The Politics of Legitimacy:
The Case of Belarusian Opposition in Exile

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Abstract

The concept of political legitimacy, often employed in modern political discourse, remains an "essentially contested concept" with multiple ontological underpinnings. This paper seeks to deconstruct the varied conceptualizations of political legitimacy through the lens of ontological politics and practice theory, particularly focusing on the Belarussian political crisis of 2020-2023. Employing the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu and the ideas Annemarie Mol and Ernesto Laclau, the study aims to delineate how the concept of legitimacy serves as a dynamic operational tool within the Belarusian power relations and political activism field. Through a combination of methodologies, the study aims to construct a "mixed-method picture" of the social situation that brings to light the "dispositional logic" (habitus) and "positional logic" of different social actors. Textual materials and discursive practices related to the Belarusian democratic opposition in exile are analyzed to reveal the multiplicity of legitimacy claims and differences in the actors' standings. By deconstructing the representations behind legitimacy claims, this paper aims to contribute not just to academic discussions but also to enhance the practical efficacy of political actions within the Belarusian democratic movement.

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Introduction

The concept of political legitimacy is highly used in modern political practice. "Legitimate authority," "legitimate decision," "legitimate actions," "legitimate military targets," and even "legitimate concerns" these combinations could be easily tracked down in modern media writing on political affairs. The word legitimate comes from medieval Latin *Lēgitimātūs* and is historically interconnected with the question of law. To mean that something or somebody is legitimate was to name something or somebody lawful. Lawful either from the perspective of natural law in traditional societies or in the boundaries of the system of law in modern ones. However, in contemporary linguistic practices, the concept of legitimacy diverts in its meaning with the world legal and becomes a property of power and authority that could not only reside in law. The concept of legitimacy is relocated to the domain of politics by such exemplary accounts as Max Weber's *Economy and Society* ([1922] 1978). Legitimacy becomes the property of political power relations and a necessity to those who wield that power.

Nevertheless, and partly because of the extensive proliferation of the concept into various discourses, it remains highly contested and undefined. (Langvatn 2016, 133). To make the matter even more complicated, conceptual boundaries of "legitimacy" are constantly redefined and argued, sometimes with the consequences of conceptual overlapping and collapsing to other notions, such as belief, morality, and legality. (Pitkin [1972] 1993). The concept of legitimacy, or more precisely, political legitimacy (to move away from organizational studies and theories), represents an instance that could be labeled as an "essentially contested concept." (Gallie 1956) Normative, descriptive, pragmatic, instrumental, institutional, and actor-based accounts co-exist simultaneously in the academic field. The differences between these accounts are not purely theoretical: notions and theories of legitimacy take different shapes as linguistically operatable concepts in different ontologies. This multiplicity of theories of legitimacy enables a new type of practical approach to the issue: "ontological politics" (Mol 1999) of legitimacy, or politics of legitimacy.

The consequences of such ontological competition raise a pragmatical question: if "there are options between the various versions of an object: which one to perform?" (Mol, 1999, p. 74). That is why this inquiry's final stance on political legitimacy will also be pragmatic. This means what William James, in his *What Pragmatism Means,* famously named as "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts." (James, 2014, p. 15). Adopting this stance, we must seek actions and consequences with respect to legitimacy interpretations presented to the participants of a concrete situation. One of the requirements of such practically oriented ontological, political analysis is a definition of a "site" of practice (Schatzki 2002, 146), or in Bourdieu's ([1977] 2010, 166) terms, of the "field." A situation of practice in which judgment of consequences is required to be made, which has concrete boundaries defined by subject positions and "the rules of performance." Such a field can then be used to excavate the choices around the concept operation.

The employment of the concept of legitimacy is clearly traceable in the case of the Belarusian political crisis of 2020, the activities of the Belarusian opposition movement

in exile. The narrative of contesting legitimacies is not new to the Belarusian political discourse: almost 30 years of Belarusian independent history are marked with falsified elections and authoritarian practices. (Olędzka and Rust 2022; Bedford 2017; Bedford and Vinatier 2019; Gapova 2021). After the 2020 elections, the results of which were widely not recognized as fair and transparent in the Western world, as the following sections of this text will show, the debate around political legitimacy sored with a new energy. The concept became central to the Belarusian democratic movement of 2020. Legitimization of Belarusian opposition in exile and delegitimization of the Lukashenko regime became a stratagem and a practically used framework of thinking that various political actors employ to orient themselves in the political situation. The sociological approach of Bourdieu is used to create an operational account of political legitimacy and reveal the logic behind the positions of the members of the Belarusian opposition who use it. The ontological pictures and theoretical representations are ameliorated with the subjective dispositions of the practice field. These "competent performances" (Adler and Pouliot 2011) will show that legitimation strategies are not purely the consequence of a rational choice but an constitutive combination of the practical field positions, dispositions, and aspiration to take on these positions. Numerous claims of legitimacy were made during the period of 2020-2023, but what is more important, "having legitimacy" becomes an integral part of an interiorized political identity.

Some of the questions presented in *Ontological Politics* by Annemarie Mol (1999) will help to facilitate our inquiry into the situation of Belarusian politics: Where are the options for practicing judgment of legitimacy located? What is at stake? Are these really options? How should we choose? (Mol 1999, 79) This number of questions will be addressed in the following order. First, a brief conceptual analysis of the concept of political legitimacy will be laid out to facilitate the mapping of different theoretical and ontological representations onto the observed public claims and judgments upon legitimacy in the Belarusian context. Second, a short review of the methodology of Bourdieu's practice theory and Mol's idea of ontological politics will be presented with an important supplementation from Ernesto Laclau's discursive theory, touching base with the notions of the "field" and ontological multiplicity in the sense of "disparate realities produced in different practices" (Schatzki 2017, 17). The first exercise would give us material for reconstructing implicit hegemonical ontological influence, in forms of "sedimented hegemonic meanings" (Mendonça 2014, 72). The second will hopefully help us to evaluate the practical value of concept operation and answer the questions about how legitimacy became an essential issue in the Belarusian activism field.

The academic work written on the current affairs of the Belarusian political landscape was consulted, though it is clearly unrealistic to cover the complexity of the situation in one study. The review of literature on Belarusian politics is out of the scope of this work; an approach to prioritize practical implications of the current debate was chosen with the hope that the results of this study will contribute to the efficacy of actions of various political actors in Belarusian democratic movement and will provide a solid theoretical framework for political activist practice. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian languages are my own.

Theories of legitimacy: why and how it has been conceptualized.

Why legitimacy?

The practical reasons for

Legitimacy is one of the core concepts in Western political theory. The first conceptualizations are dated back to Plato and Aristotle (Dogan 2009, 195), continuing to appear through ages of European history of thought in Thomas Aquinas' *War and Peace* (Reichberg 2016), John Locke's *Second Treatise* (Waldron 1989), Hobbs (1651; Dyzenhaus 2001; Newey 2008, 81) and to one of the most significant reconceptualization made by Max Weber ([1922] 1978) in *Economy and Society.* Legitimacy as a concept in political thought seems to never become obsolete, appearing in numerous recent methodological developments of neo-pragmatism (Fossen 2022a), neo-realism (Greene 2020), political science (S. C. Gordon and Huber 2020), the study of revolutions (Kitzen 2017; Schoon 2014; Caspersen 2015) and actor based theories. (Metzger 2011; Duyvesteyn 2017) But why is the concept of legitimacy so important that almost every other theorist engaged with the topics of power and authority takes the time to give a relevant account of the concept?

First, the question of legitimacy is a practical question. As commonly stated, legitimacy is a degree of cooperation of the governed with the established authority. (Greene 2017) Legitimacy thus becomes a foundational requirement for institutionalized power relationships. Pure coercion is not perceived as possible, even in the most primitive systems. (Cromartie 2003, 93) "The lack of political legitimacy is regarded universally as a defect" (Greene 2020, 65), a defect of an authority system that will imminently lead to the system's collapse. The lack of legitimacy is argued to have a negative influence on "order, stability, effectiveness" (Beetham 2013, 33; Gilley 2006, 499) and "the degree of cooperation and the quality of [government] performance." Lack of political legitimacy can lead to a situation when most of the efforts of political actors will be concentrated "on maintaining order" and not on other political goals. (Beetham 2013, 28) Authoritarian regimes are not an exclusion. Bedford (2021), following the Belarusian case of 2020, argues that authoritarian regimes become incredibly vulnerable when they fail to employ legitimization strategies. The loss of legitimacy of the regime in Belarus is thought to have declined the capacity of popular self-representation of the regime and reduced its leverage in the international arena. (Nizhnikau 2022). All these perceptions about legitimacy draw pictures of something that bears concrete value for a political practitioner.

Second, the practical significance of legitimacy rises from the philosophical perception that legitimacy is not something natural, which comes with the arbitrary events of individual fate or lies in the metaphysical space of "regulative ideals," but something "attainable" that could be influenced and constructed. (Greene, 2020, p. 65). This locates legitimacy in the site of political practice — the site of the possible and dislocates it from the questions of abstract order.

Third, as normative theories of legitimacy assert that the proper use of coercive political authority needs to be morally justified or acceptable (Mason 2010, 667), the importance of legitimacy thus rises from the moral questions of political practice. If an authority or power must be "good," it must be then concerned with the question of legitimacy as a reflection of its acceptance. The concept of legitimacy in such a view acts as a bridge between an idealization of a just society and a fallible reality. It helps to cover the "gap between an ideal on the conceptual level and non-ideal circumstances" (Mason 2010, 659). This approach challenges the implicit dualism of Western philosophy and turns the political theory into a pragmatic inquiry echoing Bourdieu's search for "the relationship between subjective hopes and objective opportunities." (Bourdieu 1990, 23) To seek legitimacy means to seek convergence with the ideal founded by normative standards. Beetham's (2013), but to realize at the same time that this convergence is unattainable. Normative theories of legitimacy focus precisely on the practice of providing moral grounds for compliance. (Beetham 2013, 34).

A fourth, though a pure theoretical utility, can be found in the fact that legitimacy bears intrinsic explanatory value. Conceptualizations of legitimacy "explain people's behavior," especially "grounds and reasons" for obedience. (Beetham 2013, 26). However, the explanatory value of a concept is heavily dependent on the meta-ontological and methodological approaches of political theorizing. A situation when a too broad concept conceals the complexity of an object of theorizing is not uncommon. (Marquez 2016). While the critique of methodological aspects of concept construction in political theory is beyond the scope of this study yet, it could be a possible way for any political theory research to pursue.

Fifth, in a pragmatic sense, the idea of legitimacy serves to "make political stances explicit." This provides mechanisms to navigate critical situations by presenting and requesting explanations and judgments. (Fossen 2013, 441). Essentially, this means to treat the activity of judging legitimacy as a "truth nomination" (Bernstein 2010, 119) exercise. It is worth noting that taking such a pragmatic stance should also be combined with the rejection of epistemological truth-seeking exercise. (Rorty, Engel, and Savidan 2007; Bernstein 2010) The legitimacy becomes a piece of a "practical political vocabulary" (Fossen 2013, 446) and acts in a quasi-performative manner. (Pitkin [1972] 1993)

The practical reasons against

O'Kane (1993) challenges the utility of legitimacy as a concept for its practical inapplicability, particularly in the context of civil wars. "Support," she argues, might be a better framework for analysis as it could include both the attitudes and non-behavioral factors of key groups within a society: the military, industrialists, or landowners. In a non-institutionalized context, such as during civil wars or insurgencies, the dichotomy of 'legitimacy' and 'legitimacy deficit' can indeed be a challenging concept to apply. The issue becomes even more complicated when the population is divided approximately in half, each side backing a different faction in the conflict. In such a situation, the traditional boundary of a nation can't be applied. It then becomes a question of whose legitimacy is being considered — the incumbent government or the rebellion? The move towards a framework of 'support' means the consideration of what aspects of support are significant. It might not be merely about the size of support (how many

people or which groups support the regime) but also about the quality of that support (how intensely these groups support the regime and what they're willing to do to express that support). This can include elements such as the group's resources, their level of organization, and their willingness to mobilize in favor of the government. (O'Kane 1993, 477)

Marquez (2016) indicates that the field of social science could gain from moving away from the vague notion of legitimacy in favor of more detailed explanations of the processes that lead to compliance with authority and submission to norms. Though empirical studies have found correlations between beliefs in legitimacy and institutional stability, these effects are often minor. (Marquez 2016, 23). Marquez argues that legitimacy may not be the primary factor in the stability of systems of domination. Instead, what really matters is the public signaling of commitment to a given authority or system. This public commitment is part of a shared discourse that sets the standard for how one should behave within that system. These public commitments may not necessarily align with individuals' private beliefs, which can be influenced by various factors such as cost-benefit analyses or conditional circumstances. (Marquez 2016, 32) The traditional views that attribute social change to shifts in legitimacy are also challenged. According to Marquez (2016, 31), what's more important are changes in the costs associated with leaving a system of power or moving to an alternative one. In this context, legitimacy becomes a residual factor, a leftover after a consideration of options for exit or collective action against a system. Legitimacy is a residual of "what is left of commitment to a relationship that is not explained by the possibility of exit or collective action." (Marquez 2016, 32).

Legitimacy how?

The problem of the conceptual boundaries

As a classic account of Gallie (1956) provides, all political concepts are "essentially contestable." The concept of legitimacy falls in all of the criteria of an essentially contestable" concept: it bears an intrinsic positive value, it has a complex character, and is relative in its meaning. (Gallie 1956, 171–72). The disagreements on its substance reflect differences in normative, theoretical, and empirical attitudes. In such situations, theorists often tend to "talk past each other." The situation becomes even more complicated. As legitimacy is an intensively practically used concept, it starts to fulfill different framework functions for different movements, political groups, and communities. This often leads to what is called a conceptual collapse (Pitkin [1972] 1993) when the concept starts to act as a mere synonym of the other and loses its explanatory value, though not necessarily a performative value.

In the conceptual work on legitimacy a constant problem of the conceptual boundaries between various other concepts, such as legality, morality, belief, content, and obedience appear. This difficulty is explicitly visible in the search for normative foundations of politics in Weber's classification of legitimate authority (Weber 2000) as well in the Schmitt's *Legality and Legitimacy* (Dyzenhaus 1999; Schmitt 2004). While Weber perceives it as a matter of arbitrary historical development, Schmitt is concerned with a possible collapse of legitimacy to the legality of the "legal positivism" and argues that it "conceals the problems of normative governance." Bourdieu also highlights that

legalism is not a satisfactory framework for explaining the regulation of social behavior. (Bourdieu 1990, 65). As by Wiesner and Harfst (2022, 2) the concept of legitimacy has to be differentiated from such concepts as support, identification, and satisfaction with a democracy. At the same time, other theorists argue that legitimacy is essentially one's identification with the policy and a question of the relation of self-identity to a collective authority (Cromartie 2003; Fossen 2022b; Barker 2001).

Descriptive and normative approaches

The main divide in the theories of legitimacy lies in the distinction between normative and descriptive approaches. In a descriptive account of legitimacy, the focus is put on people's beliefs about the authority of a political regime rather than any normative criteria or ethical justification for that authority. The descriptive approach aims to explain why people accept or obey a particular authority by identifying the underlying beliefs or social norms that contribute to this acceptance. (Peter 2017, 3–5). A normative account of legitimacy focuses on the ethical or moral principles that should underlie or justify the exercise of political power or authority. Unlike a descriptive account, which merely observes why people accept a specific authority, a normative account aims to determine under what conditions that authority is justified. In other words, while descriptive accounts are concerned with what "is," normative accounts are concerned with what "ought to be."(Peter 2017, 3–5)

In his descriptive account, Max Weber ([1922] 2019) sees value of legitimacy as a resource for obedience. For Weber, legitimacy is a delicate political achievement. Purely relying on force is unsustainable for any regime in the long run, therefore, every ruler must work towards achieving legitimacy, which can be understood as simply "as a successful claim" disregarding the content of that claim. (Lassman 2000, 88) Legitimacy as a concept acts in Weber's account as an efficiency concept, a property of power relations resulting in "the likelihood that commands will be complied." (Tribe 2019, 335). For Weber, the pursuit of legitimacy is instrumental. Legitimacy, thus, is a: "de facto ability of a political regime to secure acceptance based on belief" (Langvatn 2016, 133). Weber ([1922] 2019) argues that legitimacy is secured by three different models of their validity:

1. Rational or Legal Rule: Legitimacy is derived from a "belief in the legality" (Weber [1922] 2019, 342) of established laws and the right of those who are appointed to exercise authority according to those laws. People obey because they believe in the formal legality of the system.
2. Traditional Rule: Legitimacy comes from a deeply ingrained "belief in the sanctity" (Weber [1922] 2019, 342) of long-standing traditions and the authority of those who inherit power through these traditions. Obedience is given due to a sense of piety and familiarity with the traditionally appointed ruler.
3. Charismatic Rule: Legitimacy is based on the extraordinary personal qualities of a leader, such as heroism, sanctity, or exemplary character. The leader gains authority through personal trust and belief in their unique qualities within a domain where such belief prevails.

Each type of rule engages different principles for securing obedience: legality in rational rule, tradition in traditional rule, and personal charisma in charismatic rule. (Tribe 2019, 342)

In contrast to Weber, John Rawls' (1995) in his normative account argues that legitimacy is a "composite quality" that includes moral justifiability, legality, adherence to recognized procedures. It provides a normative benchmark for what is appropriately deemed legitimate. Rawls emphasizes that legitimate institutions must be morally justifiable and create a moral obligation for citizens to follow laws and decisions beyond just legal ones. (Langvatn 2016, 135). For Rawls, legitimacy is closely tied to the justifiability of imposing collectively binding laws on citizens. Importantly, Rawls' conception is focused solely on modern liberal democratic nation-states and he aimed to develop a normative framework for addressing issue of legitimacy within this specific political context. (Langvatn 2016, 136) According to another normative account of Joseph Raz (1988) presented in "The Morality of Freedom," legitimacy refers to the quality of an authority being justified or having sufficient reasons to be accepted. An authority is legitimate only if there are sufficient reasons to accept it, meaning that it is not necessary to surrender one's judgment or act against one's judgment to comply with it. (Raz 1988, 38). Raz's pre-emption thesis says that the existence of a legitimate authority changes not just what one should do but the reasons why one should do it. The "pre-emptive reason" replaces other reasons one might have had to act. This ability to replace reasons is what transforms an "ought" into a duty. For an authority to be morally sound, evidence must show that the person under that authority is more likely to act appropriately when guided by that authority, rather than acting on their own understanding of the situation. (Raz 1988, 60)

In his most well-known work, *Legitimation of Power,* Beetham (2013) tries to follow the 'middle way' and bridge the difference between normative and descriptive accounts of legitimacy. The power can be named legitimate, argues Beetham, if it "a) conforms to the established rules, b) the rules can be justified by the reference to beliefs shared by dominant and subordinate, and c) there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation."(Beetham 2013, 16). While Beetham in general adopts a descriptive ("sociological") "Weberian" account, he simultaneously "opens the way for consideration of moral authority." (O'Kane 1993, 472). "A given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs."(Beetham 2013, 11). He argues that the Weberian approach is equal to the mere "report on people's beliefs," while a social scientist must make a judgment if the power satisfies the criterion to be legitimate. "The moral justifiability of power relations" is part of this criteria, (Beetham 2013, 5) while in Weber's conception it is irrelevant if there are valid justifiable moral grounds, and thus the powerful need only to work to maintain the legitimacy through means of ideological work. (Beetham 2013, 43)

Visible political acts of legitimation or delegitimating by the members of power relationship play an important role in his account. Following that, O'Kane (1993) in her reply to Beetham's *Legitimation of Power,* argues that the representation provided by him overemphasizes human agency and neglects the possibilities of government legitimization of itself. In her opinion, government and regimes are not passive structures and can generate legitimating beliefs through the experiences of political

participation and encounters. “The question of whether experience of government generates beliefs or beliefs undermine governments” (O’Kane 1993, 482) is the question of sources of legitimacy.

Realism

In the attempt to establish more grounded standards for legitimacy, modern realism aims to position itself between two contrasting viewpoints. The first approach is political moralism, which bases the criteria for legitimacy on ethical values and principles that exist externally. The second is utilitarianism, which reduces power relations to a utility model, following the line of scientific positivism. In contrast, realism seeks to grant more independence to the political arena. (Sleat 2014, 315) That means “that it must start from and be concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally to act … but rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances.” (Geuss 2008, 9) According to Sleat (2014), one of the strengths of a realist approach to legitimacy is that it provides a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the conditions under which political institutions can be considered legitimate. Realism recognizes that legitimacy is not solely based on moral values or ideals but also on the ability of political institutions to effectively exercise power and maintain order. Additionally, realism is sensitive to the fact that different societies and cultures may have different criteria for legitimacy and avoids imposing a single set of universal criteria. (Sleat 2014, 14) Realism can help to bridge the gap between moralism and utilitarianism by acknowledging the importance of moral considerations in politics while also recognizing the realities of power and the need for effective governance.

Pragmatism

An extensive account of a pragmatic approach to legitimacy was recently attempted by Thomas Fossen. (2022a) In *Political Legitimacy as a Problem of Judgment: What Distinguishes Moralist, Realist, and Pragmatist Approaches?* He proposes to shift ”the focus from the articulation of principles to the activity of judging.” (Fossen, 2022, p. 1). A shift from a static picture to an ontology of process and action is a common methodological move in pragmatism, which roots itself in many ways in Darwinian evolutionism and historicism. (Dewey 1929) The concept of legitimacy thus executes quasi-performative functions. “To call something legitimate is at least normally to imply something about its authoritativeness, bindingness; to call something legitimate is to take a position toward it—a position that may have consequences with respect to one's own or other people's obligations and responsibilities.” (Pitkin [1972] 1993, 280). According to Fossen (2019, 2), the significance of pragmatism for thinking about political legitimacy lies in the way it reorients our thinking towards political practice. Pragmatism broadens the scope of inquiry beyond narrowly focusing on the content and justification of criteria. A good judgment in matters of political legitimacy requires a combination of rational analysis, prudential considerations, and ethical reflection. (Fossen 2022b, 638)

Institutional vs. actor-based

Most of the theoretical literature takes legitimacy as a property of authority within a state. But as we will see on the example of Belarus, opposition and revolutionary groups that are not part of the political system continue to claim legitimacy for themselves as political actors. This tradition is, of course, reinforced by Hobbes-inspired Weber's (2004) understanding of the political as being encapsulated within the state. Greene (Greene 2020) proposes a new framework for understanding political legitimacy based on the idea of "boundary policing," which involves identifying and enforcing the boundaries of legitimate political action. This framework emphasizes the importance of political actors and institutions in defining and maintaining political legitimacy rather than focusing solely on the conditions or characteristics of a legitimate political system. The proposed framework also emphasizes the role of public opinion and discourse in shaping political legitimacy, and it seeks to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the concept.

A study of legitimacy in the Belarusian case would have been challenging in a traditional theoretical way as most of the accounts and theories of legitimacy, as we see, allocate it within a situation of power relations within a given political institution or organization. The Belarusian situation is represented by the asymmetry of power situation: Lukashenko wields effective control and empirically observable position of power. The mainstream democratic forces in exile — have no political power and no position within a political institution. In general, this could have disqualified the applicability of such theories to the situation subjected to the analysis of this study. This is why the methodology of the analysis will employ a mixed-method approach inspired by the practice theory of Bourdieu and focus not on the search for the answer if the regime or Belarusian democratic opposition in exile has legitimacy but on what pictures are being constructed in the field political practice and what consequences it bears.

Methodology: Social politics of legitimacy

As already mentioned in the introductory section, the motivation of this work is based on Annemarie Mol's (1999) argument that reality itself is multiple and performed in a variety of practices. This means that there may be options between various versions of an object or situation and that decisions between alternative performances may have different implications depending on where they are situated and what is at stake. Ontological politics is a term that is used to describe the way in which "the real" is implicated in the "political" and vice versa. The term "ontological" refers to the study of what exists and what does not exist and how things come into being. The way in which reality is understood and enacted shapes political decisions and actions, and political decisions and actions, in turn, shape the way in which reality is understood and enacted. Therefore, ontological politics is concerned with how different versions of reality are created and how these versions shape political decisions and actions. (Mol 1999, 1). The concept is particularly useful in a context of fluid, ever-changing nature of reality's foundational elements. These elements are not static; they are the provisional outcomes of ongoing practices, interactions, and interventions. Consequently, the formation of reality is inherently political, as it establishes modes of existence and ways of connecting both human and nonhuman entities. (Pellizzoni 2015, 75). In that sense, ontological pictures here act as discourses that "are productive of "reality"— what can

be known and acted upon" (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 3). This emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and power.

The idea of how theoretical appearances influence our real actions and how choices of this appearances form political actions is not unique to Mol. In the words of Foucault, "power is 'always already there'" (Foucault 1980, 141). Certain ontological pictures, when embedded in practice, start to act as "the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth." (Foucault 1984, 74). The difference between Foucauldian genealogical constructivism and Mol's account framed in the tradition of what is called "practice theories" is that Foucault asserts the only "one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge." (Foucault [1966] 2012, 183). In contrast to Mol's account where these realities are simultaneously present and performed, Foucault's constructivist stories imply that different 'interpretations of reality' could have existed. These alternatives were possible historically but disappeared before they could fully develop. In this way, the notion of multiple realities is extended to the past. (Mol 1999, 77). Discussing the concept of multiple realities relies on a different metaphorical framework. Instead of using metaphors related to perspective and construction, the focus shifts to intervention and performance. These metaphors, in Mol's opinion, facilitate the understanding that reality is actively created and performed rather than merely observed. (Mol 1999, 77).

But why speak of ontologies and not discourses? To be more precise, what it means to speak about ontological politics on a discursive level is to speak about discourses with the dimension of ontologies. This idea of ontic and ontological distinctions in discursive practices was developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). Laclau argues that by representations of Michel Foucault, all discourses are positive. In a sense, they are self-containing totalities, "regional areas of the social" (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014, 261). Foucault's philosophical goal was to split the social fabric, to deconstruct it into a piece of immediate encounter. But these pieces of reality do not question the dimension of Being, the dimension of the ontological (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014, 261). Though reading Foucault, we see a different perspective: he underscored that the description of the statement group should be conducted "not as the closed, plethoric totality of a meaning, but as an incomplete, fragmented figure;" (Foucault, 1972, p. 125). Laclau's efforts follow the post-foundationalist position of weakening the ontological grounds. (Mendonça 2014, 59) To ask an ontological question is to ask, "how entities have to be so that the objectivity of a particular field is possible." (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 9). The way we think about new topics is influenced by our existing ontological picture of what is real. At the same time, these new topics can also change our general understanding of reality. Some of the ontologies are incompatible and reveal the "limits of all objectivity." (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 13). This incompatibility exposes sets of "sedimented hegemonic meanings that constitute a certain order."(Mendonça 2014, 72)

Discursive practices will be analyzed in the dimension of political practice with the reconstruction of underlying ontology. This is also an essential theoretical goal for the author: to reveal the bridge between theoretical models and. While tactical political discourses bear "truth meanings" at the forefront, the hegemonic ontological discourses remain unquestioned in the background. The expansion of the "field of opinion" into ontological discourses is necessary to reflectively advance political studies on Belarus. While political discursive dimensions will be more fruitful for political practitioners,

ontological mapping will supposedly be more of an interest to the academia writhing on Belarusian topics. This also reflects the author's position in this inquiry, a practical political and a practical philosophical, but with the relation of the same field and site.

Another thinker who is certainly worth mentioning here is Pierre Bourdieu. Basically, what Mol proposed in Bourdieu's terms is to "construct a model of the game" that is more than just a list of rules or a description of usual behaviors but to "reflect on the different modes of existence of the principles of regulation and regularity of different forms of practice." (Bourdieu 1990, 65). The politics of ontology is an idea that all groups are "struggling over representations, to impose selected representations as legitimate social identity." (Swartz 2010, 45). Bourdieu examines power through three interrelated yet separate lenses: "power vested in particular resources (capitals); power concentrated in specific spheres of struggle over forms of capital (fields of power); and power as practical acceptance of existing social hierarchies (symbolic power and violence)." (Swartz 2010, 57)

While influenced by Max Weber's ideas on domination (rule) and legitimacy, Bourdieu disagrees with the possibility of a rational and conscious choice of those who governed. He argues that the notion of 'legitimacy of domination' wrongly assumes that people can consciously discuss and accept power imbalances. Instead, Bourdieu believes that domination persists not through ideology or complex narratives but by the ongoing compliance with existing power inequalities, often without full awareness from those who are dominated. (Joas, Knöbl, and Skinner 2011, 25). The concepts of symbolic power and violence emphasize that dominant groups dictate what are considered legitimate perceptions of the social world. These viewpoints are then deeply ingrained in subordinate groups as assumptions that are accepted without question. (Swartz 2010, 48). The reflective exercise of revealing the ontologies behind the legitimacy becomes a meaningful power-enabling action.

In the context of legitimacy struggles, the legitimacy for Bourdieu is a "misrecognition of arbitrariness," lying in the unknown space of *doxa* — "the aggregate of the 'choices' whose subject is everyone and no one." (Bourdieu [1977] 2010, 168). When people are "unaware of the very question of legitimacy," they are unaware of the struggles behind those questions. This truth can be revealed by the creation of the "field of opinion" — "the locus of the confrontation of the competing discourses." The critique "breaks the immediate fit" between the subjective and the objective. This is what enables us to perceive the seemingly natural as being practiced. (Bourdieu [1977] 2010, 168–69)

Scholars in political science have not derived as much value from Bourdieu's practice theory as researchers in other social science disciplines have. Power is a crucial element in social interactions and is embedded within societies. Sociology encompasses the exploration of these power relations. In Bourdieu's view, this blurs the lines between sociology and political science, making them fundamentally interconnected. (Maggio 2018, 42; Swartz 2010, 45) An application of Bourdieu's methodology means a construction a mixed-method picture of the social situation. A combination of methods for capturing the contrasting space of personal trajectories (habitus), the structural situation of resources (field), and everyday political actions (practice). (Pouliot 2012, 45–46). Essentially, what Mol is trying to achieve is to combine Bourdieu's theory of Practice with the Foucauldian notion of power, which is "co-extensive with the social

body" and "interwoven with other kinds of relations" (Foucault 1980, 142). Bourdieu "takes the "linguistic turn" seriously" and creates "the ontological continuity between words and the things that they are meant to signify." (Pouliot and Mérand 2012, 30)

So, what would be the approach of a socio-political analysis of legitimacy claims and ontological references they bear? Pouliot (2012), in his chapter on Bourdieu's methodology application in international relations studies, outlines three operational steps of such possible application:

1. "Getting access to practices.
2. Reconstructing dispositional logic (habitus).
3. Constructing positional logic." (Pouliot 2012, 46)

For Bourdieu, the picture of the social process is created as an interplay between social objective structures (dispositions) and subjective perceptions (positions). Dispositions correlate but never perfectly match and "operate their own logic." (Pouliot 2012, 47). This subjective position brings a logic of constructionism and a "sociology of the construction of visions of the world which themselves contribute to the construction of this world." But these points of view, in their turn, are "taken from a certain point, that is, from a determinate position within social space." (Bourdieu 1989, 18)

Getting access

How does one get access to Belarusian political practice? Bourdieu warns on following methodological purification and that science needs to be practiced and not be a search for "a logic prior to and external to the history of science in progress." (Bourdieu et al. 1991, 9). The first preferred method, aligned with the original Bourdieu's notion of "research as a craft," would be a method of ethnographic observation and interpretation. Ironically, and not coincidentally, the author himself is in the unique position of being an internal participant and observer of the democratic movement since the very start of the mobilization in May 2020. The author himself was involved in key events around the mass movement of 2020 in Belarus and repeatedly met the key figures of Belarusian oppositional political landscape, as well as relevant stakeholders in the European Commission, Department of State, MFAs of EU member states. This unique position of an 'insider' also allows us to perceive this paper as influenced by an unsystematized inquiry of political ethnography. Immersion in a community, age group, location, or a set of related roles is considered the essential element of this approach. But being an insider also allows for a different level of ethnographical sensibility. (Schatz 2009, 5). The idea of writing this paper comes from numerous internal discussions with the immediate decision makers and three years of observations, which fuel the problems of this paper.

Still, documentation of these political ethnographic observations and interaction detailed accounts of position is out of the scope of this paper. This discussion is narrowly focused on the concept of legitimacy and the claims of legitimacy because, from the point of view of the author, it is the concept that captures most of the complexities arising from the differences in self-perception, identity, social position, and field disposition at best. While most instances of these ethnographic encounters are not properly recorded or documented and occurred before the idea of such research

appeared, I will reference them only on limited occasions and not as the main factual material itself, but rather as a supplemental fact bringing different perspectives on the main parts of the discussion. In Bourdieu's framework of relational ontology, social behaviors or actions arise from the interaction between habitus and field, or in other terms, "between dispositions and positions." (Pouliot and Mérand 2012, 30). The author will adopt this reconstruction in the way of amelioration, where evidence will be analyzed not asking the question of "why" but the question of "how it is possible"? (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 89). Agents develop strategies to maintain their position" not as a result of explicit planning or deterministic factors, but rather as an emergent result from an implicit comprehension of the situational dynamics, shaped by their cultural and social conditioning — "habitus." (Pouliot and Mérand 2012, 29). In this paper, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological method will be used to investigate how political activists think of legitimacy and legitimacy of themselves.

The main research material is accumulated through textual analysis of a specific genre: public interviews and political statements. This specific genre has several advantages: first, textual material is explicit and easily available in public access and could be analyzed diachronically. Second, these claims often reflect the aspiration of the social position in the political game, a position to be or perceived as being held by those who make such public statements, which makes it particularly relevant for a political inquiry, and third discourses will be "treated as practice in Foucault's spirit" (Pouliot 2012, 49), which means the practice will be reconstructed from the textual analysis. Foucault and subsequent theorists building on him understand discourses to be "systems of meaning-production" that temporarily "fix meaning." Discourses "enable us to make sense of the world and to act within it." (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 2)

While it's hard to say if there is one available canonical form of textual discursive analysis, the reference taken in this work is informed by the works of Iver Neuman (2008; 2016), who developed a methodology of a discursive analysis for the application firs in international relations and then in social sciences in general. As outlined by Neuman, there are several stages and several prerequisites for conducting such an analysis. First and foremost, Neuman (2008, 63; 2016, 83) highlights the importance of "cultural competence". Fortunately to the author, as mentioned earlier, there is hope this prerequisite is already naturally fulfilled. The main stages of a discursive analysis follow:

1. Choosing texts and delimiting scope.
2. Create an inventory of representations.
3. Mapping of the discourses.
4. Layering out summative discourses.
5. Establishing positional and dispositional connections.
6. Establishing theoretical and ontological references.

The timeframe of the textual instances is limited to the period of May 2020 to August 2023. The scope is strictly limited to the representations of legitimacy claims and claims "around" legitimacy. The representations are inventoried, mapped, and searched out for "possible asymmetries between them." (Neumann 2008, 70). Then, they will be layered out into summative discourses with degrees of variation. These discourses will be supplemented by a short ethnographical amelioration. Discourses would be analyzed

through the optics of legitimacy theories and their underlying ontological representations for the purpose of excavation of underlying hegemonic ontologies. In the end, the reconstruction of the positions and dispositions will be made as a conclusion step of the analysis in the form of causal and genetic reconstruction.

Analyzing the discourses

Choosing texts & delimiting scope

The general idea of this study is to investigate the issue of legitimacy, not in a theoretical way but as a political sociology about practical stances that political actors take in front of the question of legitimacy. The focus of this study, as mentioned earlier, is the 2020 elections and post-electoral political crisis of 2020-2023, which followed the violent suppression of the mass protests and exposure of fraud during the presidential elections. (Sierakowski 2020) Thus, the period of analysis is limited to August 2020 till the current time. It's also worth mentioning that there could be different views on whether political crises in Belarus persist. Mass protests have ended by the end of 2020, with the most dedicated protesters sustaining activity up until the end of January or the beginning of February 2021[1] (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2021; Deutsche Welle 2021). In May 2021, the largest Belarusian independent media outlet was closed, and its staff was arrested. (*AP News* 2021a) and during the summer of 2021, almost a year after the elections, major raids on the civic society organizations were conducted. (*AP News* 2021b). In general, by the state in August 2023, the Belarusian regime had full, effective control of the country, and there were no visible challengers inside the country. At the same time, Belarusian opposition in exile is still maintaining activities and challenging the political authority in Belarus. From this point of evidence, the boundaries of the field will not be defined by the logic of crisis but by the logic of the appearing activities of political actors. The periodization of the Belarusian political crisis, from the point of view of the magnitude of political action, is presented in Table 1. The textual instances presented further lie in this period and present the context of the events of 2020.

Table 1. Periodization of the Belarusian post-electoral political crisis of 2020

Pre-election period	Mass Protests	Strategical Ambiguity	Closed Political Space
May 2020–9 August 2020	9 August 2020–December 2020	January 2020–May 2020	May 2020–Now
Legal political action, electoral mobilization	Active and visible social movement, mass arrests	National Assembly, Launch of parties, National Dialogue imitation	Ban on activities of CSO, parties, independent media, Arrests as an everyday practice

[1] Also see (Onuch and Sasse 2023, 737)

Several types of genres are mostly presented: social media posts, interviews, op-eds, political analyst articles, and official statements of governments or IGOs. While social media posts and interviews mostly represent the explicit position of political activists, op-eds and political analysis pieces represent the attempts at theoretical abstraction by political sciences or analysts. These two genres of texts should be treated separately, as the speaker's position on the field is different. Academic texts on the issue were not treated as a reliable genre as they often lack practical immersion and impose certain theoretical views from other political sites, driven by the method of analogies, which is certainly not valuable for positional excavation of the empirical evidence. However, a couple of texts (Olędzka and Rust 2022; Kropatcheva 2012) were consulted. The other important genre is the official statements and resolutions. This type of text is also treated differently, as they reflect not actor-specific claims but of an institution. These institutions become actors in the international inter-state arena, but they are not proportionate to the actors in the Belarusian political field. Should we compare the claims of such international actors and political activists, we should have to think in terms of how concrete politicians act inside of those institutions. Such a study would be a fruitful contribution to the constructivist's IR research but lies beyond the scope of this work.

Official Statements and Institutional Positions of Key Western International Political Actors

Positive Statements

European institutions' statements, in general, were focused on the popular and visible representation of political positions. European Parliament and the Council of Europe, in various resolutions, called to respect “the legitimate demands” (European Parliament 2021a, 9; 2020c, 3; 2023, 6) of the “people of Belarus for democracy based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, prosperity, sovereignty, and security must be met” (European Parliament 2022b, 5) and legitimate calls for “free and fair presidential elections.” (Council of the EU 2020b, 2). European Parliament names “peaceful protests” legitimate (almost the same as justified here) (European Parliament 2020a, 3; 2020c, 3) as well as “legitimate civic discontent” (probably in the sense of “rightful” here) (European Parliament 2020a, 5) and “legitimate democratic expression of the will of the Belarusian people.” (European Parliament 2022a, 7)

The role of the opposition individual figures is representative. They are not being considered as legitimate political subjects, but a voice and representatives of the legitimate political subject — the people: “brave women of Belarus, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika Tsapkala, and Maria Kalesnikava, and their supporters in voicing and representing the legitimate demands of the Belarusian people” (European Parliament 2020a, 5). The Coordination Council, in its turn, is recognized “as the legitimate representative of the people” (European Parliament 2020b, 10), which is interesting because it’s not clear what representation procedure is meant to be named legitimate. But the Coordination Council supposedly seems to be legitimate as long as it voices the demands of the people as the abovementioned trio of women does. The importance of demands coming from a broader base is echoed again by Ursula Von Der Leyen, the president of the European Commission: “The Belarusian people have the legitimate right to determine the future path of their country.” (Ursula von der Leyen

[@vonderleyen] 2021). In summary, the logic under these constructions could be that: a) foremost, the claims come from a broad electoral base; thus, these actions (claims, protests, demands) are legitimate in the sense of the subject producing these claims — the people, the nation, the *demos* b) the claims of Belarusian people are in line with the principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights, so the claims are normatively justified, thus legitimate.

Statements coming from US institutions and officials are much scarcer on the usage of the legitimacy category in a positive way. The only time the legitimacy of the opposition is addressed is in reference to the possible dialogue with incumbent authorities: "Recognize the Coordination Council as a legitimate institution to participate in a dialogue on a peaceful transition of power;" (US Congress 2020, 9; US House of Representatives 2021, 7). This is a much weaker claim, as it doesn't even raise the representation function of the Coordination Council, but only a role in the "dialogue." The underlying meaning here is that the Coordination Council is a preferable and genuine actor from the US perspective to be dealt with in the process of possible negotiations with Belarusian authorities. This legitimacy claim probably comes from the idea that the Coordination Council is a representative body of the opposition and civil society. Thus, the normative sense is different — it is not a justification of legitimacy through normative values or established procedures but more in line with a realistic picture of whether the Coordination Council is believed to be a legitimate organization by the people of Belarus; thus, it should be the preferred actor.

Negative Statements

The negation of legitimacy has much more materiality in the official discourse, especially towards Lukashenko in person and, in some cases, towards the Belarusian authorities. European Council (2020a) stated that based on that, "Belarus Presidential elections were neither free nor fair." The EU doesn't recognize the falsified result: "The new mandate claimed by Aleksandr Lukashenko lacks any democratic legitimacy."(Council of the EU 2020b) It's worth noting the precision of the used terminology in that case: lack of "democratic legitimacy" doesn't mean a lack of legitimacy in general. The additional "democratic" dimension here points to the fact that Lukashenko might have a non-democratic legitimacy, but it can't be acknowledged as acceptable. This granular distinction, though, is instanced only once in the statement of the Council of EU during the first months of the protests. The ongoing European Parliament resolutions represent a more general character of legitimacy statements. Lukashenko is named an "illegitimate leader of the country;" (European Parliament 2021a, 8) together with "illegitimate Belarusian authorities." (European Parliament 2020b, 14; 2022a, 7). The illegitimacy of authorities is then connected with the requirement of a democratic election procedure: the possibility of the positive dynamics in EU-Belarus relations is linked with the fact of the possible emergence of a "new legitimate, democratically elected authorities in Belarus" (European Parliament 2020a, 3). Lukashenko is not recognized "as legitimate president of the country," and his "inauguration ceremony" is deemed illegitimate (European Parliament 2020b, 9).

In the later resolutions by the EP, collapsed definitions such as "illegitimate Lukashenka regime" (European Parliament 2023, 4) and harder evaluating expressions such as "illegitimate dictator of Belarus" (European Parliament 2022a, 7) appear. Another

interesting statement that could be attributed more to a rhetorical form of expression: “considers the current regime in Belarus as illegitimate, illegal and criminal” (European Parliament 2021b, 5). There is a distinction between illegal and legitimate, though “criminal” seems to be redundant here. In the statements that concern the repressions of the activists, another form of speech is introduced: “illegitimate detention” (European Parliament 2023, 6; 2022b, 5)which supposedly means that no proper juridical procedures were conducted prior to detention and the prisoners were deprived of free and independent justice.

The US Congress in the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 the election themselves as “lllegitimate” (US Congress 2020, 4) which undermines the “legitimacy of executive and legislative authority” in the country. (US Congress 2020, 2), refusing to “recognize Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the legitimately elected leader of Belarus” (US Congress 2020, 9). In latter resolutions, the “Government of Belarus” is also deemed to be “illegitimate” (US House of Representatives 2021, 5), though Lukashenko is called a President, however illegitimate (US House of Representatives 2021, 6).

All in all, in 13 official statements, including 1 Council of EU conclusion, 9 European Parliament Resolutions, 1 Congress Act, 1 House resolution, and 1 Senate resolution, the word ‘legitimacy” is used 42 times, 18 times in connection with the “regime,” “authorities” and Lukashenko and 13 times in relation to the “people of Belarus” and their actions. Only 3 times the opposition organizations were called legitimate in the context of negotiations and peaceful transition of power. There are also eight instances of other usage not towards political subjects but events or processes: detention, elections, and inaugurations are called illegitimate (see Table 2).

Table 2. The appearance of the word “legitimacy” in the statements of the EU and US

Resolution Name	Int. Political Actor	Topical Reference				
		Lukashenko and Regime	Opposition	"People of Belarus"	Other	Total
11660/20 Council Conclusions on Belarus	EU	1	0	1	0	2
P9_TA(2020)0231 Situation in Belarus	EU	0	0	4	0	4
P9_TA(2020)0280 Recommendation to the Council, the Commission, and the VPC/HR on relations with Belarus	EU	2	1	1	3	7
P9_TA(2020)0331 The continuous violations of human rights in Belarus, in particular, the murder of Raman Bandarenka	EU	0	0	2	0	2
Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020	US	4	1	0	0	5
P9_TA(2021)0293 Systematic repression in Belarus and its consequences for European security following abductions from an EU civilian plane intercepted by Belarusian authorities	EU	2	0	1	0	3
P9_TA(2021)0420 The situation in Belarus after one year of protests and their violent repression	EU	1	0	1	0	2
H. RES. 124 Supporting the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations and condemning the election rigging and	US	2	1	0	0	3

subsequent violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters by the illegitimate Lukashenka regime.						
P9_TA(2022)0215 Prosecution of opposition and detention of trade union leaders in Belarus	EU	3	0	1	1	5
P9_TA(2022)0418 The continuing repression of the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus	EU	0	0	1	1	2
Expressing the sense of the Senate on the political situation in Belarus.	US	1	0	0	2	3
P9_TA(2023)0075 Further repression against the people of Belarus, in particular, the cases of Andrzej Poczobut and Ales Bialiatski	EU	2	0	1	1	4
P9_TA(2023)0199 Belarus: inhumane treatment and hospitalization of prominent opposition leader Viktar Babaryka	EU	0	0	0	0	0
Total mentions		**18**	**3**	**13**	**8**	**42**

Statements of key Belarusian political activists and actors

Positive Statements

The logic of a symmetrical competition for legitimacy with the Belarusian regime was adopted as soon as November 2020. The "recognition of the illegitimacy of Aliaksandr Lukashenka by other states – fulfilled" and recognition of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Coordination Council … as legitimate representatives of the people of Belarus – fulfilled" are the first two listed action items in the roadmap. ("Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Plan" 2020). Though, as we have seen, there are no official statements of the EU or US that recognize Tsikhanovskaya or the Coordination Council as a legitimate representative, the plan describes this as being already fulfilled. It's also worth noting that the illegitimacy of Lukashenka is not attributed to the fact of election fraud and visible mass political manifestations but to the result of advocacy activities of the opposition. Veronica Tsepkalo, one of the three women who were beheading the campaign rally together with now-imprisoned Kalesnikava and Tsikhanovskaya, who left Belarus right after the elections, called for the "recognition of Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya as the legitimate president-elect of Belarus by the EU bloc and the United States" (Aksamitowska 2020) in September 2020.

In 2021, Pavel Latushka, the second most media-present figure of the Belarusian opposition in exile, reiterated that Tsikhanovskaya has "to become a president." He proposed that Tsikhanovskaya is "to be inaugurated and make resolutions as the legitimate leader of Belarus." (*Belsat* 2021). The opposition in exile is primarily represented in public by Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya and Pavel Latushka and the Coordination Council — the assembly of civic society organizations and activists (Coordination Council 2023). The so-called "United Transitional Cabinet," which was created after two years of in-exile activities of the Belarussian opposition, is thought to be the main executive body of the mainstream movement abroad. (Novoborsky 2022). The "United Transitional Cabinet" was announced to counter rising criticism of various activists towards Tsikhanovskaya, who was leading the international advocacy efforts after 2020, and the general crisis of the ideas in the opposition movement, which came with the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (Boguslavskaya 2022). The Cabinet is more a format of cooperation for several most publicly known organizations

rather than a separate organization itself. Nevertheless, the cabinet members often present it as an alternative to the Belarusian government: the executive branch. (*euroradio.fm* 2023). As was commented after this event by Franak Viachorka — the key figure behind the office of Tikhanovskaya in Vilnius and her main advisor, "the configuration ought to empower Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya as a national leader, whose legitimacy is not in question" (Orushkevich 2022). During the recent one-day crisis in Russia, when the mercenary group "Wagner" announced its "March of Justice" to Moscow, the Cabinet stated that "the Cabinet of Ministers, set up by President Sviatlana Tsykhanouskaya, was "the only legitimate authority in Belarus" which "bears responsibility for the fate of Belarus and the Belarusian people. (United Transitional Cabinet 2023). Pavel Latushka, in his turn, emphasized that the Cabinet "is the only legitimate power." (Latushka 2023). In her address at the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in March 2023, Tsikhanovskaya claimed that "the Belarusian democratic forces … have the legitimacy and think about national interests." ("US Support of Democracy and Human Rights," 2023, p. 2).

Franak Viachorka says: "In 2020, no elections actually took place; Tikhanovskaya was not taken the oath to office. And her legitimacy will end with the fulfillment of her mission. Her mission," Tsikhanovskaya's adviser says, "is to hold new elections. We don't create any theories when the legitimacy of Tsikhanovskaya ends". (Euroradio 2022b). "Legitimacy is not something which could be redistributed. Legitimacy is earned. Not through redistribution, but by the expression of the will of people," says Valeri Kovalevsky, one of the members of Tsikhanovskaya team, and her international relations manager (*Euroradio* 2023a). From his point of view, Tsikhanovskaya clearly has earned it as even "Ukraine understands Tsikhanovskaya's legitimacy" (*REFORM.by* 2023). The legitimacy of Tsikhanovskaya can't be shared. These legitimacy claims go hand in hand with a pursuit for the recognition of the opposition structures created by Tsikhanovskaya as a "government in exile." (Deutsche Welle 2023). Alina Koushik, one of the members of the Cabinet, said that they consider themselves a "body of executive power." (*Zerkalo* 2023).

Negative Statements

In line with the first Western reactions of 2020, instanced in the resolutions of the European Parliament and the US Congress, as soon as Tsikhanovskaya left Belarus after the elections, she appealed to the international community "not to recognize Lukashenko's legitimacy" as he was "illegitimate in the eyes of the Belarusian people. (*Interfax.ru* 2020) Lukashenko is not "a legitimate representative of Belarusian people" (@tsikhanouskaya 2021), "there is no legitimate authority in Belarus" (Latushka 2022a), "Lukashenka is not a legitimate president" (Latushka 2022b), echoes Pavel Latushka.

The statements about the regime or Lukashenka illegitimacy play a central role in the narratives of Belarusian opposition in exile. This is a sensitive issue for the opposition, as Franak Viachorka says that "even mentions of Lukashenka" in the media "play into his hands" as he thinks they function as a "source of his [Lukashenka] legitimacy" (*Hromadske* 2021). The opposition figures are concentrated on avoiding "any sign of legitimization of Lukashenko" because, in the opinion of Tsikhanovskaya, "he is using every small event that could legitimize him." "Don't talk to him," she asks Western

supporters. “Delegitimization is also very good leverage for putting pressure on the regime.” (Graham and Tsikhanouskaya 2021). At the same time, she argues that “He [Lukashenko] will never gain legitimacy” (King 2021). However, if the previous statement is true, there is a perceived possibility of regaining legitimacy, or otherwise, the opposition shouldn’t be concerned. Tsikhanovskaya's team consistently revisits the topic of illegitimacy of the Belarusian regime and Lukashenko, which they use interchangeably. In her Twitter, she asked the Western media not to call Lukashenko “a President” as it “could lend the regime false legitimacy” (@Tsihanouskaya 2023c). Stated that Lukashenka “has no legitimacy” (@Tsihanouskaya 2023b) and the international community “should stop pretending that Lukashenka has any legitimacy” (@Tsihanouskaya 2023a).

Through these statements, Belarusian opposing figures in exile attempt to challenge Lukashenka's legal actions as well, making a causal inference that if Lukashenka is considered illegitimate, he can’t issue any decrees or sign any state-level agreements, as he has lost legitimacy for “approving any international legal documents” (Latushka 2021). While this usage of legitimacy is clearly a collapsed one with no clear categorical boundaries, it shows how much importance is put on the notion that Lukashenka “has lost his legitimacy” by the opposition on exile.

Affiliated Narratives

One of the key roles in the narrative formation of the Belarusian oppositional media field belongs to political analysts and influencers who comment on political affairs. In 2021, the Analytical Center of Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya’s Office serves as an affiliated network of experts who promote a point of view on the actual topics related to Belarus. (Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya 2021) Klaskousky (2023), a Belarusian political analyst, says that “many people in the democratic community began to call her [Tsikhanovskaya] the legitimate leader of the Belarusian people.” However, Western states are not in a rush to mirror that. iSANS, a Belarusian think-tank, members of which have been working closely with Tsikhanovskaya since September 2020, started to discuss the matter of legitimacy quite early after the elections. They argue that “although the Coordination Council is not an institution of power,” it acquires legitimacy through gaining public trust, in contrast to the government bodies. Svetlana Tikhanovska, in their opinion, had “the highest level of legitimacy among all Belarusian politicians.” (Eliseev 2020) Elena Korosteleva, an academic researcher with Belarusian roots, also working in collaboration with the analytical center of Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya, says that “Svetlana Tikhanovskaya … enjoys open doors and full legitimacy with all major western powers” (Korosteleva and Petrova 2023, 881). "No one has such legitimacy as Svetlana Tikhanouskaya. This legitimacy is both internal -— the Belarusian opposition-oriented society recognizes her as its leader — and international. Leaders of almost all European countries and the US President Joe Biden have met with Tikhanouskaya," says political analyst Valery Karbalevich. (Dako 2022). Tsikhanovskaya is a world-recognized legitimate representative of democratic Belarus. (Tsihankou 2022)

The instances of attribution of legitimacy to a specific oppositional organization or leader are not as visible in the Western media field as in Belarusian. Only a couple of publications name “the Cabinet” a “legitimate Belarusian power.” (Kowal 2023) and call

for a campaign for “recognizing Tikhanovskaya as the legitimate representative of Belarus” (Otroshchenkov 2022) as in a recent article of the le Republica “*la presidente legittimamente eletta*” — legitimately elected president (author’s translation).

There are also different shades of legitimacy attribution, which supposedly reflect the speaker's understanding of the complexity of the situation. Tsikhanovskaya sometimes claimed to have an "informal legitimacy” (Knyrovich 2022), not “complete presidential legitimacy,” but that of utmost importance “greater than Lukashenko” or any other politician. (Mazejka 2022; Sklyarov 2022). The statement of impossibility of the regime to regain legitimacy is mirrored by analogous statements about the impossibility of Tsikhanovskaya losing hers. “She is herself an institution. Her legitimacy hasn’t shaken. She will be the leader of democratic forces as long as history permits … If we destroy her, we will not have anyone better, says former presidential candidate of 2006 Aliaksandr Milinkevich. (Euroradio 2022a). We need to preserve the “legitimacy of the leader — of Tsikhanovskaya” and the “subjectivity of Belarus as an independent” state. “She has what no one has: she has won the elections and is a legitimate person, [her legitimacy] will be preserved if the upcoming elections will be undemocratic.” (Euroradio 2023b). “The speeches about the "redistribution of legitimacy" of Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, the redistribution of her duties and the like sound strange. Understanding the nature of this legitimacy, we can only mean to share her life path” argues Belarusian political journalist Siarhei Dubavets (2022) “her legitimacy is in fact the story of her life” (Dubavets 2022). “She will be the legitimate president of New Belarus” until new democratic elections are held, says Vitali Shkliarov, a political campaign manager who was helping the office of Tikhanovskaya with lobbying activities in Ukraine. (Shashkova 2022). Karbalevich reiterates that Tsikhanovskaya's “domestic and international legitimacy has not so far been questioned” and stresses that, again, those who operate without alignment with her marginalize themselves. (*RFI* 2022)

However, there is a present alternative discourse that does not reflect the position of the key public figures in the mainstream Belarusian opposition affiliated with Tsikhanovskaya. Though there is no visible disagreement on positions concerning the illegitimacy of Lukashenko and the regime, some analysts, such as Petr Kuznetsov, argue that the 2020 elections can’t be the source of legitimacy in terms of “delegation of consent” for any concrete politician as the elections where not free and fair. Suppose the source of legitimacy is the very fact of the leadership, “legitimacy then has to be divided between three of women” who lead the campaign of 2020. Kuznetsov describes the situation as a “vacuum” of legitimacy and argues that in such a situation, the ability of coercive authority becomes even more relevant. (*The Village Belarus* 2022) Lesia Rudnik, a Ph.D. candidate from Belarus at the University of Karlstad and a political analyst, acknowledges that the international legitimacy of Tsikhanovskaya soon has to be reaffirmed (Euroradio 2022c). Klaskousky (2023) distinguishes between internal and external (international) legitimacy and connects the issue with the possible “weakening of hopes” in the absence of an actual power transition in Belarus.

The discursive sum

After the analysis of statements by the key Western international actors, the discourse around the legitimacy could be summarized as follows:

"The West doesn't recognize the election results, and thus Lukashenko is not recognized as a legitimate president. People of Belarus's demands for new, fair, democratic elections and for the restoration of human rights and the rule of law in the country are legitimate. People discontent and political expression is a legitimate form of political action."

The dominant discourse in the Belarusian oppositional field could be summarized as follows:

"Lukashenka will never regain his legitimacy. But he will use any opportunity to legitimize himself. Tikhanovskaya is the most legitimate politician because of her unique life story and political path, and nothing can undermine this. You cannot redistribute legitimacy, and no other politician in Belarus has bigger legitimacy. United Transitional Cabinet is a legitimate power of Belarus and, together with Tsikhanovskaya, should be recognized as a legitimate representative of the Belarusian people."

Interposition 1: An ethnographic observation

As Bourdieu ([1999] 2009) aptly noted, one succeeds as a self-legitimator when he is not "a cynical calculator who consciously deceives the people, but someone who in all good faith takes himself to is something that he is not." (Bourdieu, Thompson, and Raymond [1999] 2009, 113). One of the most terrific examples of such faithful self-legitimization was observed by me at one of the meetings I had in Summer of 2022 with the participation of the Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya team. The discussion revolved around general matters and plans. At the end of the meeting, one of the Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya's team members, suddenly said: "Let's stand up to say goodbye to our President." I did realize that the claims of "factual presidency" also serve as an internal ideological and motivational framework for the team, but it caught me by surprise that it could be so deeply propagated into everyday practices. This symptomatic affection to governmental-like forms of interaction is a bright reminder that the "self-identifying as politicians" could be in greater need of reassurance of their relevance than those who observe them playing a particular social position. In the end, as Nietzsche (Nietzsche 2007, 10) said, "The concept of political superiority always resolves itself into the concept of psychological superiority." I also remember several instances of talking with activists, who were extremely proud of several occasions during Svetlana's visits to the Czech Republic and US Senate when some of the officials were referring to her as "madam president." It seems that for those activists, this was an event of the utmost importance. True, in many of the talks meeting people in the diaspora, statements such as "our president" appear often. The legitimacy issue bears a similar weight. The easiest way to irritate an average Belarusian activist in exile is to shed doubt on the legitimacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya or the United Transitional Cabinet.

Conclusion: Choices of Realities, Rebels or Citizens?

As we have seen, the narrative of Belarusian democratic opposition is pierced and driven by the dichotomy of legitimacy and illegitimacy, as both "confronting parties do not recognize the legitimacy of the opponent." (Shchyttsova 2021) By sustaining this symmetrical "legitimacy antagonism," Belarusian opposition leaders in exile create political space for themselves, though often purely verbal. This specific difference serves in the Belarusian discursive space as a distinction between the "friend and the enemy." (Schmitt 2007, 26) It corresponds to the "good and evil" in the moral sphere and is readily collapsed to the questions of morality by those who don't have direct access to the political practice. This leads to the mediatization of the political field as activists lacking "thick subjectivity" (Fossen 2022b, 625) and starts to act as the audience of the media, which has no chance to "encounter" this claimed legitimate authority and have a "stake in it" (Fossen 2022a, 29). Such audiences apparently don't have a problem "bringing the gap" between the ideal and non-ideal circumstances and readily adopt the language of legitimacy as a performative act of moral judgment. (Fossen 2013, 444)

The problem with such a Schmidtian political self-conceptualization is that "by-design" requires a dichotomic symmetry. The Belarusian political crisis is, in turn, characterized by the asymmetry of power and resources: the regime has the political power, and the opposition does not. Verbal legitimacy claims exist in the verbal space as instances of the "political mythology," while the politico-social field exists as "bodily postures and stances" as well. (Bourdieu [1977] 2010, 15). Belarussian opposition is unable to provide a symmetrical response to the regime neither in terms of manpower, financial resources, terror, violence, and even media coverage. This weakness is instrumentalized by the regime, which doesn't adopt the framework of pursuit for legitimacy and rejects the imposed "rules of the game." Lukashenko denies the necessity of external legitimation and calls legitimacy just "a matter of taste." (*Belta* 2021) The regime works in a different conceptual matrix, avoiding the problematization of its authority on an ontological level. The more opposition in exile tries to chase legitimacy, the more they expose this asymmetry, finding themselves in the "cities of words."

Another practical problem arises from the fact that the Western claims of legitimacy do have a clear ontological basis. First, they are normative by their substance, as they are based on the standards of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and second, they are focused on empirical evidence of popular action that demonstrates the withdrawal of consent (Beetham 2013, 19) or broad public support. While delegitimization of the regime has occurred because of unprecedented protest activities, the legitimation of the Belarusian oppositional actors faces a problem with the absence of the possibility to organize "the exercise of individual freedoms and participation in political decision-making." (Duyvesteyn 2017, 679). This leads to what is called a start-up problem: "a simple ethical conundrum: How to send the signal of legitimacy when, by definition, the organization is not yet legitimate? A social judgment of legitimacy has not been made regarding the organization, yet the organization must appear as if it has." (Rutherford, Buller, and Stebbins 2009, 950) This practical challenge forced mainstream political figures to switch from normative theorizing about legitimacy to a realist Weberian picture of legitimacy as "beliefs." (O'Kane 1993, 472) Adoption of this theoretical picture equates legitimation with the cultivation of suitable beliefs in society. (Weber [1922] 1978, 213) Eventually, a charismatic model of authority (Weber 2004,

34; [1922] 2019, 374) legitimation was established: the legitimacy of the Belarusian opposition in exile became inherently linked with the life story of Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya and her exceptionalism.

The consequence of this ontological change is very straightforward: the democratic opposition becomes a non-democratic opposition and adopts an internal authoritarian, charismatic model. This situation is non-unique. As Barker (2001, 93) notes, "the self-legitimation of rebels is likely to be in all manner of ways a mirror image of the legitimation of those whom the rebels seek to overthrow." Barker (2001) argues that rebellion is not a straightforward act of revolution but a nuanced game of rival legitimations, involving both a challenge to and a mirroring of existing power structures. The claims made by rebels to legitimize themselves often reflect the dominant values or beliefs of their society. For example, in democratic societies, rebels might appeal to the principle of popular sovereignty. However, this is less a genuine commitment to democratic values and more a tool to assert the authority and legitimacy of a new elite group.

If we ask the question "How is it possible?" and try to reconstruct the disposition behind the previous positional picture, it appears as follows: In the absence of "internal" democratic legitimation from the constituency, the easiest way for leaders in exile is to resort to "external" legitimation. Opposition figures become overdependent on this mechanism and focus their attention on the preservation of the status quo. As broad public support towards specific political figures declines, the only characteristic that couldn't be effectively countered by the regime "legitimacy" starts to play in. As long as the regime is considered illegitimate in the West, opposition leaders in exile can pursue the position of a legitimate political actor presupposed by the "field." This stretch between the genesis of disposition and given position constitutes the drama behind the leaders — they have to "pretend" to be the rebels. (Barker 2001, 97) This concludes the "habitus" of a Belarusian opposition leader in exile.

Interposition 2: Action items for the Belarusian ontological politics

What does an ontological turn in Belarusian opposition in exile would mean?

Rejection of the dualist thinking. The rejection of non-legitimate/legitimate dichotomy and the acknowledgment of the situational asymmetry is a fruitful act that would facilitate practical access to new organizational and political strategies hidden by the current field dispositions.

Adoption of the framework of public support. As argued by O'Kane (1993) a better strategy in the situation of lack of institutional context is to pursue not legitimacy but public support. Public support is an asset that can ensure a sustainable democratic transition, while revolutionary "rebel" thinking is concentrated on the capacities of mobilization.

Abandonment of political self-identification. The rejection of a political self-identity would ease actors' need to construct "friend-enemy" spaces and focus efforts on tactics of maneuvers. The idea of providing people with direct help will come to the foreground, facilitating positive image-building through constructive efforts, in contrast

to self-representation through the negation of the regime. The rejection of a political self-identity doesn't mean it rejects activism. What it destroys — is a distance between those who call themselves "politicians" and those who do not.

Create citizens, not rebels. The cultivation of the Belarusians as citizens, as agents with interests and a sense of solidarity, should be the goal of any activist. A turn from elitist self-legitimating practices to constructing a common identity of citizenship (Barker 2001, 125) will mean a genuine turn towards democracy.

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