

**Life under dictatorship: What it feels like to be excluded from the political and moral community and how to survive if you choose to resist?**

On June 29, 2021, Ekaterina Vinnikova delivered her commencement address on the stage of Belarusian State University where she thanked the previously fired by the university's president professors of law who "showed by their example what the law is and what it takes to be a good lawyer." Among others, she introduced a professor and member of the Opposition Coordination Council, Maxim Znak accused of "conspiracy to seize power" and "creation of an extremist entity." Two more professors of the School of Law, Elena Basalai and Elena Laevskaya, who were dismissed for their views were also named in Ekaterina's commencement speech. On the very next day, Ekaterina was summoned to the local Department of Internal Affairs where she was interrogated for seven hours and detained until morning. She was later charged with "holding an unauthorized rally" and spent fifteen days in prison. (DW)

Maxim Znak is a Belarusian lawyer, former associate professor of law at Belarusian State University, and politician, part of Viktor Babaryka's team, member of the presidium of the Coordination Council formed during the 2020–21 Belarusian protests in opposition to the rule of Alexander Lukashenko and aimed to help coordinate a transition to democracy in Belarus. Following the forced expel from Belarus of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Znak along with fellow opposition leader Maria Kalesnikava actively participated in the demonstrations and protests against the Lukashenko government. On Wednesday, September 9, 2020, unidentified men in ski masks seized Maxim Znak from the office of the opposition coordination council and dragged

him out of the building. Maxim has been kept behind the bars since brutal detention. (The Guardian)

On Monday, September 7, 2020, masked men seized Maria Kalesnikava, a leading member of the Council, from a street in Minsk. She and two other Council members were driven to the Belarusian-Ukrainian border early on Tuesday and told to cross into Ukraine. Kalesnikava, however, ripped up her passport and escaped out of a moving car via a window. She was promptly rearrested. Kalesnikava is now being held at a ministry of internal affairs pre-trial detention center in Minsk. The charges against Maria Kalesnikava and Maxim Znak could see them jailed for 12 years.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is a Belarusian human rights activist and politician who ran in the 2020 Belarusian presidential election as the main opposition candidate after her husband Sergei Tsikhanousky was jailed ahead of the vote. After Tsikhanouskaya cast her ballot on the election's day on August 9th, 2020, she disappeared for several hours before it was reported that she had arrived in Lithuania. Following her disappearance, a video apparently scripted and recorded under duress before Tsikhanouskaya left Belarus, emerged on the official news feeds in which she urged her fellow countrymen to end their protests and accept Lukashenko's re-election. (NY Times)

These four stories as well as hundreds of thousands of others like them have been happening to the Belarusian citizens since the most recent presidential elections in Belarus on August 9, 2020. Although the heroes of these stories may haven't known each other, all of them ended up in a very similar manner: thrown in jails, fined, fired from the jobs, expelled from the

educational establishments, had their children expropriated from the families, and put into fostering facilities, had their health significantly worsen, beaten, raped, tortured, or even murdered to death. This paper provides a brief description of the main hurdles experienced by Belarusian people from the authorities, the ways of helping them to survive through the most repressive times ever seen in this country, and why all the above turns out a positive feedback loop. The paper educates on how to define a dictatorial regime from democratic as the former often masks to the latter. Finally, the most important part of this work explains through the multiple concepts of ethics why the authoritarian style of governance is immoral, unjust, and therefore must not exist.

In his "Politics" dated 350 B.C.E., Aristotle claimed that an individual can't live without being a part of the political community because each individual is supposed to be a part of this community by nature. He uses 'logos' to refer to any being from the moral community to belong to the political community by saying: "logos is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is a partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state." (Aristotle) Following this logic, if anyone who has logos and therefore belongs to the political community, has this right innately acquired and determined by nature; consequently, they can't place individual needs before those of the community they belong to. "For the whole must necessarily be before the part," Aristotle says. (Aristotle) If society is a whole, then an individual is a part of this whole. In cases when it happens otherwise, autocracies arise. And when this happens, being the best of the animals when perfected, a man becomes the worst of all when separated from law and justice. (Aristotle) Even though these words were written

thousands of years ago, with the current presence of dictatorial countries on the world's political map, they still correctly reflect the nature of the phenomenon of critical imbalance of power like dictatorships. The modern meaning of it is quite transparent in terms of its definitive criterion, yet it turns out that the assignment of this definition to a country that carries the main features of the phenomenon of autocracy may not be as simple as it seems for several reasons. For example, some parliamentary republics that have the process of elections per se, in fact, are dictatorships because most of the power is concentrated in the hands of one person or a small group. Hence, these dictatorships deny their citizens' fundamental rights like freedoms, justice, rights, and safety provided by constitutions and declared by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by excluding their citizens from the political community; however, they still call themselves democracies or at least claim they have all attributes of the last. So how we can objectively determine whether a country is a dictatorship or democracy, or something in between besides our perceptions of what it is?

To answer this question, we can refer to several resources that use the methodologies based on statistics, analysis of different data, questionnaires, and more. One of them is a determination of the Polity Index by professor Robert Deacon from the University of California. To rank a country's political system between democracy and dictatorship, he suggested a model that allows estimation of a country's governance style by using an evidence-based statistical approach that determines a Polity Index for the country of interest. The model implies that less inclusive (autocratic) governments will under-provide public consumption goods, environmental safety, and controls over pollution relative to more inclusive (democratic) governments. Such ranking of the countries aims to establish a relationship whether an actively promoted democratization has

positive consequences on the processes of public goods provision, environmental safety, and more. Accountable factors that were later on represented as variables and incorporated into the formula include and were obtained from the following sources:

- The percent of the population having access to sanitation facilities and safe drinking water provided by the World Health Organization.
- Non-environmental public goods, roads, and public education are based on the data on paved and unpaved road mileage from the International Road Federation.
- The public education measure is derived from UNESCO.
- The lead content of gasoline, measured in grams per gallon, as an indicator of environmental policy. Lead concentrations are reported by Octel Corporation.
- The factor of ethnic fragmentation as a possible cause of disagreement over the specific features of public goods that a government should provide represented by two additional variables, a probability that two individuals randomly selected from a given country do not belong to the same ethnolinguistic group and a degree of skewness in the income distribution.
- Inclusiveness, the fraction of the population whose preferences count in political decisions, was obtained from the Polity and Banks data. Each set was compiled separately by different organizations and, while both sources seek to describe systems of governance, their approaches are distinct.

Additionally, prof. Deacon used the data of the political attributes of countries that he derived from the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive and the Polity IV database as an alternative

approach to determine whether a country is democratic or autocratic by its political style. The calculated results were summarized in a table where the countries with a Polity Index less than 0.5 appear in the mixed or autocracy regime. It was also established that the majority of these regimes experience exceedingly low incomes and poor levels of public services and environmental protection. (Deacon)

Another approach to distinguish democracies from autocracies is to refer to the data collected by Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization that produces research, reports on, and analyses other core thematic issues related to democracy, political rights, and civil liberties. Freedom House uses a scoring approach for the determination of the liberty status of as many as 210 countries ranking them in the interval from 1 to 100. (FH)

Based on the Polity Index, the style of governance the Republic of Belarus is considered as the "non-free" and strictly autocratic even though formally this country utilizes the institutions of democracy like the bicameral parliament, National Assembly as an addition to Presidential power, and three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial. According to the most recent data provided by Freedom House, the country's Global Freedom score is 11 points out of 100 possible (was 19 before the elections in 2020), the Internet Freedom has 38 points (was 35 before the elections in 2020), and the Democratic score is 5 points only (was 7 before the elections in 2020). The combination of these scores ranks Belarus a consolidated authoritarian regime. (FH)

As a consequence of almost 30-years history of the dictatorial form of governance in Belarus, the cult of personality, a hand-ruled economy that completely depends on external resources,

mostly from Russia, and the most violent repressions ever seen in this country since its independence from the USSR were declared, thousands of Belarusian citizens including myself and my family were enforced to emigrate for a better and safer life. In addition to a country's deep economic stagnation along with the massive political repressions, the majority of rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution have been abolished for the remaining in the country's non-elite cohort excluding it from the political and moral communities.

None of the countries in the world is free from all forms of oppression within its society; therefore, a person of the non-dominant group can experience oppression in the form of limitations, disadvantages, or disapproval. They may even suffer abuse from individuals, institutions, or cultural practices. "Oppression" refers to a combination of prejudice and institutional power that creates a system that regularly and severely discriminates against some groups and benefits other groups. (NMAAHC) In the case of consolidated authorities like Belarus, basically, all forms of oppression are held in the hands of one person and a small group of people who surround and serve this person's wills. Systemic oppression causes deep suffering, it diminishes lived experiences of individuals, ruins and displaces families, gaslights the whole nation's perception of reality, morality, justice, and dignity. Interesting though, that it can also consolidate people of different identities around revolution or resistance ideas making them work together to achieve a common result.

According to the Human Rights Center "Viasna", a non-governmental human rights organization created in 1996 in Belarus, there is a total of 631 currently detained Belarusian and foreign citizens considered political prisoners. Bloggers, businessmen, students, presidential

campaign members, and peaceful protesters are held in prisons only because they were not afraid to exercise their constitutional rights - the right to participate in peaceful assemblies, to express their opinion, and to be involved in political activities. Most of these people were targeted by politically motivated criminal prosecution in connection with the events that took place during and after the presidential election of August 2020. Besides those spending their time behind the bars, there are around 900 more whose freedom is restricted under home or non-prison confinement for the actions of civil disobedience. The total amount of people who have undergone arrests throughout 2020-2021 is nearing 40,000 Belarusian citizens. The World Prison Brief, an online database that provides free access to information on prison systems around the world, puts Belarus in 3rd place after Russia and Turkey based on the total amount of prisoners in Europe. (Telegraf.by) Volunteers of the Human Rights Center "Viasna" report on multiple physical and mental abuse and tortures of political prisoners: extremely overcrowded cells with an average of 30-75 persons occupying a four- to six-seated cell, denial of medical care including acute conditions or COVID cases, denial of getting correspondence, and even such extremes like the prohibition of sitting or lying, opening windows, turning off the lights in the cell, limitations/absence of food and water, feminine hygiene supplies, physical activity, sleep deprivation, etc. Political prisoners experienced violence and tortures including several cases of deaths more than 4,600 times. Besides criminally or administratively imprisoned for participating in peaceful assemblies, many of these people were fined, expelled from the workplace or educational establishments, and, eventually, emigrated. Their actions were considered "related to illegal mass events, riots, protests, encroachment on state sovereignty and public safety, deliberate destruction and damage to property, violence and death threats against

officials and members of their families.” (Viasna) According to human rights activists, the most common criminal instrument of repression today is persecution for defamation: insulting the president, government officials, judges, and police. Trials for these offenses are held throughout Belarus on a daily basis. The most common mechanism of police interactions with civilians involves breakages into houses and apartments in search of protest symbols, conduction of unauthorized house-checks following by detentions of individuals, and taking them for interrogations. (Viasna) The most ridiculous cases of administrative trials followed by detentions and fines include to following: prison sentences for inscriptions “Never Forget” on the ground, moving along the roadway and making loud clapping, using opposition symbols, walking in the front rows of the column, and therefore violating public order. No less surprising are some of the sentences that the Belarusian courts passed for administrative offenses. Thus, a 75-year-old woman was fined 200 US dollars for her participation in “unregistered mass events” by holding in her hand a white-red-white marshmallow. Same colored window blinds were considered an “unauthorized picketing” and led its owner to be fined 300 US dollars. (DW) As red and white colors are thought to be the colors of the opposition due to their relation to the historical national symbols, they are prohibited to appear anywhere outside, inside, or on people. Any evidence of red and white appeared on a person like socks, umbrellas, scarfs, dresses, etc. led its bearers to prosecutions. “What should you put in your bag before leaving home in Belarus nowadays if you openly criticize the government?” Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya called by Lukashenko “a stupid little girl” and “a housewife” recommends packing an extra pair of pants and socks in case you get kidnapped or thrown in jail because under strongman President Alexander Lukashenko, you "feel that you don't have rights at all." (DW)

On a larger scale, the repression machine continued to exterminate non-governmental public organizations, children's hospices, journalism, small business, churches, theaters, international language schools, educational facilities, IT companies, etc. More than 50 non-profit organizations were executed by the authorities in July of 2021 with several more non-governmental establishments expected to be liquidated in the near future. (Vyasna) In addition to this, the most prominent athletes, healthcare and culture workers, priests, scientists, were fired or forced to flee from the country; as a result of this massive cleanup, the most qualified and experienced assets have vanished from almost every domain. Thus, the Belarusian Olympic National team showed the worst results through the last 27 years during the most recent Olympic Games in Tokyo. Being politically and government-supervised and afraid of punishment, the athletes collected the smallest number of medals ever in Belarusian history; in turn, these results accompanied by political scandals during the games revealed a big problem of systemic unhappiness in high-performance sports.

To protect and support itself financially, the dictatorial regime in Belarus utilizes the least moral ways that contradict to the most world's conventions: human trafficking, civil airplane hijacking, drugs, tobacco and alcohol trafficking, arms trade, blood products trading, and many other forms of illegal and immoral international actions. Gaslighting has become the most common response of the Belarusian authorities to any sort of socio-political events. Thus, it has been systematically declared that the massive protests are fake and the result of Photoshop, that everyone who doesn't agree with the results of elections is a product of the European spook factory and was paid for participation in the peaceful protests. The authorities deny their involvement in the migration crisis at the European borders caused by thousands of immigrants

from a number of Arabic countries who were issued Belarusian visas and hosted in the most expensive, government-held hotels in the Belarusian capital followed with transportation of them to illegally cross the border with the neighboring European countries.

The knowledge about how to define the dictatorial form of governance from democratic and how a repression machine works from the inside doesn't make us understand why it's actually such a wrong, destructive power and philosophy. Any dictator cannot keep the nation in fear without having a surrounding that serves them or even is like-minded. So, obviously, there is always a cohort of people that shares the ideas of ideology on the one hand, and another, much bigger cohort of those who do not share but stay along because of fear to be repressed. The latter has a view that dictatorial power is violent, unjust, and immoral, but how it actually can be validated assuming that there are various concepts of justice that may look at tyranny from different perspectives? To answer this question, I will assess the phenomenon of dictatorial power through the scope of ethics. I will show that all ethical theories that are based on values cannot justify tyranny of any kind; in addition, I will analyze why the theories where moral judgments are matters of approval and that can authorize hegemony are not relevant today.

Living under systemic political oppression by the authoritarian form of governance puts society in the conditions when its individuals even though being in a state of complete virtue still not capable of happiness. By virtue, Aristotle meant a state of character of a person which defines this person's moral standards and the ability for wise, good judgments. To be a virtuous person means not only to have reasons but not to misuse them to satisfy appetites or cultivate negative features like greediness or boastfulness. In other words, having reasoning and balance it

with appetites shapes one's character in a way to achieve a state of complete virtue. Through the lens of Aristotelian virtue ethics, dictatorships can't be considered moral forms of power as they abolish both individual and societal happiness where not only individuals cannot flourish, but the whole society doesn't achieve excellence.

According to the concept of Categorical Imperative by Kant, an action may have moral worth and therefore be ethically relevant only and only if it has a good intention and is driven by morality regardless of the consequences of this action. By morality, he meant an idea that every human is of an absolute value which is unmeasurable, unitless, uncountable, priceless, and based on dignity. It's universal for all humans without exceptions. Any actions motivated by emotions, desires, personal choice-based, or those that disobey the universality of absolute value are considered ethically irrelevant and therefore shouldn't be done. This concept of the categorical imperative is exactly opposite to the system of values of power-obsessed rulers who completely disregard a principle of absolute value and therefore act exclusively to satisfy their own ambitions regardless of the price.

A theory of contractarianism by Thomas Hobbes also known as a social contract theory, even though holds that persons are primarily self-interested, also states that a rational assessment of the best strategy for attaining the maximization of self-interest will lead to act morally. Rationality requires that we respect persons, which in turn requires that moral principles be such that they can be justified to each person. Thus, individuals are not taken to be motivated by self-interest but rather by a commitment to publicly justify the standards of morality to which each will be held. (Cubb) With dictatorships, obviously, there is no reason for signing a social contract

between the ruler and any individual as the former is missing rationality, and the latter appears in the forced situation where they will be punished even though they may have signed the social contract. Fear of punishment cannot be sufficient driving power for morality and justice as this concept alone has vulnerabilities. Another concept that drives morality and justice according to the theory of contractarianism is trust. If the nation lacks this component toward its authorities, the only way for the latter to keep the power is to keep civilians in a state of permanent fear.

From the utilitarian perspective, all humans' actions are committed in order to achieve happiness, as happiness, ultimately, is the most desirable thing for all of us. On the other hand, people tend to avoid pain which is the opposite of happiness. In terms of morality, happiness is considered an activity of one's soul in accordance with one's state of complete virtue, and this activity aims for the highest, ultimate happiness which is collective happiness or eudaimonia. This term is commonly translated from Greek as happiness and is an activity that aims towards amplification of the common good (the highest good) rather than achieving a personal state of happiness. The concept of happiness strives to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people while creating the least amount of harm or preventing the greatest amount of suffering. It holds that every entity's interest should be considered equally when making the decision, and this includes those of other species since they also are capable of suffering. (Capsim) As can be seen, the utilitarian concept of morality cannot be applicable to autocracies where there is no balance between benefits and harm for the most stakeholders who therefore experience sufferings and are in a state of unhappiness.

“Divine Creation Theory” which is rooted in the early chapters of Genesis, values the ideas of freedom and equality assigned to all humans by nature. Freedom is a natural state of all people is bounded by equality, so everyone is free yet none of us is more superficial to others and vice versa. As the concept of creationism deals with morality and justice, its main core is bounded to the intrinsic claims about equality. One of them states that all individuals are of infinite human dignity (equal in being unbounded in value) and therefore deserve the same or equivalent treatment - justice. (Fletcher) So how this claim may be grounded for a commitment to equality under the law? The answer is that the rule of law requires the enactment of non-discriminatory laws and the non-arbitrary execution of these laws by the executive and judiciary. (Fletcher) This same idea is a foundation stone for the American Declaration of Independence, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Constitution of many democratic countries per se. Dictators neither treat people as equals, nor they see them free, so the” Divine Creation Theory” has nothing in common with the authoritarian style of governance.

As can be seen, none of the theories have justified tyranny so far, so are there any others left who are able to do it? There is a group of theories of morality where moral judgments are matters of approval, so these theories are not based on values unlike all those mentioned above. The theory of Moral Subjectivism amounts to the denial of moral principles of any significant kind, and the possibility of moral criticism and argumentation. (Baber) As dictatorial power denies moral principles and never accepts criticism of any kind, the theory of Moral Subjectivism completely explains the phenomenon of autocracy in itself as well as gaslighting as one of its by-products that aims to justify the actions in front of opponents. A theory of Cultural Relativism is closely linked to Moral Subjectivism. It implies that we cannot criticize the actions of those in

cultures other than our own. And again, it amounts to the denial of universal moral principles. Also, it implies that a culture cannot be mistaken about what is right and wrong, and so it denies the possibility of moral advancement. (Baber) Another theory, Ethical Egoism, implies that people act so as to maximize self-interest yet does not exclude helping others; however, egoists will help others only if this will further their own interests because they believe in the selfish nature of humans who are not capable of genuine altruism. The person who helps others at the expense of their self-interest is actually acting immorally, and this is exactly the case with dictators who treat their own interests superiorly and never act altruistically. The last theory of morality that approves what is right from what is wrong is Divine Command Theory which is tightly related to religion. Although there are related claims that religion is necessary to motivate and guide people to behave in a morally good way, there are several dictatorships where the leaders proclaim themselves gods, however, they do not necessarily attach morality to the religion that they create yet to take a right to command what is good and what is wrong.

Martin Luther King Jr. called for reforms, peaceful protests, civil disobedience, and revolution. History has lots of examples when highly repressive and seemingly all-powerful regimes sometimes collapse at the hands of protesters armed with little more than slogans. Unfortunately, there are still many hot spots where such unarmed movements fail. In most, these dictatorships are not committed to the West's core values of democracy and morality so that its governments while being not embraced of these principles, cannot be leveraged against them. (Ritter) What else can be done in such cases when revolution is not a possibility, and the repression machine keeps smashing peoples' lives? There are two main directions to work on: pressure and support. The first utilizes external economic sanctions that may cause a huge effect

when applied on the countries with the limited resources and which are highly dependent on debt money from outside sources. In the case of Belarus, multiple economic sanctions have been applied due to the efforts of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team, Belarusian democratic forces in Poland, Ukraine, the USA, and many other countries with large diasporas. So far, the sanctions hit potash, tobacco, oil, finance, and the individuals close to the president including himself. The measures include banning EU businesses from importing goods or doing business with Belarusian companies in sectors including banking, petroleum products, and potash, a salt used in fertilizer that is the country's main export. (Reuters) The second direction includes support of the striking movements, small business, flipped over law enforcement and security forces, and all those who have already been pressured for their protestant activity. A number of initiatives that fundraise and distribute resources have been working on this matter since August, 2020: BYSOL: Belarus solidarity foundation supports the families of political prisoners. #By\_help is a civic campaign that financially supports the police victims, penalized for civil disobedience citizens, helps with healthcare, attorneys' expenses. The Media Solidarity campaign supports the repressed journalists and their families. The greatest pitfall of the whole supportive campaign is that it creates a pathologic circle with a mechanism of a positive feedback loop when the funds eventually settle in the dictator's pockets: the more people get penalized, the more money would be eventually gotten.

Stephen Fry, an English actor, broadcaster, and co-creator of the Project "Camera #18" which tells stories of 36 women who spent time together in a 4-seated cell said: "The brutal censorship, silencing, imprisonment and suppression of dissenting voices in Belarus has captured the world's attention, but the depth and meaning of such suppression and brutality are hard for the mind to

grapple with in abstract or statistical terms.” (Kamera18) Systems like dictatorships treat people like slaves or even like animals while keeping them incarcerated and tortured due to the latter exercised their constitutional rights. They leave them behind political and often moral communities and in a state of unhappiness. When a political system like dictatorship doesn't build its core around principles of morality, human dignity, and equality and rejects universal moral standards, then this system is immoral, unjust, and therefore has no ethical right to exist.

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Viktoria Buina  
Alfie Cohort 5  
08/06/2021

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