

Article

Belarus's Sound Body

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Abstract: This study delves into the creative protest tactics of Belarusian activists in 2011, highlighting their use of “sound bodies” created through clapping to challenge authoritarian constraints. The research posits that these ethereal sound bodies exert significant normative pressure on the regime by challenging the regime’s legitimacy. By analyzing the clapping protests as civil disobedience, this study illustrates the effectiveness of this non-visual form of protest in compelling the authoritarian regime to address the collective call for change. Through this lens, this paper contributes a nuanced understanding of how decentralized protest strategies, particularly those leveraging sound, can serve as potent mechanisms for challenging oppressive governance in a digitally connected global landscape. This essay thus intervenes into the realms of argumentation theory and sound studies.

Keywords: acousmatic sound; normative pragmatics; social movement; argumentation; sound bodies

1. Introduction

Alexander Lukashenko became a household name in Belarus in the 1990s after he delivered a speech on national radio denouncing high-level corruption. Upon assuming power, he swiftly established an autocratic regime characterized by severe restrictions on the media. He aggressively censored the state-controlled press and shut down Belarus’s only independent radio station along with several independent newspapers. Lukashenko constructed a robust and effective electoral falsification apparatus to secure his position, which played a crucial role in enabling him to claim landslide victories in the 2001, 2006, and 2010 presidential elections [1]. In the immediate aftermath of the 2010 election, Lukashenko’s dismissal of international election monitors, coupled with the arrest of seven opposition candidates and 700 protesters, begot international condemnation and signaled an ominous lean towards authoritarianism [2].

Under Lukashenko’s iron fist, Belarus has witnessed a significant intensification of repressive tactics aimed at stifling opposition and dissent. These efforts included widespread arrests, targeted violence against protesters and opposition leaders, and stringent laws limiting public assemblies and speech. The 2010 crackdown saw riot police violently suppress protests, with numerous detentions and unfair trials, creating a culture of fear that has deeply affected Belarusian society. This state-led intimidation campaign created a persistent fear of surveillance and retaliation against any dissent. This environment of heightened visibility and brutality of repression effectively demobilized political opposition, and the public and potential new dissenters preemptively curtailed their actions to avoid similar fates. In a pan-mediated, wild, global network, protestors must leverage power wherever they can to enact the potential for change. Here, the citizens are concerned with one lever of power, the state, and the attempt to establish a regime more welcoming to their freedoms. When you cannot effectively reason with someone with all the power, you must find other resources to compel them to the table.

This study explores the 2011 summer protest in Belarus, often called “the silent protest” by the media, scholars, and journalists alike. “Silence” is not precisely accurate, considering a significant amount of sound, such as clapping, ringing, and stomping. However, it offered a shorthand proxy to represent the feeling of a presence that was difficult to attribute to



Citation: Eckstein, J. Belarus’s Sound Body. *Philosophies* **2024**, *9*, 141. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9050141>

Academic Editor: Brian L. Ott

Received: 21 March 2024

Revised: 1 August 2024

Accepted: 27 August 2024

Published: 5 September 2024



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any specific person because no specific sign or symbol associated with the movement could be assigned to any person. But calling the protests “silent” misses how the activists developed an innovative form of protest sound in the face of authoritarian restrictions on public gatherings and free speech. In this essay, I explore the power of an intangible yet forceful presence, or a sound body, manifested through clapping, ringing, and stomping in Belarus¹ [3,4]. While others focused specifically on the linguistic and textual language choices on social networking websites, specifically vKontakte, I am more interested in the sound element and how it provided a resource for protest and resistance [1,5].

To understand the Belarus Summer 2011 protest, I will bring together normative pragmatics and sound studies, which might seem like an odd pairing. Normative pragmatic approaches reveal how argumentative acts like public protest can create webs of obligation that compel engagement² [6–8]. This helps create grounded accounts of reasoning that can be used to make judgments. This structure reveals the complex ecology enabling civil disobedience—the coordination of physical gatherings and digital networks with tangible impacts on the international stage. This approach sees persuasive power as stemming from the deliberate design choices that make obligations and social norms visible. Yet, this notion of the public and argument needs further redefinition to account for how new agents surpass the visible realm and exert influence beyond the immediate and tangible to the ethereal, transcendent, and ultimately immanent/metaphysical.

At the same time, this piece extends the interdisciplinary conversation on sound and advocacy. Michele Hilmes’ article “Soundwork” argues that sound can be a powerful tool for activism. She states that soundwork has “resonated in the public sphere” throughout history, used “for better or worse” in efforts to inform, organize, persuade, and alert listeners; Hilmes gives examples like early radio documentaries bringing “the voices of ordinary people onto the air” and the struggles to establish alternative and community radio [9]. She argues that sound has unique capacities for blurring public and private spheres, enabling activism through intimate yet public forms. This view conceptualizes sound as “work” regarding labor, craft, and purposeful effort for communicative ends. Several scholars have taken up this call to think about how that argument can be used to cross boundaries, build communities, challenge dominant narratives, create new public memories, and reject state control [10–12]. Yet, this study needs an account of how these sounds are given normative force.

The combination of these two projects enables me to understand the unseen force of the “sound body” and how it wields normative power against the regime, embodying agency and intention without a visible form. In contrast to other accounts of an assemblage, this is interested in how a combination of sounds from an unseen source invites speculation, which allows for imaginary supplementation. This space enables auditors to imagine an agent with an omnipresent aura that surpasses the limitations of visual spaces and can create obligations and undertake responsibilities. In a world dominated by media, the sound body operates beyond the visual spectrum, providing a framework to understand how presence can be subtle and overwhelmingly influential. Initially, it might manifest as a faint sense of something lurking, but it can swell into a formidable force. The sound body epitomizes a social movement’s felt presence, asserting the rights and power of the people, which in turn challenges the regime’s authority and legitimacy.

This project contributes to the line of thinking I call “sound tactics” [13–15]. I conceive of sound both as a noun and an adjective: first, as a tangible phenomenon that can be heard and felt, grounding it in sensory experience; and second, as an adjective denoting actions that are practical, intentional, and indicative of good judgment. This dual interpretation informs my understanding of sound as a tactic employed by agents who, despite lacking traditional power, utilize audible methods to enact reasoned judgments within their environments³. Hence, “normativity” in normative pragmatics is deeply embedded in the rhetoric tradition as a method to help evaluate options to advance their arguments and foster social change, which can beget debates, policy shifts, cultural redefinitions, the revaluation of values, and a host of other outcomes. This interdisciplinary analysis

reveals argumentation's dynamism in adapting to evolving media environments and authoritarian contexts. For the Belarusian people, it facilitated a spread from a square in Minsk to global networks, illustrating the broad impact of their actions. Together, these insights demonstrate how the clapping protests in Belarus created a dissociated "sound body" that strategically leveraged democratic norms and free speech to challenge the regime's legitimacy.

2. Acousmatics

The concept of acousmatics opens a gateway to exploring the intricate relationship between sound, presence, and the production of the social. The term was coined by experimental composer Pierre Schaeffer, who proposed the idea of "reduced listening", which involves ignoring the exact cause of a sound and instead focusing on the experience of the sound itself. Schaeffer found inspiration in Pythagoras' teaching behind a curtain, where students were forced to listen and agree on what they heard without visual context to stabilize meaning. While he lacked the Pythagorean veil, Schaeffer's experiments, inspired by Pythagoras, utilized a tape recorder to separate sound from its source. He believed that both ancient teachings and modern experiences of radio and recordings shared the challenge of understanding sounds without visual clues. Quoting Schaeffer, the difference "between the experience of Pythagoras and our experience of radio and recordings" is deemed "negligible" (p. 77) [16]. In both, the source of the signal is obscured, and the listener is forced to create categories to give it meaning.

Building on Schaeffer's foundations with acousmatics, theorist Brian Kane delineates a tripartite ontology of transmission, cause, and effect. The initial transmission constitutes the unique sound-producing event. The cause involves reducing a complex set of events into an attribution, and the effect relates to the perlocutionary impacts. The "cause" is not a discrete individual experience but up to public categories that are rhetorically constructed and can be broadly circulated. Ultimately, the cause and the effect become infinitely repeatable, the way a record can recreate a sonic effect, irrespective of what makes the transmission. This separation of transmission from cause is foundational to the acousmatic experience of being "sight unseen". This disconnection leaves the audience to imagine what the unseen source might look like, leading to a need for an imaginary supplementation about the potential conditions around the cause of the sound. Kane writes, "One central, replicated feature of acousmatic listening appears to be that underdetermination of the sonic source encourages imaginative supplementation" (p. 9) [17]. This imaginary supplementation can be filled with various cultural assumptions, contributing to the overall experience of the public realm. As audiences hear these sounds, they create mental images of characters, objects, or spaces, and they attribute causes; they project "sound bodies" in their imagination to make sense of the acousmatic experience. In other words, the mind wonders what body caused the sound.

To illustrate his point, Kane gives the example of a mountain, Moodus, near a small village near East Haddam, Connecticut, that is known for unusual rumbling noises and tremors that seem to emanate from underground. The name "Moodus" is derived from the term "Machemoodus" used by the indigenous Wangunk people. It means "Place of Noises". The Moodus noises occur periodically, rattling houses and shaking the earth, fueling curiosity and speculation about their cause. The initial transmission was the rumbling sounds produced by volcanic activity and vibrations underground. Yet, since the potential origin cannot be verified, it is attributed to an unknown set of causes. Kane covers an array of hypotheses ranging from spiritual and religious to seismic activity, gas dynamics, electricity, chemical reactions, magma movement, and shifting geology, all of which give a reason why this sound comes into being. Each of these explanations results in speculative, imaginative projections that define society, with Native Americans attributing the noises to Gods. At the same time, European settlers assumed both natural and supernatural sources. The obscurity of the original transmission and journey facilitates the imaginary projection of the voices of spirits or deities.

These experiences go beyond a localized event but can be generalized to global events. In his study on the Iraq War, J Martin Daughtry notes that mediated sounds from events persist and reverberate through assemblages, like news and digital networks, intensifying their affective impact. Daughtry argues that the fog of war disconnects the sights and sounds of war from their origin, creating another acousmatic situation and new objects. The sounds of an explosion from a battlefield and an image of a battlefield can be articulated as a win or defeat based on the different news networks that ascribe the meaning. In the context of the war in Iraq, the sounds of the civilians on the frontlines became a sound body that shaped domestic debates by transmitting the sensory experience of the Iraqi people into American households (p. 200) [18]. The discourse shaped the experience of the presence of the Iraqi people. It shifted hearts and minds on the home front. The global flow of digital networks enables the dissemination of acousmatics beyond physical constraints. Just as with the Iraq War, when domestic discourse became detached from the desert and entered the American public's homes, the reach of different sound bodies can compel distinct audiences into action.

An imagined body causing a sound, or what Kane calls a "sound body", provides a lens for understanding how movements, entities, and networks provide a site for imaginary supplementation. When the source of a sound is unclear, like the indistinct roar of a crowd, our uncertainty can lead us to fill in the gaps with imagined characteristics. An imagined agent caused the sound. The use of the term "body" for an agent that causes the sound gets at the feeling of presence associated with bodies. Often, these agents live in a world beyond our capacity to sense them. Since they are not confined to the world of the visible, they are not limited to the bounds of wordy presence, as the sonic has housed the likes of ghosts and gods. These vary in shape, size, and proximity—often, they exist in an omnipresent position, almost panoptic, not knowing how far that is away, how large they might be, and how present.

Forms of activism continually evolve in response to emerging technologies and changing political contexts. The pan-mediated public screen refers to the ubiquitous networked digital interfaces like smartphones that mediate communication and argumentation. Unlike Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere centered on rational discussion, the pan-mediated screen foregrounds visual, fragmented, and affective discourse circulating rapidly across social platforms. Thus, the pan-mediated screen indicates an expanded, more diverse public arena of political participation and argumentation enabled by proliferating media technologies. In today's digitally networked world, activists face the challenge of capturing attention and exerting rhetorical force when traditional modes of dissent and protest may be suppressed. As Kevin DeLuca and Elizabeth Brunner argue, the pan-mediated environment shapes how activists and the public argue—relying on affect, pre-cognitive reactions, distraction, fragmentation, and highly visual strategies attuned to the networked mediascape [19,20]. The public screen goes fast, and agents need to be given more reason to stop and rationally process verbal exchanges. We must recognize the distribution sites of power that social movements might target to realize specific and strategic goals. What is needed is a more specific account of argumentation outside of one where we think of "changing minds" or "rational disagreement". Normative pragmatics provides an account of how civic agents, such as sound bodies, might be able to move each other through force—relatively local transactions that they can exert force upon one another. Normative pragmatics provides an account of argumentation through dissemination instead of dialogue [8].

3. Normative Pragmatics

Making an argument is a social endeavor where premises and conclusions are disseminated. Social arguments involve disagreements that run the gamut from mitigating uncertainty to making policy decisions. On any given day, speakers may use arguments when proposing an idea or making an accusation against someone else [21]. An argument

is typically conceptualized as a collection of statements where one statement (the claim or conclusion) is supported by others (data or reasons). In this sense, argumentation is limited:

Arguments are fundamentally linguistic entities that express a special pragmatic force proposition where those propositions stand inferential relations. If you cannot explicate such propositional assemblies and modes of expression from a message, the message is not an argument (p. 268) [22].

However, the practice of making arguments rarely renders propositional relations explicit, and the practice of identifying an argument in a piece of discourse can be challenging. The interdisciplinary field of argumentation provides tools to extract and logically connect statements so they can be evaluated. There are several theories of argument; no doubt, many readers are familiar with testing things like validity or sufficiency. Unlike some approaches that predefine a function of argument, a normative pragmatic acknowledges their diverse forms and the interactive process of challenge and response that shapes them. A normative pragmatic approach is interested in the intuitive ways people evaluate each other's reasoning in actual discourse. That is, instead of an analyst making conclusions about the argument, it is best understood by closely examining how arguments naturally occur and evolve in various contexts.

The normative pragmatics approach recognizes arguments that involve an expressive and functional dimension. Each act is expressive because it constructs significance and shared reality through qualitative, symbolic functions. At the same time, each act is functional because it delineates obligations, undertakes roles, and distributes risk. Separating the two is important because the two mutual conditions, functional and expression, can facilitate and dampen future deliberative conditions. By factoring in the rich situational dimensions—the social worlds, power dynamics, and media ecologies—that shape argument, the normative pragmatic approach reveals how sound argumentation adapts to fulfill context-specific motives. The norms implicitly negotiated are embedded within broader discourses and institutions that have public significance to arguments. How an argument is communicated creates rationales and reasons for adherence that exert normative pressure on the audience. Thus, it is not that people will be rational agents and evaluate every reason. But it does create reasons for them to care and consider rationales. In a way that is not that different from why some public restrooms move the sink outside into the public view to make others wash their hands, the conspicuous view exerts normative pressure. The speaker's overt creation of reciprocal obligations alters the normative context to give their message persuasive force. However, if the audience is willing to shoulder the consequences, defiance remains an option.

At its core, the expressive component embodies the qualitative attributes that shape the interaction potential. The expressive dimension relates to the symbolic meaning of engaging in argumentation. It focuses on how arguing expresses identity, values, emotions, and relationships. Arguing allows people to articulate identities, values, and norms. Framing issues in particular ways shapes what reasons and solutions seem relevant. The selection of different forms of presentation contains affordances that change the potential to select, reflect, and deflect different realities. For example, arguing about mass shootings as a mental health issue invites certain expert opinions and policy proposals, while framing it as a gun control issue suggests different avenues of discourse. Through qualitative, symbolic functions, argument expresses worldviews and shapes shared significance. Attending to these expressive dimensions provides a richer understanding of how an argument constructs meaning in context, not just rationally persuades.

An argument is also something functional that involves the practical duties and responsibilities needed to continue a conversation. Ordinary speech acts set the stage for argumentative encounters and embed practical commitments delineating responsibilities and obligations in a conversation. Argumentation is locally managed, interactionally emergent, and participant-administered, with content and norms developing responsively [23]. Proposing, accusing, demanding, and advocating create a "normative terrain" and endow the discourse with commitments, thereby shaping the disagreement space and its

inherent reciprocal responsibilities [24,25]. As Sally Jackson astutely highlights, arguments evolve incrementally, not adhering strictly to predetermined structures extricated from discourse [23]. There is not a pre-established blueprint like dialogues or structured discussions that prescribes rules, demarcates roles, or mandates speaking turns.

In other words, argumentative force arises when speakers, through their communicative actions, take on explicit obligations, fostering an expectation of their fulfillment. This dynamic creates a context where listeners are prompted to respond as the speaker intends, grounded in an assumption of the speaker's commitment and a mutual desire to avoid the criticism that comes with unmet obligations. Beth Innocenti outlines a basic schematic of normative pragmatic accounts as follows:

1. A speaker uses strategies that make visible their intent and obligations to live up to normative materials brought to bear just by using the strategies.
2. The obligations are reciprocal or applicable to both speaker and addressees, so all can hold each other accountable for meeting them.
3. The visibility and accountability for acting in accordance with normative materials change the context. Addressees now have two reasons to be influenced, as the speaker intends.
 - A. They can presume that the speaker would not risk criticism for failing to meet the obligations unless they, in fact, did or planned to meet them.
 - B. To avoid criticism for failing to meet reciprocal obligations, addressees can be influenced as the speaker intends [26].

This approach illuminates how speakers navigate emotional appeals, social protest strategies, and the burden of proof by articulating the web of obligations they engage in through their rhetorical decisions. In essence, this view considers argumentative force a function of the risk speakers assume, which enforces accountability based on the specific normative elements within the discourse.

In the context of women's suffrage, the application of normative pragmatic theories of argumentation, as discussed by Jean Goodwin and Beth Innocenti, underscores the multifaceted impact of making arguments in social movements [27]. The women's suffrage movement exemplifies how arguments made by women were not solely aimed at obtaining the vote but also at redefining societal norms about women's roles and capabilities. By engaging in public discourse, suffragists challenged existing laws and shifted the cultural perceptions about women's rationality and place in political life. This approach highlights that the act of arguing did more than seek rational persuasion; it functioned as a transformative social practice that reconfigured relationships between speakers and audiences, embedding new norms and expectations about gender and rights in the societal fabric. The suffrage argument thus becomes an expressive act that reshapes social realities and redefines what is considered normative, making the struggle for suffrage a profound exercise in renegotiating power dynamics and reconstructing social identity.

Introducing sound bodies as arguments expands the reach of normative pragmatics by giving a new language to think through other kinds of agents for our mediated world⁴ [28,29]. As an unseen presence constituted by sound, a collective sound body transcends the limitations and risks of visible individuals. Its fluid, permeable nature allows rapid size, position, and tactic shifts. By undertaking acoustic risk, the sound body's obligations become salient. Its amplified reverberations exert magnified normative pressure. As an adaptable imaginary construct, the sound body avoids easy accountability even while compelling reciprocity. Its omnipresence offers a key sign for those looking for hope of resistance in an otherwise dim world of totalitarianism⁵ [30]. These fluid, imaginary constructs harness the visceral power of sound to amplify their rhetorical presence and create a sense of obligation. By embracing acoustic risk, their claims gain prominence, and the amplified reverberations exert heightened normative pressure, compelling a reciprocal response.

The capacity to assign normative value to an act without an apparent actor is an important consideration. The relationship between a specific individual and the imaginative presence of the sonic body asymmetrically distributes risk and represents a significant

tactical advantage for a social movement. For listeners, sound's normative frame empowers them to manifest presence, navigate responsibilities, and traverse the landscapes of multimedia platforms. People worldwide can feel a movement's presence, which reaches far beyond the impact of any single individual. And it far exceeds the individual risk undertaken by any single person. This provides practical resources to organize what is happening and provides resources for others to form judgments and make sense of the complex ecology of an event. As presented in the next section, the sound body enabled Belarusian protesters to leverage the power of a sound body to disobey the government and become a global presence.

4. Belarus 2011: Lukashenko Gets the Clap

Lukashenko's 2010 election win came at a tremendous economic cost. Clair Briggs reports that "sparked by a rise in Russian energy prices and a lavish public spending campaign ahead of the December 19 presidential election", Belarus entered an economic free fall [31]. In an attempt to stabilize its ailing economy further, it turned to its long-time ally Russia for an economic bailout, but Russia rejected Belarus's request for a \$1 billion stabilization loan [32]. Russia's decision was unexpected due to earlier optimistic statements from Russia during two months of negotiations. Some speculate Russia's about-face on stabilization funding to Belarus may be linked to a number of concerns, such as Minsk's recent nuclear talks with the United States⁶ [32]. Because the government could not secure economic funding externally, it turned to internal measures, such as devaluing the currency by almost 36%, which contributed to soaring inflation and declining living standards [31]. Briggs describes the scene as Belarusians "hoarding basic foods and forming long lines at exchange points to convert some of their savings into foreign currency in scenes reminiscent of the chaos that followed the Soviet Union's collapse 20 years ago" [31]. Many average citizens had to make basic bargains at the grocery store because they were unsure what staples were affordable.

Amidst Belarus's economic turmoil following the 2010 presidential election and unsuccessful external financial assistance attempts, there was a societal shift towards digital platforms for organization and protest. A prevalent platform was vKontakte, which provided digital denizen affordances like private chat, a public wall for friends to post comments on a profile, and opportunities to join groups. Administrators used the platform to share political and economic news and entertain members with political jokes, memes, and demotivators. Perhaps most importantly, it became a centralized hub to coordinate movements [33]. One of the groups, "Revolution Through Social Networks", saw a rapid increase in engagement, swelling to 220,000 members [5]. The "Revolution Through Social Networks" initially emulated the mobilization strategies of the Arab Spring, leveraging social networks to engage previously politically disinterested groups. The group was highly active from June to August 2011, publishing 889 posts, primarily coordinating these actions [5]. Numerous local groups emerged across Belarus to further organize and innovate within the movement.

The protestors and the media coverage would call this a "silent" protest. The "silence" of these in-person gatherings is a subversion of the state's strategy because there were no loud slogans for the authorities to attribute to the leader for them to arrest [34]. The BBC notes that "The Belarusian 'silent rally' protesters rounded up" or 'Hundreds Arrested at Belarus Silent Protest', or in another instance, "Silent Protests Frighten Regime" [34]. Although far from a leader, Sergei, a youth unwittingly thrust into the limelight by security forces interviewed by the BBC, highlights that the essence of the silent protests is widely understood as a manifestation of the people's yearning for transformation [34]. He explains that the silence is like an old Soviet joke about a man distributing blank leaflets near the Kremlin, implying that the populace is already aware of the issues.

The protest started in early June, with people coming out and clapping, and it peaked with approximately 9000 participants across 44 cities [5]. However, as the presence of the sound body became apparent, countermeasures were instituted, which included plain-

clothes police making arrests. In the second act, Lukashenko decided he had enough and launched a more aggressive attack upon the Belarus people, ratcheting up the violence and engaging in disinformation on the protestor's digital platform, vKontakte. Yet, the protestors evolved their tactics to adapt. Early protests involved participants clapping their hands in central squares. Still, as time passed, protesters shifted to more subtle forms of expression, such as mobile phone ringtones and analog communication strategies like DVDs and posters. By the end of July, the number of protesters dwindled to around 700 across 19 cities [5]. Yet, by the time we hit the final act in August, Lukashenko's regime was hitting a critical point where it could no longer afford to brutalize its people without risking the entire economic viability of its country.

4.1. Act I: When Silence Is Audible

The protest began in early June. Participants receive messages on the web and mobile devices and launch collective action. Instead of raucous slogans or striking banners, they clapped and strolled through the city. Walking through the streets became a symbolic method for the protesters to reclaim the city spaces that felt co-opted by the authorities. Kastychnitskaya Square was chosen for its proximity to symbols of official culture and state power, such as the presidential palace, which became the focal point. The clap symbolized appreciation for each other's bravery in resisting the authoritarian regime. It also served as a sound to remind other citizens that others did not agree with the regime. But, more practically, it was selected because it was tough for the authorities to weed out who exactly was a protestor and who was just an average citizen. Vasial Navuma observed, "At first, authorities did not react to any actions (law-enforcement agencies completely ignored events on 1 June and 8 June), as protestors did not visibly differ from ordinary passers-by" (p. 299) [5]. Indeed, the lack of specific signs and symbols first earned them the name "silent" protests.

In contrast to past protests, where there might have been a leader or an opposition leader, these protests specifically were not attributable to any one person. The diffuse, overlapping sounds projected a unified presence, a resonant "sound body" dissociated from individuals. For the listener, the uncertainty of the exact origin of the resistance encouraged imaginative attributions. The ears may discern the crowd as the general cause, but the specific origin of each handclap remained unknown. It represented an unknown unity in the distance that surpassed any single person. The sound body emerged from a shared objection to Lukashenko's legitimacy. There was a thick context of repression where people felt like they could not even gather without facing repercussions⁷ [35]. In his textual analysis of the posts on "Revolution Through Social Networks", Navumau found the groups eschewing traditional party politics and setting aside differences, calling on others to join. They said, "Let us unite into a single company until we make Lukashenko Resign". "We will be neither opposition nor authorities. . . we will be the single 'Movement for the Future'—an informal association obliged to struggle for the liberation of Belarus" (p. 297) [5]. In another, they put it quite plainly: "A citizen should have an opinion about the power. The state should be for the people, not people for the state" (p. 297) [5]. These all called on a shared unity that cut across typical social, cultural, and political divides.

In other words, a way to describe Navumau's finding is that people coming out expressed the will of "the people". Michael Calvin McGee explains that "the people" justify a shared meaning by drawing on joint ideological commitments imputed to the populace, where "the people" are the source of sovereignty legitimacy (p. 245) [36]. Indeed, if kings gained their power from the power of the divine, the move towards a secular government found its power in protecting the people. But, when the people lose trust in the government, it no longer has legitimacy in its power to govern. So, at "the heart of the collectivization process is a political myth" that transforms individuals into a collective agent (p. 245) [36]. If the government derives its power from the consent of the governed, appealing to the unified will of "the people" legitimizes the proposed policies (p. 245) [36]. Portraying policies as the will of "the people" wields an imagined consensus as a political weapon.

In line with McGee's argument, the Belarusian people coming out and clapping via their sound bodies became the warrant for the claim that the regime was not legitimate. The clapping is about something other than charismatic leaders delivering compelling speeches; it is about the emergence of a sound body expressing presence. The act of clapping, particularly in symbolically significant locations like Kastychnitskaya Square near the presidential palace, served as a symbolic reclamation of spaces typically dominated by state authority. This simple act challenged the norm that public areas are merely for state-sanctioned events, asserting the public's right to these spaces for expression and assembly. Perhaps more importantly, the collective action of clapping, particularly among large groups, fostered a sense of community and solidarity among participants. This collective identity formation challenged the state-imposed norm of isolation and fear, showing how solidarity can be built through shared, simple acts of dissent, strengthening communal bonds against oppressive forces. If there was an issue where only a few people shared their concerns (even if they were just behind screens), it helped them realize there were many who shared their sentiments. But the sounds enabled them to become part of something larger than themselves.

If we understand social movements as intrinsically rhetorical, then the sound body is composing the substance of their argument. The sound body enabled these protests to transcend the spatial confines of Minsk and spread throughout the country. The sound body suggests a new, pervasive form of opposition that is harder to silence and symbolizes unity in the desire for change across Belarus [34]. The citizens' disobedience reverberated from Minsk through social networks and reached Belarus's periphery. The constitution of presence—omnipresence to be precise—made it an undeniable force that permeated physical and psychological spaces across the nation. The Belarusian sound body did not merely represent a leader or an individual's voice. It challenged conventional perceptions of agency in protests, asserting that agency could be vested in the collective, intangible resonance of the sound body rather than just in the visible leaders or symbols. While in the past Lukashenko could target a specific leader to undermine a movement (as he had performed to significant effect), the decentralized, rhizomatic sound body made it impossible. Ubiquitous presence meant that even when people were arrested and thrown in jail, others would return and take their place.

While the Belarusian state apparatus could visibly monitor the gatherings online and in person, the omnipresence of the sound they generated was more challenging to contain. For instance, some clapping might have happened in a public square in Minsk, but it radiated out into distant communities as people popped up nationwide. This sound body's unpredictable emergence, not limited to a physical location or specific time, engendered a constant sense of unrest and resistance that the authorities could not quickly quell. For example, on 30 June, the BBC reported, "In June, dozens of cities saw these gatherings. In one village, ten people showed up. The entire village police force—nine officers—came to control them" [34]. While in Minsk, "police were out in their thousands. But this show of force did not deter the protesters" [34]. While physical assemblies could be confined to specific spaces or dispersed by authorities, the sound body transcended such limitations with its ethereal nature. This is precisely the *all-seeing vantage point without being seen* that the concept of the sound body embodies. It was not confined to city squares or streets; it resonated in homes, public transport, workplaces—everywhere. Its omnipresence became its power. It did not require visibility to assert its existence, making it a challenging force for authorities to combat.

The sound body became an invitation for others that their simple act of clapping could join and amplify a chorus that resonates beyond their immediate environment, which might be profoundly empowering. Realizing that each clap contributes to an omnipresent wave of dissent likely galvanized more individuals to participate. They might see this form of protest as a manifestation of defiance and an opportunity to join a more significant, unseen body. This could encourage hesitant citizens to participate because many others are willing. The idea is that their seemingly small actions collectively contribute to the sound

body, thus expanding its reach and impact. Each in the audible impact, but in the lowering the threshold of norms to participate. Each protest accumulated more normative force as people came out and clapped.

For instance, the protest allowed others to erode the fear of the government because each small act demonstrated to others that others shared their feelings. The BBC consulted Yuri Chausov, a political analyst in Minsk, on the ground during the protests, who observed that the rallies “should be seen as a symptom and a good way of fighting fear” [34]. This observation makes sense because the sound body enables others to reason that they share similar. When individuals saw and heard others clapping, they realized they were not alone in their dissent. This shared action created a powerful sense of solidarity, reducing the fear of retaliation by the authorities. The collective clapping served as a public acknowledgment of shared discontent, transforming isolated voices into a unified front and making the protest more resilient against attempts to silence it. It is not surprising that the protests continued to grow over the first few weeks.

For Lukashenko, there was no way to distinguish among the multitude of forces causing the social unrest in the weekly protests. Since a single person or group leader did not orchestrate this but just a movement, the origin of claps remained unknown. He was unable to target a specific person to root out the unrest. Yet, synchronization comes together into an overt act that separates the action from a random aberration of the everyday that calls the sound body into being. The sound body’s powerful presence in the Belarusian protests stemmed from individual acts and a salient, nationwide resonance that seemed to linger and compel force. The presence of this imagined sound body asserted the people’s right to voice their defiance. In short, the people rendered their intent quite audible; they did not view him as legitimate. The nightly occurrence set the expectation for protest, and each time made it appear more acceptable as an everyday occurrence to participate.

The clapping was a powerful act, asserting that it was incompetent and illegitimate, thus compelling Lukashenko to respond. This act of unison placed the government in a position where it had to either engage with the substance of its claim or face reputational risk and criticism for ignoring or simply being unable to suppress the popular will. At first, it tried to disrupt the protest, such as occupying the public space; for example, they would host parties and discos simultaneously; when that failed, they moved towards crackdowns and arrests. Yet, the cycle of crackdowns and the omnipresence of the sound body created more force. The clapping became an omnipresent reminder of resistance and the government’s duty to engage with it. Despite its best efforts, the government’s inability to do so undermined its legitimacy as a force that could govern its people. The government, therefore, was obligated to provide a justifiable response to this ongoing act of defiance, which transcended the physical protests and became a constant, inescapable presence throughout Belarusian society. It just kept growing.

4.2. Act II: Defiance

After escalating protests, Lukashenko decided it was time to respond definitively. In an assertive July 3rd Independence Day speech during a military parade in Minsk, Lukashenko denounced the protests under his administration as a foreign-inspired attempt to incite revolution and topple his government. He vehemently stated that efforts to weaken Belarus and nullify its independence achievements would not succeed. He decreed that handclapping was forbidden in public unless directed at war veterans [37]. He passed new legislation requiring any public silence to get prior authorization, which could apply to people queuing or gathering in parks [38]. In addition to the shifting legal conditions, he opened up the battle against their capacity to coordinate: Lukashenko also declared informational warfare, blocking the “revolution by social network” main page on a Russian social media platform, setting up fake Twitter accounts that imitated protest organizers and even foreign journalists to disseminate misinformation, and finally, telling official media outlets what to promote [37].

This creates an environment where both physical and digital spaces for protest are entirely shut down. Yet, the antecedent conditions created through the first phase of the protest ensured that the sound body had gained enough inertia that people kept returning. People knew the time and place to come together and clap. Activists were motivated by immediate economic grievances and a broader fight for fundamental freedoms. In response to the government's harsh reactions, one activist said, "This will not stop the peaceful acts of protest. We are not fighting for a bit of sausage and \$20 more pay, but for freedom" [39]. In an official statement from Revolution through the Social Networks website, Lukashenka was told he could not "strike fear into the entire people" [39]. Another appealed to the people to "Conquer your fear: become a hero" by joining them [40]. Despite harsh government reprisals, this persistent engagement in demonstrations indicates a deep-seated discontent and a strong desire for change.

Making videos of the protest and keeping it non-violent ensured that others could see that the government was not legitimate. The decision to make their protest non-violent and to use clapping was vital because it was the warrant for their claim of legitimacy. When arguing against a tyrant, they need to claim the higher ground. By choosing non-violence, they help draw the two sides into relief. The citizens of Belarus exhibited a resilient and defiant spirit in their willingness to continue protesting despite facing arrests and intensifying brutal crackdowns by the authorities. Human rights organizations noted a surge in detentions, including of prominent opposition figures like the country's first post-Soviet leader, Stanislav Shushkevich [40]. Undeterred, around 3000 protesters clapped in Minsk's main square, openly defying the ban. Lukashenko's response was swift and harsh; protesters faced beatings and arrests [40]. Tear gas was deployed to disperse participants [40].

The sound body turned to older technologies to capture and disseminate what was happening. As Jason Motlagh reported, "Activists have started producing homemade DVDs of police brutalities. The faces of some of the worst offenders have been printed on leaflets designed to resemble Wild West-style wanted posters" [37]. For those inside Belarus, these low-fi technologies became images paired with the sounds that they would hear nightly as the violence visited upon the protesters became the new argument against the regime. The sounds of the evening became paired with images of violence, giving the image of the state unjustly harming the people of Belarus for non-violent tactics. Videos of state violence against citizens enhanced its rhetorical appeal—the harshness of the crackdown strengthened the claim that the government had lost legitimacy. In particular, it created the conditions for "backfire," when the government's response appears so excessive that it works against them.

Although Lukashenko's regime tried several digital tactics, it could not preclude the "revolution through social networks" protests, and the sound body reverberated globally [41]. Consider one of the 8 July incidents that came to the forefront in this period that involved Konstantin Kapkin. Despite being physically incapable of clapping due to having only one arm, Kaplin was arrested and fined for supposedly participating in a clapping protest. This incident, among others, highlighted the regime's disproportionate reactions and drew criticism [42]. Kaplin reported that he was only trying to photograph the demonstrators with his cell phone when plainclothes police apprehended him. Kaplin described the fine as a significant financial burden, being more than twice his monthly pension, necessitating him to seek help from family and friends [42]. This was a turning point that increased global scrutiny of the government's severe approach to quelling the protests through fines and arrests, even for harmless clapping.

For the citizens of Belarus, the absurd premise that underscores the 8 July incident challenges the notion that the Belarusian regime is an all-powerful force to be feared. By having to resort to fining a one-armed man who could not physically clap to repress dissent, the administration looks desperate, petty, and irrational rather than ominously formidable. The apparent incompetence on display erodes any sense that the authorities can make calculated, strategic decisions to maintain control. Instead, the authorities are revealed

as arbitrarily grasping at ridiculous pretexts to punish critics randomly, which deepens their perceived unfairness and boosts resentment about it. Humor is potent in diminishing the aura of fear that tyrants rely upon. By portraying authoritarian figures as inept or foolish, humor undermines their perceived authority and diminishes their ability to instill fear⁸ [43,44].

The perception from sympathetic governments that Lukashenko acted too harshly was only possible because the people decided to use non-violence, which created the conditions for backfire. As the regime struggled to contain the protests and used increasingly harsh measures to stop them, while the protestors reconfigured the norms, making it appear more appealing to participate, the sound body created the conditions for backfire, undermining its credibility as an international actor. For example, the crackdown on protesters prompted condemnations from the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union. They expressed “strong concern and regret over continued violence by the Belarusian authorities against their fellow citizens who intended to exercise their civil liberties and hold peaceful public demonstrations” [39]. This approach highlights the role of sound in constructing normative terrains that compel engagement and response from both participants and authorities. While Belarus might have had tenuous commitments to human rights, it needs to keep the OSCE happening for valuable security and trade agreements. Angering these partners presents an even greater international risk.

Activists further evolved their tactics as the government clamped down on any form of audible dissent. On 13 July, protesters organized a symbolic wake-up call to the government and the public. At a prearranged time, 8 a.m., hundreds or possibly thousands of people set their mobile phones to ring simultaneously⁹ [45]. The shift in tactic kept the presence of the sound body. People all around Belarus knew of the people and their spread. The synchronized ringing acted as a metaphorical alarm, signaling the need for change and waking those unaware or indifferent to the ongoing resistance. But it became difficult for anyone to tell whose phone was part of the protest. The following week, they adapted again. Now, foot stomping is another way to produce a sound body. Here again, stomping made salient the experience of the resistance sound body, but it became more difficult to discern who the right person was accountable. The beauty of this method was in its ambiguity; it was a daily action transformed into a defiant act, making it more challenging for authorities to suppress without seeming overtly oppressive.

As the Belarusian government increased its crackdown on the clapping protests, opposition activists sought new, innovative ways to express dissent. The sonic nature of their demands made it very hard for authorities to stop it from happening. Even as the regime is now arresting so many people, they often look incompetent at doing their job, opening it up to new criticism from both the international community and making it appear more vulnerable to the domestic populations. Clearly, the sound body became a force that reconfigured the normative terrain, which imposed new obligations upon the regime, forcing them to assume that everyone—now anyone out and about—might be potentially a protestor. For Lukashenko to prevent protests, he had to ensure total control of the space. He had to tighten the laws, which enabled him to arrest anyone even before they had performed anything.

4.3. Act III: *Illegal Inaction*

On 2 August 2011, Lukashenko passed a new law that would make it illegal for people to gather “for a previously planned action or inaction”, effectively criminalizing even passive group activities if planned [46]. The state appeared desperate to impose an order upon its citizens, but it could no longer have them out. While the law was seen as absurd and likely unenforceable, it underscored the risks faced by demonstrators. The West performed the role of a sympathetic public attempting to hold Belarus generally and Lukashenko specifically accountable for the treatment of the Belarus people. The human rights abuses provided the justifications for a new round of economic sanctions by the

United States. The instability drew a further wedge between Belarus and the West, further isolating the two countries.

However, the protests ultimately subsided due to external intervention. In September, Russia stepped in, beginning a bailout process that involved several other former Soviet states. This move was partly motivated by fears of an Arab Spring-like scenario spreading to the region. Russia also promised to help Belarus exert better control over social networks, addressing a key concern of the Lukashenko regime [47]. The Russian bailout, finalized in November 2011, provided crucial economic support to Belarus. It temporarily restored the system of Russian subsidies that had previously accounted for 15–16% of Belarus's GDP, alleviating the severe economic instability [48]. This cash helped stabilize the market, which helped people secure everyday things and quelled dissent.

5. Discussion

One might dismiss the Belarus protest as unsuccessful since it did not result in regime change. Some perspectives on argumentation might conclude that the result was because these protests did not happen under the “correct” higher order conditions—those being that everyone had enough freedom in the first place—so success should not even be considered. Despite going on for many months, they could not create any long-term change, and even at this writing, Belarus remains tightly controlled by Lukashenko. However, perhaps this sour evaluation would miss the successes of the sound body and the different ways that sound tactics operated to reconfigure the normative terrain to make it feel more acceptable for people to join in and challenge the legitimacy of Lukashenko's regime.

Instead, an approach to sound tactics attends to how these acts emerge within a network of social and cultural infrastructures influenced by formal and informal commitments. These commitments shape how individuals engage with and navigate societal norms, making decisions that are both practical and grounded in good judgment—what is often described using the adjective “sound”. Such sound decisions involve everyday interactions like accusations or proposals, which adapt and modify existing commitments in line with local normative expectations. In the modern digital context, where communication often happens without a visible origin, protesters leverage this acousmatic nature to craft compelling identities and narratives. This strategic use of sound as both a noun and an adjective amplifies their messages across the fragmented digital landscape, engaging global audiences more effectively by turning the challenges of digital dispersion into a tool for widespread influence.

For many citizens, it was novel not to wear signs, make a specific demand, or carry signs. Although they risked that their audience might not know the intention behind their movement, there is a great deal of value in coming out, walking, and clapping. For each citizen, it also offers a low-stakes, accessible entryway to enter the protest while existing among the rest of the populace. The tactical decision to go “silent” and remove anything that might attach someone to a specific commitment makes it difficult to know who is arguing. For many looking not to be harassed by the police, this is precisely the point; the communicative ambiguity is a feature, not a bug. If the government does not know why citizens are sporadically clapping in the town square, they cannot hold anyone accountable, further undermining the authoritarian culture. Since it can be anyone making the sound, how can it decide who to arrest and hold accountable? This simple yet powerful act creates a “sonic body”, symbolizing unity and solidarity with minimal risk, encouraging widespread participation. But, for each person unsure if others feel their sentiment concerning the government's legitimacy, it is a powerful sound; they are not alone. As it grows, the inverse logic develops that so many people hold it; maybe they must make everything illegal or arrest everyone.

In the case of Belarus, the nightly beatings of citizens to quell protests created a multitude of problems for Lukashenko, especially during a significant economic crisis. As the clapping attracted more people and it became more difficult for the regime to decide who was resisting and who was an average citizen, it increased the potential for “back-

fire”, or when the administration’s use of force creates adverse consequences. In this case, it made the regime appear incompetent. Such aggressive suppression undermines the state’s stability and legitimacy, exacerbating challenges in managing the economy and public dissent. For the local population, this created normative conditions where they felt more emboldened to keep protesting [46]. By arresting and jailing a significant number of these workers, reducing the available workforce during an economic free fall only hurt it more. With most of the Belarusian workforce under government employment—these protests indirectly threatened the country’s labor infrastructure. Thus, while intended to suppress dissent, the government’s response to the protests may have unintentionally deepened the country’s economic woes by depleting its workforce and complicating its legal environment.

Even more problematically, Belarus’ harsh crackdowns became a resource for future deliberations about what to do and how to treat the country, resulting in sanctions. This prevented investment and economic aid, further straining an already beleaguered economy. For example, stories like the arrest of a one-armed man for clapping highlight the absurdity and overreach of the state’s response to peaceful demonstrations. This kind of overreaction to non-violent actions not only exposes the regime’s lack of proportionality but also its inability to appropriately address or interpret the nature of the protest. Such incidents underscore the regime’s desperation and undermine its credibility [46]. This drove Belarus further away from the West and isolated the nation.

Yet, it is hard not to reason that the new divide between the West and Belarus might have allowed Lukashenko to come back with Russia. The sequence of events in Belarus, particularly the government’s severe crackdown on protests and subsequent Western sanctions, catalyzed a shift that drew Belarus significantly closer to Russia. Initially, Belarus faced a deepening economic crisis and isolation as it was rebuffed by Russia in May 2011, when it sought a crucial \$1 billion stabilization loan. This rejection came amidst escalating tensions and was a critical blow, exacerbating the economic instability. The situation was further aggravated by the Western response, where increased sanctions targeted key Belarusian industries, deepening the crisis and further isolating the country internationally. But Russia initiated a bailout process involving other former Soviet states, providing substantial economic support and restoring the system of Russian subsidies, which previously constituted a significant portion of Belarus’s GDP. This assistance was crucial in stabilizing the Belarusian economy and quelling dissent, effectively mitigating the impact of Western sanctions. Russia’s intervention, therefore, not only bolstered Lukashenko’s regime but also reinforced Belarus’s dependency on Moscow, reversing earlier attempts by Belarus to engage more closely with the West. This realignment illustrates how Western sanctions, intended to penalize Belarus for its crackdowns, inadvertently pushed the country into deeper reliance on Russia, strengthening their bilateral ties in the face of external pressures.

6. Conclusions

In the digital age, the acousmatic nature of protests—where the origins of sounds or messages are obscured—enhances their impact. This approach allows activists to broadcast their cause without revealing their location or identity, which is crucial in surveillance contexts. Utilizing digital platforms, these unseen messages can go viral globally, captivating audiences with their mysterious origins. By focusing on the content rather than the communicator, these messages encourage deeper engagement and discussion, effectively turning the digital landscape’s fragmented attention into a strategic tool for mobilization and social change.

Just as protesters in Belarus found strength and solidarity in their shared actions, their gestures also began to reshape public perceptions and governmental challenges. This evolving dynamic between the protesters and the regime captures a significant shift in the landscape of dissent. Robert Coalson, reporting for the BBC, observed this transformation: “As is always the case in totalitarian regimes, living according to one’s conscience takes an effort of bravery that very few can muster” [46]. As the government scrambled to redefine

what constituted active and passive resistance, the protesters creatively expanded their repertoire of resistance methods. Over time, these subtle acts of defiance, like clapping or the ringing of an alarm, became powerful symbols of dissent, enabling more citizens to express their rejection of the regime openly and safely. Coalsen observes that the protests “have opened up new avenues through which an increasing number of people are becoming willing to make a statement”. Indeed, Coalsen notes the changing ways that people *knew* others stood with them, and they were invited to join in, such as applauding outside, “the ringing of an alarm—all of these and more have become ways to say “No” to a government whose oppression has become so evident that the opposition no longer even needs slogans or demands” [46].

The power of the sound body lies not in the charismatic face of a single person but in its flexibility and anonymity, allowing its members to commit full force to their message. Attributing presence to an idea provides an identity that transcends any individual, which does so much more than offset specific risk. In the most immediate sense, the underdetermination of the sound complicates the task for authorities to identify leaders or instigators, thereby safeguarding the movement’s core. Since it has an imaginative origin, it can constantly change the different members making the sound. The inherent flexibility of a sound body, devoid of a strict structure, facilitates quick tactical shifts that can throw off and baffle those in power. The emergence of a collective became a salient force (and presence) that transcended any individual. Part of the process convinces others to join, while the other part pressures those in power to respond. The increase in the power of the people coming together to challenge the legitimacy of the regime directly resulted in a need for a response. These sound bodies, though intangible, created a palpable presence that exerted normative pressure on the regime, demonstrating the capacity for resistance to be both omnipresent and influential without direct confrontation. The strategic ambiguity of these sound bodies and their capacity to signify dissent while evading easy suppression complicated the regime’s efforts to quell resistance, broadening the movement’s potential support base. The sound body becomes more salient as we live in a world of increased surveillance and pan-mediated public screens.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank Katy Terry, Lauren Moore, William O Keith, Emma Bloomfield and the Normative Pragmatics Reading group for help with the essay.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ While some might be tempted to see the metaphysics of presence, this is a presence affect. For more on this please see Joshua Gunn [3] and Justin Eckstein [4].
- ² For example, the term normative pragmatics was coined in the early 2000s by people like Jean Goodwin and Scott Jacobs to get at the natural normativity that accompanied the ordinary act of arguing. More recently, there has been social movement scholarship that has looked at how these norms and obligations have had ecological impacts across social movements; for more, see Justin Eckstein [6], Jean Goodwin [7], and Beth Innocenti [8].
- ³ I understand sound as a noun and an adjective. The first definition of sound is as a noun, something that you can hear or that can be heard and felt. Such a definition places sound firmly in the realm of the phenomenological. A second definition of sound, is an adjective: “showing or based on good judgment”.
- ⁴ It expands some sonic work on the multimodality of normative pragmatics, first started by Justin Eckstein [6]. For the move of argument beyond symbolicity and textualism, see Eckstein [28,29].
- ⁵ I would like to put the sound body explicitly with a corporate persona. A body may exercise agency, but the most crucial element is how it conveys presence. Corporate persona refers to how corporations can exercise characteristics, agency, and legal rights similar to individuals. Nicholas S. Paliewicz gives the example of 19th railroad companies like Southern Pacific Railroad Co.

(SP) strategically as a unified entity to influence its legal status, demonstrating agency and personhood-like qualities, even before being officially recognized as a legal “person” by the courts. “SP exerted agency by building pragmatic alliances with actors and actants that shifted the links between legal, material, economic, and social practices. . .Effectually, this networking shaped a rhetorical culture where it was sensible for the SCOTUS to assume corporations were legal persons protected under the Fourteenth Amendment” (p. 205). For more information, see Paliewicz [30].

6 Other speculation is that it could be seen as critical leverage to get them away from the West [32].

7 A Belarusian opposition leader, Andrei Sannikov, has been sentenced to five years in a high-security prison for his role in organizing mass protests against the results of the presidential election held in December [35].

8 For more on humor to fight against dictators see Srdja Popovic [43]. For the normative pragmatics of humor, see Beth Innocenti and Elizabeth Miller [44].

9 Thank you Katy Terry from the Jackson Foundation for help translating this article [45].

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