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Article

# The "Accidental Candidate" Versus Europe's Longest Dictator: Belarus's Unfinished Revolution for Women

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**Abstract**
Women in Central and Eastern Europe have made gains as presidents and prime ministers. A notable exception to this is Belarus, where President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the longest dictator in Europe, has tightly clung to power since 1994. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya surprised many when she threw her hat in the ring for the 2020 presidential election. This article asks how Tsikhanouskaya arose as the 2020 opposition candidate and how gender shaped the campaign. Gender played a central role in her being able to stand in the election. Her husband had been a leading presidential candidate but was imprisoned by the regime. Like women who rose to executive leadership positions, Tsikhanouskaya ran in her husband's place. Lukashenka permitted her candidacy because he did not see her as a political threat. Lukashenka regularly diminished her candidacy using sexist rhetoric. Tsikhanouskaya's own campaign highlighted more traditionally feminine traits such as being a nurturer, unifier, and non-power seeking, and only being in politics by chance. Referring to herself as an "accidental candidate," she made it clear that she sought to unify the Belarussian people against the dictatorship and would step aside after this was accomplished. As de facto opposition leader, she continues to highlight these more feminine qualities and craft a less threatening image.

**Keywords**
Belarus; Central and Eastern Europe; dictatorships; democracy; gender studies; revolution; women in politics

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## 1. Introduction

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Europe's longest-serving dictator, has clung to power since 1994. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya surprised many when she ran in the 2020 presidential election. The "accidental candidate" quickly amassed supporters in opposition to the dictatorial regime. Though Lukashenka claimed a landslide victory, widespread reports of election irregularities surfaced triggering massive protests and government crackdowns (Neuman, 2020). Facing increasing threats of detention, Tsikhanouskaya took exile in Lithuania, unofficially serving as Belarus's leading opposition figure. This article asks how gender shaped both Tsikhanouskaya's 2020 candidacy and the presidential campaign.

Gender played a central role in Tsikhanouskaya's standing for election and factored noticeably in the campaign. Tsikhanouskaya's husband, a leading presidential candidate, was barred from running and imprisoned by the regime. Like several other women worldwide, Tsikhanouskaya rose to prominence through marital ties. Lukashenka only permitted her candidacy since he did not see her as a political threat because she is a woman and repeatedly diminished her candidacy with sexist rhetoric. Tsikhanouskaya's campaign highlighted more traditionally feminine traits such as being a surrogate,

unifier, and apolitical. Referring to herself as an "accidental candidate" she sought to unify the Belarussian people against the dictatorship but would step aside immediately if this was accomplished. While we recognize the importance of a woman coming close to cracking the Belarussian glass ceiling, Tsikhanouskaya's rise affirms the more limited pathways open to women where authoritarian institutions and structures prevail. Her stressing of more traditionally feminine traits suggests continued constraints on women's political ascension.

We first provide a short overview of Belarus and the autocratic government under Lukashenka. We then discuss women's political status. Moving to an analysis of Tsikhanouskaya, we focus on her rise as a candidate and scrutinize how gender facilitated her candidacy and influenced both campaigns. Our findings are based primarily on media analysis of the election and the ensuing protest movement. This case study sheds much-needed light on women as opposition leaders. The existence of an opposition leader does not imply there is democracy. Indeed, electoral autocracies are the most common types of authoritarian regimes and yet Tskihanouskaya leads the anti-system opposition party seeking democratic regime change in Belarus from abroad (Lührmann et al., 2018; Schedler, 2013). Her rise breaks the traditional understanding of how opposition leaders arise in autocracies, especially in presidential systems (Helms, 2021, 2022). This case study of Belarus allows us to better examine the link between women's rise to prominence through activism and family connections, but also the limits on women's political executive ascensions in autocratic systems.

## 2. Background of Belarus and the Rise of *Batka*

No current map of Europe excludes Belarus. Lukashenka's official narrative, however, glorifies Belarussian history as distinct from its European neighbors. Accordingly, *Batka*, or the father of the new nation, cultivates a "paternal" image and champions the role that an independent and sovereign Belarus operates in geopolitics by straddling East and West (Heintz, 2021). Belarus is seen as a border state to Europe, opposing a "return to Europe" as so many Eastern European countries sought after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Baltics, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary (pre-Orbán) all have vocal popular narratives promoting Europeanness and regard Cold War-era communist governments as Kremlin imperialism or an interregnum that stymied their development (Graney, 2019). The ensuing determination towards reconnecting westward manifests in seeking European Union membership as well as admittance to NATO.

### *2.1. The Dictator*

Lukashenka came from rather mundane origins of serving in the army for five years, then working as an instructor in political affairs and secretary in the communist youth organization in the 1970s. He moved up in the communist party as a state and collective farm manager in the 1980s (Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 2022). Elected to the parliament of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990, he was the only deputy who opposed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. In the first presidential election in the post-Soviet state, now Belarus, in 1994, Lukashenka beat the incumbent communist Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebic, with 80% of the votes in the second round. He remains in power under his sixth consecutive presidency (Åslund, 2020).

### *2.2. Democratic Erosion*

Despite relatively competitive elections in the early 1990s and amid optimism across all of Central Eastern Europe (CEE) over the course of the decade, Belarus became a repressive regime based around the cult of Lukashenka (Way, 2005). Opposition to Lukashenka became synonymous with unpatriotic behavior. Referenda in the mid-1990s increased presidential powers dramatically. The president could dismiss parliament, and the unicameral Supreme Council was disbanded and replaced with a bicameral National Assembly—of which the president selects one-third of the members of the upper house. Lukashenka extended his term another two years rather than hold the 1999 election (US Department of State, 2001). This is not uncommon in unfolding autocracies. The character of the people elected in nascent democracies directly impacts the viability to sustain democracy. If the rules of the game are changed, term limits eliminated, and political opposition repressed, then elections become uncompetitive and lack integrity. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue, the greatest threat to democracies comes from within.

By the early 2000s, substantial government manipulation of elections was evident, including incumbent monopolization of the media, weak opposition, and de facto power of the executive over parliament (US Department of State, 2001). Executive authority was virtually unlimited, corruption proved rampant, and the judiciary was no longer independent. The authoritarian state under Lukashenka's leadership became entrenched. In another referendum in 2004, presidential term limits were abolished, clearing the way for Lukashenka's monopolization of power (Myers, 2004).

### *2.3. Democracy and Autocracy*

Democracy "presumes fully contested elections with full suffrage, and the absence of massive fraud, combined with effective guarantees of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association" (Collier & Levitsky, 1997, p. 434). Autocracy suggests that "citizens do not have the right to form organizations and only

elites have access to the legal system and therefore political leaders and powerful figures are not constrained by the rule of law; citizens' economic well-being is tied to their political connections" (Krasner, 2016, p. iii).

Across multiple indices measuring democracy, Belarus ranks among the bottom. The V-Dem Institute (2022) ranks Belarus 148th out of 179 countries. Belarus earned the abysmal ranking of 181 out of 195 countries in Freedom House (2022), which considered it a consolidated authoritarian regime. *Polity* categorizes Belarus as an autocracy and *The Economist*'s Democracy Index scores Belarus 18th worst in the world (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). The Corruption Perceptions Index scores Belarus 41 out of 100 (Transparency International, 2021). Crackdowns on independent journalism positions Belarus as the worst in Europe (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). The autocratization of Belarus and civil society repression substantially limit democratic change. Despite allowing opposition candidates and parties in national elections, Belarus qualifies as an electoral autocracy; elections are neither free nor fair (Lührmann et al., 2018). Gender equality could thus also lag far behind. However, the situation is more complicated. The next section reflects the nuances associated with democracy and women's status.

## 3. Women's Status in Central Eastern Europe

Between 1945 and 1990, countries in CEE appeared supportive of women's participation. Constitutions often guaranteed equality between women and men, women's labor force participation was equal to men's, and child-care centers were state provided to alleviate burdens to women's workforce integration. Many parliaments featured gender quotas (Jaquette & Wolchik, 1998). Men, however, were still placed at the helm (La Font, 2001). As the fight for democracy transpired (1980–1990), women pushed for change (Penn, 2005). Women's engagement in independence movements in communist states proved limited (Waylen, 1994). Women's presence in political institutions in the aftermath of democratization also declined (Chiva, 2005, 2018; La Font, 2001 Wike et al., 2019). When parliaments became sites of real power, women were marginalized (Matland & Montgomery, 2003; Rincker, 2017).

The Global Gender Gap Index measures educational attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. Based on a scale from 0 to 1 (with 1 indicating *gender parity*), Belarus's overall women's political empowerment score is 0.758 and is ranked 33rd among 156 countries. Economic participation and opportunity is 0.840; educational attainment is 0.999 (primary and secondary education is compulsory); health and survival is 0.977.

Women's political empowerment score is low, only 0.216. Women comprise only 3.6% of ministers and they have failed to attain the highest offices (World Economic Forum, 2021). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, women comprised only 3.8% of the legislature in 1990. A decade later, their share was only 4.5%. Women's levels jumped in 2004 when 29% of parliamentarians were women. This was followed in 2008 with 32% and then 26% and 27% in 2012 and 2016 respectively. Belarus is currently ranked 28th among 186 countries for women in the lower house, with 40% of legislators being women. Record highs were achieved without gender quotas (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). The average percentage of women legislators is 30% throughout Europe so Belarus's 25% for women in the upper house brings their numbers more to the norm. Still, without deeper interrogation, one would conclude that women's political standing was high, but this is more fantasy than reality.

Authoritarian rulers strategically extend women's rights and representation to enhance perceptions of regime legitimacy rather than to spur true democratic change (Tripp, 2019). Autocratic gender washing distracts observers from other governmental abuses to curry favor with the international community. Roughly two-thirds of the parliamentary quotas for women implemented in the mid-1990s were in authoritarian states (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Women were loyalists; their allegiance was a precondition to their ascension while men enjoyed varied inroads and autonomy. Rather than empowering women, women legislators serve in more dependent roles *because* they are women; we see this very scenario playing out in Lukashenka's Belarus.

In 2004, Lukashenka was attempting to fill more seats with loyalists in the parliamentary elections. Parliament was not simply "rubber stamping" his agenda. Open disagreements surfaced and some members resorted to hunger strikes (Koulinka, 2006). Some of the few women parliamentarians broke away from male opponents of the president. One female parliamentarian publicly declared her loyalty to Lukashenka in the press, praised his leadership, and made a pragmatic case for increasing women's presence—incorporating more women would quickly raise Belarus's standing on international human development indices and sharply contrast the perception of authoritarianism (Koulinka, 2006). The goal was not to increase women's political empowerment or democratization but to present a better picture of Belarus to the world.

Before the elections, Lukashenka publicly declared the importance of increasing women's parliamentary presence through traditional understandings of gender roles:

> We should have no less than 30 to 40% women in parliament. Therefore I will use all means to support greater representation of the female portion of society in parliament….Male candidates who will compete against women…[should] give up [their intention to run for office] and let women work. Women should be widely represented in parliament. Then the parliament will be stable and calm. Women

> are always an emanation of kindness. Then the male members of parliament will work properly. (Lukashenka as cited in Koulinka, 2006)

Women's enhanced participation is understood as a way to make legislators more obedient and respectful of the power structure and norms. As loyal and kind followers, women would respectfully toe the line and their presence would encourage their male counterparts to follow suit. Women candidates supported by Lukashenka accessed important resources such as media coverage. Lukashenka succeeded in having 30% of parliament comprised of women but the body was extremely weakened and akin to a rubber stamp (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, 2022). That the institution is so weak can help explain women's presence, whereas their absence often indicates more influence in the actual decision-making of that body (Luciak, 2005; Rincker, 2017). A woman has yet to hold the presidency or prime ministership, given Lukashenka's tight grip on power. Democratic transition is thought to facilitate women's political inclusion and is viewed as a springboard to presidencies and prime ministerships in part due to women's increased mobilization (Jalalzai, 2013; Montecinos, 2017). Advocating for independence from colonial powers or transition to democracy, women engage in political protest and sometimes leverage this experience to obtain a political foothold (Jalalzai, 2013; Montecinos, 2017). In some regions, including Asia and Latin America, women repeatedly stood at the forefront of democratic regime change—first toppling dictators, then holding office. These were often daughters or wives of charismatic male leaders (Jalalzai, 2013; Thompson, 2019). While still facing many obstacles, women demanded and seized myriad opportunities as previously closed systems opened to their participation before, during, or after the transition (Montecinos, 2017). Belarus has never successfully transitioned to democracy and Lukashenka's clinging to power helps explain the dearth of women executive leaders. While exceptions exist, the family path does not prevail for women executives in Europe, including the CEE (Jalalzai & Rincker, 2018). While executives from dynasties are largely declining in most democracies, they are quite common in less democratic systems (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2017).

## 4. Tsikhanouskaya's Ascendance to Opposition Leader

This next section provides contextual details explaining increased public discontent and sets the stage for Tsikhanouskaya's ascension and the ways gender shaped her rise, candidacy, and role as opposition leader.

### *4.1. Situational Background: Discontent in Belarus*

A potential transition emerged in 2020. Belarussians were growing discontented with the government for its handling of the pandemic and the economy. Moments of instability or crisis can propel women to executive power or at least mount strong candidacies. Lukashenka's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic grew in the spring to summer of 2020. Sponsored by the government, elderly war veterans and thousands of military personnel held the 9 May Victory Day military parade despite spiking virus cases. It was the only European country to hold professional soccer games with fans while the outbreak was in full swing. Lukashenka advised Belarusians to "kill the virus with vodka," go to saunas, and work in the fields to avoid infection. "Tractors will cure everybody!" he proclaimed (as cited in Karmanau, 2021a). Belarus stood apart from its European counterparts for not instituting a national lockdown or quarantine measures. Only very limited physical distancing measures were implemented while life went on mostly as usual (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020). Yet, Belarusians' opposition to Lukashenka grew as the ineptitude of the government's handling of the pandemic became obvious. By June 2020, Belarus had nearly double the confirmed cases of Poland, which has four times the population (Roth, 2020).

Belarusians were vocal in their disgruntlement with Lukashenka's inability to deliver economically, and increasing protests throughout 2020 reflected this discontent. In 2014, Belarus' recorded its highest GDP of 78 billion USD, which by 2020 shrunk to nearly 60 billion USD. GDP per capita was virtually the same, at under 6200 USD, in 2014 as it was pre-pandemic 2020, positioned among the poorest in Europe (Trading Economics, 2020). While Lukashenka's official numbers claim near 0% unemployment, less than 6% below the poverty line, and a GINI index score that beats Iceland, Finland, and Norway, citizens no longer had confidence that his regime could deliver the goods. Real wages dropped over the last decade by almost 40% due to a highpoint inflation rate of over 100%. The last decade was lost in terms of economic growth and the underlying economic frustrations surfaced in the wake of the pandemic bungling (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.; Tokbolat, 2020; Zenkovich, 2020).

Instability set in as months of massive protests erupted due to the poor pandemic response and deteriorating economic conditions. Belarusian authorities responded with a ferocious crackdown with more than 35,000 people arrested and thousands beaten by police—a repression that triggered bruising Western sanctions. A series of events and miscalculations of Lukashenka set the stage for a political unknown. Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a popular opposition blogger and critic of Lukashenka's dictatorship, helped fuel widespread protests given his visibility. His anti-Lukashenka slogan "Stop the Cockroach" particularly displeased the regime and its popularity was deemed a threat to Lukashenka's stranglehold on power (Karmanau, 2021b). On May 6, 2020, nine days before the deadline to file paperwork for the August presidential election, Tsikhanouski was

detained for participating in an unauthorized demonstration held six months before (Filkins, 2021). The timing was suspicious and coincided with Tsikhanouski increasingly being asked by his social media followers to run for the presidency. Given his detention, he was unable to file the paperwork himself and, on May 16, Tsikhanouskaya tried to do so on his behalf. However, the election commission (controlled by Lukashenka) refused to accept the petition (Dorokhov, 2020).

### *4.2. Tskikhanouskaya's Rise: The Role of Gender*

Tsikhanouskaya was an English teacher and had spent the last years raising her two young children. One of her children is deaf and she was helping him learn how to speak (Filkins, 2021). When Tsikhanouski became ineligible, Tsikhanouskaya decided to run for the presidency instead. Some reports suggested that Tsikhanouski was unaware of his wife's candidacy until he was suddenly released from pretrial detention and there were even reports that he was initially upset when he found out about her bid (Filkins, 2021). Other accounts mentioned that Tsikhanouski helped her obtain the 100,000 signatures she needed. Within one week after being released, Tsikhanouski was in detention again, accused of using violence against a police officer in what appeared to be a staged incident (Dorokhov, 2020).

Two other presidential aspirants, banker Viktor Babaryka and Valery Tsepkalo, a former ambassador to the United States and entrepreneur, were seen as potentially viable contenders. However, their candidacies were soon derailed. In June, Babaryka was arrested on various charges including embezzlement. Though allegations were widely perceived as politically driven, he was disqualified as a candidate given the pending charges (Dixon, 2020). By July 1, the signatures that Tsepkalo obtained were voided by the election commission, bringing an end to his candidacy (Jegelevicius, 2020). Tsikhanouskaya was one of the few candidates that remained in the field. Lukashenka perceived her as non-threatening *because* she was a woman, thus explaining why she was allowed to compete, a point we dissect later. Tsikhanouskaya, however, soon quickly grew as the main opposition candidate that disparate forces galvanized around ("BSDP (Community) urged," 2020).

As opposition crackdowns continued, Tsikhanouskaya sent her children abroad because she feared for their safety when she was told that they would be taken to an orphanage if she refused to withdraw from the race (Rogers, 2022). A few days later, Tsepkalo fled Belarus with his two sons because of threats that he would have his children taken away. His wife Veronika stayed in Belarus. Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova, Babaryka's campaign manager, united around Tsikhanouskaya's candidacy. Research shows a willingness of the opposition to form pre-electoral coalitions even in autocracies when change is possible (Hauser, 2019). Thousands of people attended Tsikhanouskaya's first official campaign rally held on July 19, 2020 (Makhovsky, 2020). While clearly popular, the lack of reliable data does not allow us to firmly confirm the extent of public support.

Gender, "the culturally constructed meaning of biological sex differences," is "how we come to understand and often magnify the minor differences that exist between biological males and females" (Duerst-Lahti & Kelly, 1996, p. 13). Individual personal characteristics link to various behavioral expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Virtually every culture associates women and men with feminine and masculine traits respectively. Women are typically connected to communal traits such as being nurturing, collaborative, and empathetic, while men are linked to agentic traits including being independent, competitive, and aggressive. The gendered hierarchy typically places perceived masculine characteristics above stereotypically feminine ones. Perceptions of women being collaborative may provide women some advantages, especially during a crisis. We see gender being pivotal to Tsikhanouskaya's rise. Gender was also a noticeable part of the 2020 election in that Tsikhanouskaya was a target of sexism at the hands of Lukashenka but she also tended to reinforce feminine roles as a candidate.

Gender manifested in the 2020 election through overt sexism. Lukashenka has made several statements throughout his political career advocating limited roles for women. He has reinforced women's role in the family and focused on women's appearance saying: "A woman's vocation is to decorate the world, while a man's is to protect the world and women" (as cited in Dryndova, 2020). Tskihanouskaya's candidacy was initially perceived as weak and non-threatening. This provided her coverage or protection as she was permitted to run because her candidacy was considered non-viable. As she was still obtaining the necessary signatures to run, Lukashenka stated at a rally that "our constitution is not for women. Our society has not matured enough to vote for a woman. This is because by the constitution the president handles a lot of power" (as cited in Petkova, 2020). Lukashenka, an unapologetic misogynist, made very similar statements throughout the campaign that cast doubts on women's ability to be presidents. He stated: "A woman can't be president [and] the president will be a man" (as cited in Luxmoore, 2020). He also said: "Our constitution was not written for women. And our society isn't ready to vote for a woman" (as cited in Luxmoore, 2020). Lukashenka perpetuated the image of the strong man and father of the nation and used his platform to diminish women's standing. "These three unfortunate little girls were found," he said, referring to Mariya Kalesnikava, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and Veranika Tsapkala, adding: "They don't understand what they say and what they do. But we can see who stands behind them" (as cited in Luxmoore, 2020). As Tskihanouskaya gained a massive following, it is possible that Lukashenka continued to believe that she would not be appealing to enough Belarussians, because of her gender, or that he

did not want to signal that he was indeed threatened by her candidacy, thus allowing her to remain in the race.

The accidental quality of Tsikhanouskaya's rise is gendered. According to the media, she was "the accidental candidate in Belarus who is trying to unseat 'Europe's last dictator'" (Wesolowsky, 2020), the "accidental Joan of Arc" (Stickings, 2020), and an "accidental revolutionary" (Davidzon, 2021; Filkins, 2021). Tsikhanouskaya strategically highlighted the accidental nature of her candidacy. "I am accidental….I am not building my career, I am not settling scores, I do not know the language of politics, I do not like this business" (as cited in Filkins, 2021). Tsikhanouskaya's apolitical background reinforced the unlikely nature of her rise; she was a "housewife turned leader by fate" (Davidzon, 2021). She was not politically active (Filkins, 2021) and continued to see herself as apolitical even after declaring her candidacy. She stated: "During the campaign I didn't see myself as a politician but I pushed myself forward….I don't see myself in politics. I am not a politician" (as cited in Sytas, 2020). She was selected opposition leader not through a formal process but by default. The "accidental" nature of her candidacy and leadership breaks previous conceptions of how opposition leaders are chosen (Helms, 2022) but women executives, including Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom and Angela Merkel of Germany, are often depicted as "accidental" and "unexpected" (Jalalzai, 2013).

Another strategy Tsikhanouskaya employed was emphasizing being a wife that reluctantly stepped into politics on behalf of her husband. That Tsikhanouskaya's husband was a leading opposition figure comports with larger patterns related to women's pathways to executive power, such as Corazon Aquino of the Philippines (Jalalzai & Rincker, 2018). Tsikhanouskaya would never have run had it not been for her husband's imprisonment. She argued: "I had to take this place instead of my husband, who was imprisoned for no reason" (Rogers, 2022). Generally, women's candidacies are often framed as surrogates. They play the political game to further the agenda of others. This seemingly lessens the potential threat that women pose to the established gendered order (Jalalzai & Hankinson, 2008). The surrogate concept is particularly salient given the wife narrative. Party gatekeepers mobilize women candidates with family links because of perceived advantages. The party's interest is to maintain or achieve power; their backing of women is to preserve control. We do not argue that Tsikhanouskaya was mobilized by political players wielding power from behind the scenes. Rather, we recognize the long history of women serving as proxies for men, several of them who were wives of political men (Jalalzai, 2013).

Tsikhanouskaya's emergence reinforces feminine characterizations of women as political proxies and downplays her own political ambitions. The public was also growing weary of "strong man" politics making someone who eschewed the image of a politician particularly appealing. Tsikhanouskaya's discourse and even shy mannerisms likely appealed to more traditional segments of the public who turned against the regime. Being a woman also conceivably made Tsikhanouskaya seem more trustworthy given stereotypes.

A woman like Tsikhanouskaya could more convincingly demonstrate that she was motivated to seek power for the betterment of the nation in pursuit of democracy. Not being a politician was an asset to this cause. Tsikhanouskaya repeatedly noted that she was just like her fellow Belarusians and was an ordinary woman who wanted change: "I understand that people perceive me as an ordinary woman, that together for Belarusians fighting for these changes. And I understand that people know that, you know, what sympathy and empathy I have" (as cited in Rogers, 2022). The framing of Tsikhanouskaya's candidacy as accidental and her aim to bring democracy to Belarus in large part relied on traditional conceptions of women's roles. In contrast to Veronika Tsapkala and Kalesnikava, Tsikhanouskaya's message was not overtly feminist. Tsikhanouskaya's less militant persona and less political image better positioned her to lead the opposition. This trio of women opposition leaders was significant and mobilized other women.

Because she was not there to further an independent political career, a related frame that emerged was that of a temporary leader uniting the country against the dictatorship and moving towards democracy. Tsikhanouskaya pledged to step aside if elected: "My mandate is only to be with Belarusians till we bring our country to new elections" (as cited in Graham, 2021). She not only united her fellow citizens, but she brought together a diverse opposition that was ready to fight but increasingly facing crackdowns. She stated: "I am doing this for the Belarusian people (unity), and for my husband" (as cited in Filkins, 2021).

Throughout, Tsikhanouskaya highlighted motherhood: "People are forgetting that a year ago I was just a mother, not at all involved in politics" (as cited in Roth, 2021). Motherhood has frequently been used as an entry point for women in politics. Activists in the maternalist movement in the United States argued for women's empowerment by extension of their domestic roles. In Latin America, motherhood was key for the Bolivian Housewives Committee and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. Generally, women's activism was in response to government abuse of their family members and essentially an extension of their family roles. In Belarus, "women were thus not only led by women politicians but started to self-organize for political purposes" (Dryndova, 2020). With their male relatives being imprisoned for their opposition to Lukashenka, "hundreds of women formed long 'lines of solidarity,' carrying flowers" and portraits of loved ones detained during protests (Sandford, 2020). "Dressed in white they greeted all cars with flowers and cars answered them with signals. This peaceful protest against president dictator Lukashenko was named 'Flower Revolution'"

(Gaydukevich, 2020). Similar to other movements referenced, women came together to stop violence at the hands of security forces (Gaydukevich, 2020). While empowering, this perpetuates traditional notions of women as it tends to focus on women's identities as mothers and wives.

### *4.3. Leading the Non-Parliamentary Opposition*

Official results of the August 2020 election awarded Tsikhanouskaya only 10% of the votes. Poll workers pointing out irregularities or violations were fired on the spot; many were forced to sign off on results before the election even took place, and others were made to sign falsified results. The pervasiveness of election tampering created an uproar (Manenkov & Litvinova, 2020). Post-election, it is no surprise the opposition formed a new party Together (Ivanova, 2020). Tsikhanouskaya called for the release of political prisoners, the adoption of a new constitution curtailing presidential powers, and new elections (Filkins, 2021).

As noted by Dingler et al. (2023), women are not very well represented in formal opposition roles and the literature has not focused on the few women who access these posts. Even research analyzing women heads of government, including Thatcher and Merkel, tends to ignore their roles in leading the opposition (Beckwith, 2015). According to Helms (2022), research analyzing gender and opposition is grounded in resistance women face as politicians or opposition to the goals of women's empowerment. In contrast, this article and thematic issue directly focus on varied ways women can lead the opposition even in autocratic systems. Leaders and others recognized as such by the international media in these systems tend not to be located within parliaments but instead operate as opponents to authoritarian regimes from the outside. Tsikhanouskaya plays an important role in leading the opposition without having a parliamentary seat or even physically being in the country given the risks to her and/or her family's lives. Her case demonstrates the complexity and variability among opposition leaders.

Based in Vilnius, Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya currently concentrates her efforts on generating international support for the Belarusian opposition and demands that the dictatorial regime faces stricter sanctions. She uses her influence to mobilize activists and volunteers to stop the violence. Freeing the scores of political opponents that have been imprisoned and demanding new presidential elections is central. She has tried to enhance civil society in Belarus by providing critical information (that would normally be censured) and fostering connections between civil society groups. Her active social media accounts attest to this as does her high public profile. She has traveled internationally to meet world leaders, including President Biden in the United States, to influence policy pertaining to Belarus. Tsikhanouskaya uses her international platform to make demands and to raise awareness of the continued abuse political activists and opponents of the Lukashenka regime face. She has also created what might be deemed as a shadow government. From her official website, 16 people comprise her "team": nine women and seven men. She calls herself the "leader of Belarusian democratic forces" and "leader of a democratic Belarus" (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, 2022). She continues to highlight similar feminine stereotypes she did during the campaign including being a reluctant politician and unifier. As Russia initiated a full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Tsikhanouskaya focused substantial attention on the Belarussian anti-war movement, seeking to prevent Belarusian forces from joining the war and calling for Lukashenka's removal. This strategy is an attempt to reactivate opposition to the regime. Given the crackdowns after the 2020 elections, the public tended to avoid actively engaging in protest activity out of fear for their security and the invasion has not seemed to substantially change this (Kłysiński, 2022). Repression and censorship remain the norm and there are still over 600 political prisoners in Belarus (Euronews, & Associated Press, 2021).

## 5. Conclusions

While women have recently made gains in executive office holding in CEE, Belarus is an exception. Belarus has not transitioned to democracy and opposition is not tolerated. In 2020, a potential challenge to the status quo manifested when a poor economy and terrible pandemic response prompted widespread protests. Lukashenka's regime imprisoned and/or disqualified the greatest threats (all men). When Tsikhanouskaya stepped in as presidential candidate when her husband was imprisoned, she united different factions against the regime. Like other women who rose to prominence, Tsikhanouskaya ascended to politics due to her marital ties. Perpetuating the strong man and father of the country, Lukashenka attacked women in the opposition using sexist rhetoric. He permitted Tsikhanouskaya's candidacy since he did not see her as a political threat; given the statements made throughout the campaign, it is very likely that he viewed her this way, at least in part, *because* she was a woman.

Tsikhanouskaya's campaign highlighted more traditionally feminine traits such as being a nurturer, unifier, and apolitical. Referring to herself as an "accidental candidate" she sought to unify the Belarussian people against the dictatorship but would step aside immediately in the aftermath. She skillfully portrayed herself as a surrogate for her husband and her shy and non-threatening style likely allowed her to gain mass appeal, even among more traditional voters.

Despite Tsikhanouskaya's initial hesitancy to stay involved in politics, her opposition to the regime continues. Some of the most prominent women opposition leaders today do not officially hold political office (Dingler et al., 2023). Undoubtedly, Tskihanouskaya is

recognized as the leading opposition leader in Belarus despite lacking a formal role. Her example demonstrates the importance of broadening the conception of opposition leaders, recognizing their important influence, and acknowledging the high stakes of their participation. Still, her more traditional pathway to prominence and tendency to highlight feminine traits suggests limitations women still face in autocratic systems like Belarus.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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