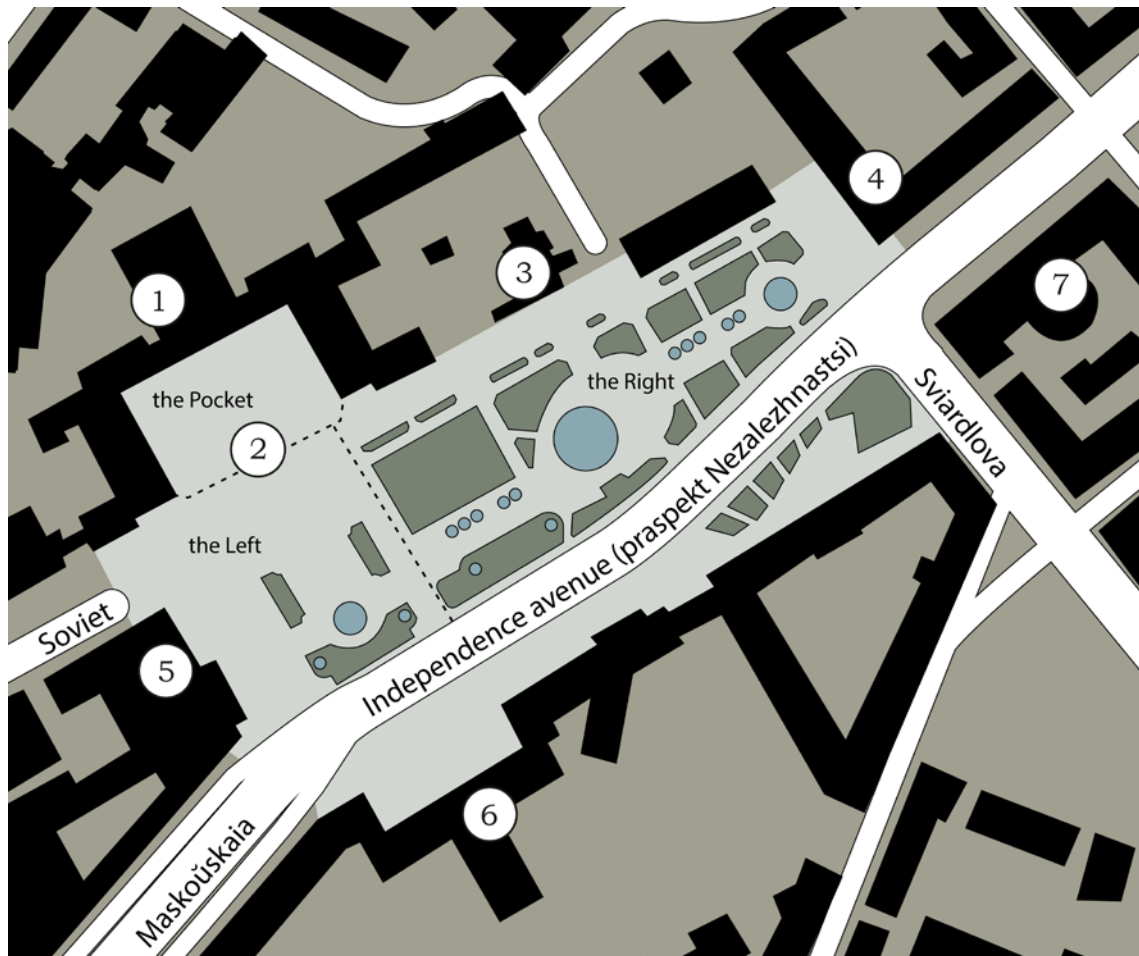


Figure 8 Nezalezhnastsi (Independence square): 1) House of Government; 2) Lenin monument; 3) Church of Saints Simon and Helena; 4) Hotel Minsk; 5) Belarusian State Pedagogical University; 6) Belarusian State University; 7) Post Office. Illustration: Arve Hansen

For the sake of clarity, in figure 8, I have divided the square into three main parts: The Left: The rectangular shaped space between the Lenin statue and Independence avenue. This is quite open, apart from a few flowerbeds and a glass dome in one end. The Right: The space between The Left and Hotel Minsk. This part is the biggest, but is crowded by flowerbeds, glass domes, benches and fountains. The Pocket: The small square behind Lenin, between the walls of the House of Government.

As Nezalezhnastsi is a long space with numerous obstacles and virtually without elevations, the problem of the absence of a good focal point applies here, too. For people on the Left, Lenin is a natural place to look at, but it is not as visible for people on the Right. On the Right, only the Church of Saints Simon and Helena offers a good focal point, but the many objects obstructing the view would divide spectators into separate clusters.

In 2010, the opposition leaders therefore chose the former option and spoke from the Lenin statue's platform – dwarfed by the giant Lenin and with the House of Government towering behind them.



Figure 9 House of Government. CC-BY-3.0 Photo: Wikimedia, Alexander Groshev

After an alleged provocation, the riot police went in to clear the square. According to Vital', the square was cleared in 7 minutes, despite the amounts of protesters assembled there; according to Paŭliuk, it took only 5 minutes. Perhaps less prone to exaggeration, Statkevich claims it took considerably longer, perhaps 30 or 40 minutes. Even so, this can hardly be described as a difficult or a long-lasting police operation. The group of people, gathered in the Pocket and on the Lenin statue's platform, quickly became trapped by police who came in from Soviet Street and blocked off the only exit. The rest of the protesters on the Left and the Right were also soon 'kettled in' by police between Independence avenue and the buildings to the north:

The first part cordoned off the whole square in a ring. They ran on the perimeter of the avenue [...]. We saw that everything up to Hotel Minsk was cordoned off. They just chased us and parted us in groups in rings, and threw us into buses.⁴³ (Katsiaryna)

Thus, the riot police used the square's architecture to efficiently and brutally put an end to the second Belarusian Ploshcha. It will appear, then, that both Kastychnitskaia and Nezalezhnastsi are easily surrounded and controlled, despite their differences in size and shape. In this manner, the physical elements of Minsk itself constitute a major challenge for public demonstrations and their organisers.

⁴³ “Першая частка ўзяла ўсю плошчу в ацапленне кальцо. Яні беглі па перыметру праспекту [...]. Мы пабачалі, што да гатэля ‘Мінск’ усё ацаплена. Нас проста гналі і людзей разбіралі на групы ў такія кольцы, і закідвалі ў аўтобусы.”

Conclusions

In the introduction, I stated that space is a potentially important condition for collective action, and my aim for this article was to demonstrate this by applying a spatial perspective on mass protests in Minsk.

Belarus is an autocratic country, and the opposition is faced with many obstacles, such as state controlled media, a weak national identity and a large security apparatus willing to use force to repress protests. Still, people have on occasions dared into the public space of Minsk in large numbers to protest against their current leadership, notably the opposition went to the streets in large numbers in 2006 and 2010. When analysing the success or failure of such collective actions, in addition to asking what external and internal conditions are present, I argue that we should also be looking at the protests from a spatial perspective: “What space are the protesters using?”, “Why?” and “How are protests affected by this space?” By asking these questions in the case of Minsk, we see that the Belarusian opposition is faced with considerable spatial obstacles:

The opposition does not have much room to choose from; only two squares are large enough to contain tens of thousands of protesters and, at the same time, be in proximity to the political centre. However, these two squares, Kastrychnitskaia and Nezalezhnasti, are presenting obstacles to the opposition and enhancing the strategies used by Lukashënka to stay in power. 1) The perceived elements of Minsk as well as the two protests squares are associated with the Soviet Union, Lukashënka’s success and the disappointment of failed protests, and thus do not have a preferable symbolic value to the largely pro-European opposition. 2) Additionally, the social elements of the city divide the city into political space (on and in proximity to Independence Avenue) and public space (where the citizens’ nodes are). In a society where the media are controlled by the state, protests might thus go unnoticed by large segments of the population. 3) This latter point is especially important, given that the physical elements of the squares makes policing particularly easy and swift, reducing the duration of the protests and lessening the possibility of people learning about them – not to mention reaching the city centre in time before the protests are over. The physical elements of the squares also limit the protesters’ communication, movement and flexibility.

I therefore conclude that a spatial perspective should be included in research on collective actions, because it might, as in the case of Minsk, be an additional contributory condition for their success or failure.

The spatial perspective would benefit from being further tested on cases, where mass protests have had a variety of outcomes. Preferably, the next step would be to analyse a city with a similar history, culture or architecture as Minsk, such as Moscow or Chişinău.

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