Dissent, Distance, Dilemmas: ICTs and the Belarusian Diasporic Social Movement Community

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In August 2020, Alexander Lukashenko's re-election, amid widespread allegations of electoral fraud, marked the continuation of his uninterrupted presidency since Belarus's independence and triggered an unprecedented wave of mass protests in the country's history. In response, Lukashenko's adaptive authoritarian regime unleashed brutal repression and systemic human rights violations. In this context, the diasporic social movement community, leveraging information and communication technologies (ICTs), emerged as critical actors supporting the anti-regime social movement in their origin-homeland. Based on semi-structured interviews with 13 members of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community, this paper explores the role of ICTs in facilitating their political actions during the 2020 protests, as well as the factors that facilitated or hindered their participation and use of ICTs. Our study highlights that ICTs facilitated diaspora geopolitics from below by enabling "social movement community," where otherwise disparate diasporic satellite publics converged around the common political goal of overthrowing the Lukashenko regime. However, the diasporic social movement community's use of ICTs was also fraught with ethical and moral complexities, navigating the "proximity dilemma" of remote participation and influencing a cause from a distance, while benefiting from socio-spatial privileges in their host country. Furthermore, the diaspora's ICT usage is shaped by the political regime, fear of transnational repression, and the geopolitical positions of both the origin-homeland and host country, as a consequence of adaptive authoritarianism in the Belarusian case. We discuss how CSCW can support decentralised, geographically dispersed diasporic organising with respect to social movements under varying authoritarian constraints.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → Collaborative and social computing**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Diaspora, Social Movement, Transnational, Resistance, Satellite Publics, Social Movement Community, ICTs, Social Media

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1 Introduction

In August 2020, Belarus witnessed massive protest demonstrations — the largest since its independence [160] — against alleged electoral fraud and the reelection of Alexander Lukashenko, the country's long-standing president since 1994. Infamous as Europe's last dictator, Lukashenko's regime unleashed massive state repression, arbitrarily imprisoning thousands of protesters, subjecting many to severe torture, and causing numerous deaths and injuries. This intense state repression forced opposition leaders, journalists, democratic activists, and many others into exile [2].

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As anti-authoritarian protests gained momentum within Belarus, the previously inconspicuous and politically inactive Belarusian diaspora became actively involved [66]. This paved the way for the emergence of Belarusian diasporic social movement community — or social networks, including informal activist networks, formal and informal organisations, and other heterogeneous actors, working towards a shared social movement goal [145, 146]— committed to liberating Belarus from the Lukashenko regime. They initiated significant protest actions and solidarity efforts against the Lukashenko regime across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia [143]. The Belarusian diasporic social movement community demonstrated remarkable resilience in sustaining resistance by engaging with transnational opportunity structures — discursive, economic, and political — to oppose the Lukashenko regime. Apart from protest actions, they also engaged in raising awareness of the Belarusian authoritarian regime internationally, operating diaspora media and publications, gathering solidarities, and providing support to their fellow nationals battling against the Lukashenko regime within their origin-homeland [35, 126, 130, 143].

The Lukashenko regime ruthlessly repressed Belarusian civil society, which comprises self-organising groups, collectives, and individuals advocating for autonomy, as well as political society, where governance and public power are contested [47, 93]. Hence, the support of Belarusian diasporic social movement community was critical to the social movement. Notably, information and communication technologies (ICTs) played a vital role in facilitating alternative publics [108], benefiting both Belarusians within Belarus and those in the diaspora. For exiled Belarusian activists, ICTs were crucial for their adaptation strategies, enabling them to circumvent regime-imposed restrictions, while also allowing the diasporic social movement community to sustain the flow of information about the social movement [111].

In North America, the pro-democracy initiatives of the Belarusian diasporic social movement community remain particularly vibrant. This includes the Rada (Council) of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, based in Canada, which is recognised as the world's oldest government-in-exile [27]. Belarusian cultural alliances in the United States and Canada have organised aid and supported political prisoners and their families facing persecution in Belarus [27, 111]. Belarusian diasporic social movement community have also garnered significant support from Western governments [64], such as the Canadian government allocating $2.25 million to support pro-democracy and civil society groups resisting Lukashenko's regime [136] and the Belarus Democracy Act, a U.S. federal law supporting pro-democracy and human rights initiatives in Belarus [84]. However, despite the historical and significant role of the North American Belarusian diaspora in pro-democracy advocacy for Belarus, the existing literature predominantly focuses on Eastern European contexts [3, 78, 83, 112, 122, 167]. This gap arises from the tendency to frame the Belarusian issue primarily within European institutional contexts [22, 53], with inquiries covering North America focusing on state relations and foreign policy, rather than exploring the North American Belarusian diaspora [11, 26, 157, 165]. Our study centres on members of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community, highlighting their critical contributions to pro-democracy advocacy, particularly during the 2020 protests.

Building upon recent CSCW studies that emphasise the importance of understanding how diaspora communities develop and deploy socio-technical infrastructures to support and strengthen social movements in their origin-homeland [9], this paper investigates the following research questions:

(1) What role did ICTs play in facilitating the political actions of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community during the 2020 protests?, and
(2) What factors facilitated or hindered their participation and use of ICTs in supporting the 2020 Belarusian protests?

In addressing these questions, this paper explores the crucial role of diasporic actors in sustaining anti-regime social movements through ICTs, contributing to the broader understanding of transnational technology-mediated activism.

Through semi-structured interviews with 13 members of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community, the study identifies three primary themes shaping the role of ICTs in facilitating and supporting informal and grassroots organising: 1) the ethical and moral complexities faced by these participants regarding their distant/remote participation and contributions to the social movement in their origin-homeland (the "proximity dilemma"), 2) the formation of a "diasporic social movement community" through strategic deployment and use of ICTs by satellite publics, and 3) the influence of adaptive authoritarianism and transnational repression on the ICT usage and tech-mediated resistance of the diasporic social movement community. The paper contributes to CSCW and HCI scholarship by discussing how these communities use ICTs to shape diaspora geopolitics from below, form collective protest identities, and promote oppositional subcultures in anti-regime social movements, as well as examining the ways technologies can support these processes.

2 Related Works

2.1 Technology and Social Movements in CSCW and HCI

While collective actions often serve as formative contexts for social movements, not all collective actions qualify as social movements. Social movements are characterised by contentious political activities in the extra-institutional realm, aimed at transforming — not merely reforming — persistent social, economic, political, or legal structures [103, 149]. Unlike occasional insurrections or protests, social movements typically "resemble strings of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space," and comprise diverse groups and organisations with varying degrees of formalisation and institutionalisation [42].

Despite the extensive body of CSCW and HCI research on activism and collective action, Dimond et al. [44] highlighted the inadequate attention paid specifically to social movements. Since this observation, several studies have explored the role of technology in social movement organising [56, 76], activists' appropriation of technologies [77, 95], movement building [50, 104], institutional transformation [159], and designing systems to support social movements [37, 120]. Research has also examined software technologies that facilitate transnational collaboration between activists [44], along with accounts of hashtag movements that challenge identity stereotypes [94] and infographic activism [69]. Other studies have examined social movements' representation on social media platforms [125], the role of social media in enhancing the visibility of discursive processes within movements [38], the influence of local social and political contexts on social movement discourses on social media [75], and social movement organisations' use of social media to engage with bystander populations [140].

Further, scholarship has examined the support of knowledge production and collective memory for social movements through online avenues such as Wikipedia (e.g., Black Lives Matter) [155], information diffusion during events such as the 2011 Arab uprisings on Twitter (later known as X) [147], and efforts to enhance participatory spaces for activism [129]. However, the deployment of ICTs in social movements has also led to inequitable outcomes, such as asymmetric power and voice for technically skilled individuals within the movement. This imbalance has prompted calls for a "grassroots culture of technology practice" [52]. Despite these advancements, much of this scholarship has focused on local or national movements, with limited emphasis on the diasporic context and the role of diaspora actors in supporting social movements of their origin-homeland [9].

2.2 Diaspora and Anti-Regime Social Movements

Previous scholarship has documented the involvement of diasporas in anti-regime social movements and contentious politics in their origin-homelands. Diasporas often leverage political opportunity structures in their host country, mobilise community resources, and strategically deploy ideologies and [imagined] identities to support movements [72, 123, 148]. They have played a crucial role in various movements, such as the 2011 Arab Spring [107], Hong Kong's 2019 anti-extradition movement [63], the Tamil liberation movement [161], and efforts against armed conflicts in Colombia [19]. Diasporas represent anti-regime social movements in their origin-homelands to external audiences, amplify and legitimise the claims of allies, and facilitate the flow of resources back home [106].

However, diasporas are not monolithic; they encompass a wide range of groups, collectives, and individuals from different generations and migration waves [73]. Their engagement in social movements may reflect divisive, sectarian, and partisan conflicts rooted in their origin-homelands' sociopolitical context, as well as concerns about transnational repression [107]. Diaspora support is multifaceted: some members collect financial resources and mobilise donations, while others participate in organisational efforts through diaspora groups and networks [9], with or without collaboration with actors back home. Additionally, differing perceptions and values between diaspora members and local actors may exist [9]. Scholars have identified social networks, including informal activist networks, formal and informal organisations, and other heterogeneous actors working towards a shared social movement goal, as social movement communities [145, 146].

Diasporas opposing authoritarian and repressive regimes undertake a range of activities, including public demonstrations, advocacy efforts [63], financial support for social movements [9], assisting exiled activists, lobbying in international forums [113, 117], representing their political causes in international media [151], garnering geopolitical support [72, 128], and using ICTs to promote oppositional discourses and deliver supportive resources [5, 28, 29]. These activities contribute to exposing and shaming human rights violations perpetrated by authoritarian regimes (e.g., North Korea [58]) but, more significantly, they disrupt the regime's monopoly on the flows of information [107].

Diasporas' involvement within their host countries also exemplifies "transnational acts of citizenship" [10], as observed in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora [10] and the Sikh diaspora [34]. Through political participation in host countries, diasporas sustain alternative political visions and social movements, regardless of their outcomes in the origin-homeland. From a state-centric perspective, however, diaspora-led social movements or subnational politics operated from the diaspora are often associated with extremism and security concerns. However, diasporas' political participation also manifests what Hyndman et. al.[65] described as 'diaspora geopolitics'—the everyday understandings and practices of protest and survival by diaspora subjects [from below] [65]. Our study will explore how technology aids these processes, focusing on the ICT-mediated practices that enable diasporic communities to engage in anti-regime activism and sustain transnational resistance efforts.

2.3 The Role of ICTs in Diasporic Activism

ICTs enable diasporas to maintain community ties and connect with dispersed populations [105], helping mitigate the erosion of social networks between diasporas and their origin-homeland [121]. Beyond their social connective function, ICTs, including the internet and social media, provide "spaces of autonomy," enabling diasporas in liberal democratic states to construct counter-power and support social movements through autonomous communication, free from the constraints of

state repression [31]. In this capacity, diasporas involved in anti-regime social movements can form "spheres of dissidence" [31], effectively countering digital repression in their origin-homeland.

However, authoritarian regimes often deter diaspora activism by sowing mistrust and fear within communication networks [101], resulting in self-censorship and decreased use of ICTs by activists [105]. These regimes employ tactics such as malware attacks, hacking attempts, disinformation campaigns [102], and the use of spyware [153]. Digital repression frequently intertwines with traditional modes of repression, including enforced disappearances, proxy punishments, and the coerced repatriation of diaspora members [102, 153]. By leveraging technology, authoritarian states transgress the territorial boundaries of nation-states to enhance long-distance repression of diasporic dissidents.

Existing CSCW and HCI research has paid limited attention to the role of diasporas or diasporic social movement communities in supporting political and social movements in their origin-homelands through ICTs. A notable exception is the work of Armouch et al. [9], which examines how, following the Lebanese revolution in October 2019, the diaspora collaborated with local actors to create a "transnational networked public." They utilised ICTs such as WhatsApp, Slack, and Zoom to coordinate their efforts in support of the social movement. Despite this contribution, research has largely overlooked how diaspora communities leverage ICTs to create autonomous spaces for communication and organising, or how they navigate the socio-technical and political dynamics of transnational repression. Similarly, the ways in which these dialectics influence technology use and shape the publics formed by diasporas remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, our study investigates how ICTs facilitate diasporic activism while examining the challenges posed by transnational repression, thus contributing to a broader understanding of diaspora-supported social movements.

2.4 Diaspora, Public Sphere and Social Movements

Jürgen Habermas envisioned the public sphere as a social realm where people form public opinions through reasoned and critical deliberations on matters of general interest [57]. However, critics have pointed out exclusions based on gender, race, and class, and the normalisation of elite interests [18, 39, 86, 110, 132, 168]. In response, scholars have proposed recognising multiple competing publics rather than a singular public sphere [110]. This shift emphasises the importance of autonomous spaces for marginalised communities to securely voice their concerns and shape alternative political discourses. For example, Fraser introduced the concept of "subaltern counterpublics," describing them as "parallel discursive arenas where marginalised groups invent and circulate counter discourses" to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs [110]. However, Squires [144] and Dawson [39] have highlighted the persistent threat of state intrusion, including policing and surveillance, which suppress democratic actions among marginalised Black publics. Squires [144] further proposed three distinct forms of public responses from marginalised communities: enclave, counterpublic, and satellite. Enclave publics conceal their counterhegemonic strategies to navigate state repression while internally engaging in planning and debate. Counterpublics actively and openly engage with the broader public to advance counter-hegemonic ideas, using both violent and nonviolent strategies. Satellites, on the other hand, maintain distance from other publics for non-oppressive reasons but engage with the wider public sphere when necessary.

While these discussions predominantly focus on the territorial nation-state and its political community, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argued that the advent of electronic media and increased global migration have given rise to diasporic public spheres [8]. These spheres enable diaspora communities to envision themselves as connected, fostering shared imaginations and collective actions [8]. ICTs, particularly the internet, have become central to building inter- and

intra-diaspora social networks, providing new avenues for political engagement. For instance, diasporas have used platforms like Twitter to challenge misrepresentations [1] and Facebook groups to create virtual communities and counterpublics, as seen in the Zimbabwean diaspora's use of Facebook [109]. The Eritrean diaspora leveraged ICTs to establish an online public sphere that supported their national independence movement, using these tools as an "offshore platform" to challenge the state [20]. Similarly, messaging apps such as WhatsApp have been employed as protective spaces for deliberating on sensitive issues [152], while collaborative tools like Slack and Zoom have facilitated communication and organising efforts among diasporas [9].

Nonetheless, diasporic participation online faces challenges like fear of harassment and surveillance, leading many to engage with politically like-minded networks [82] and community enclaves [43, 71]. Diasporic communities also seek control over how these technologies are deployed [85]. In conflict-intensive situations, where repression against social movements in the origin-homeland is prevalent, diaspora members often grapple with feelings of helplessness and emotional trauma. These reactions stem from consuming, reacting to, and responding to information flows, leading to hesitancy in their political engagement [154]. Consequently, the types of ICTs employed and the ways they are used to construct diasporic public spheres in the context of social movements are highly contextual. They are shaped by community needs, strategies, and vulnerabilities, often reflecting the insecurities of diasporic actors.

3 Background: Belarusian Political History, National Identity, and the 2020 Protests

In July 1994, three years after the independence of the Republic of Belarus following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko became the country's first president. Although Lukashenko's rise to power was marked by overwhelming popularity, securing an 80% vote share, he quickly consolidated authority by expanding presidential powers, removing term limits on the presidency, and weakening institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the Central Election Commission [60, 99]. Throughout his rule, Lukashenko has ruthlessly suppressed democratic dissent, political opposition, and independent media [134]. This repression has significantly influenced migration decisions among Belarusians, prompting many to seek safer environments and better opportunities abroad [137].

The authoritarian turn under Lukashenko also spurred greater activism within the Belarusian diaspora, with efforts largely coordinated by 'Baćkaŭščyna,' the World Association of Belarusians. The First World Congress of the Belarusian diaspora was held in 1993 [167]. However, after Lukashenko assumed office, state support for such efforts was withdrawn, and the regime sought to create a government-controlled diaspora association [167]. Despite this, between 1993 and 2017, ten World Congresses of the Belarusian diaspora were held [118]. Furthermore, prominent anti-regime diaspora activists faced visa denials and frequent harassment. Due to multiple waves of emigration for various reasons, including political repression, nearly 1.5 million Belarusians currently reside abroad [118].

3.1 Belarusian National Identity

Unlike other post-Soviet states that pursued active de-Sovietisation, Lukashenko re-appropriated the Soviet legacy to construct a nationalised version of Belarusian identity and foster a "collective social memory" [15]. He framed Belarusians as active participants in Soviet modernisation rather than as victims and positioned them within the "East Slavic civilisational space," promoting linguistic and cultural ties with Russia [14]. This stance led to policies of linguistic and cultural Russification, undermining the Belarusian language and national symbols, such as the white-red-white flag [13].

The Belarusian language, historically marginalised, experienced a brief revival following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. However, Lukashenko's 1995 referendum established Russian as an

official state language, leading to a steady decline in Belarusian usage in education and daily life. By the 2009 census, only 26.1% of ethnic Belarusians reported using Belarusian at home, compared to 41.3% in 1999 [114]. As a result, the Belarusian language is now considered endangered in its own country [142]. Additionally, Lukashenko replaced the white-red-white flag, associated with the Belarusian Democratic Republic and early independence, with a red-green flag reminiscent of the Soviet era [70]. This undermining of Belarusian national symbols and identity was part of Lukashenko's strategy to stabilise his authoritarian rule [12].

Attempts to foster strong ethnic notions of Belarusian identity gained little traction among the general populace, and Belarusians seemed to embrace a civic form of identity marked by the absence of exclusionary boundaries [30]. Even when elements of Belarusian identity aligned with the Lukashenko regime's state ideology, they did not necessarily reflect political conformity. Belarusians often retained their own interpretations and meanings of national identity, which remained diverse and fragmented [127].

In contrast, oppositional political discourse framed the Belarusian nation as victims of the Soviet Union and emphasised linkages to Europe [14, 15]. Democratic aspirations, championed by groups such as the Belarusian People's Front, were infused with robust ethno-nationalist and anti-Soviet sentiments [16]. Consequently, symbols like the Belarusian language and the white-red-white flag became hallmarks of political opposition to Lukashenko's regime [74].

3.2 Belarus and Adaptive Authoritarianism

Political scientist Matthew Frear [47] identifies Belarus as a case of "adaptive authoritarianism," explaining the longevity of the Lukashenko regime despite domestic and foreign pressures and challenges. Lukashenko pragmatically drew on socialist and nationalist themes, adapting to sustain the regime without relying exclusively on any fixed political, sectoral, ethnic, or regional forces.

Similarly, Lukashenko's foreign policy has also been dynamic, balancing relationships with Russia and Western nations to navigate contingent political and economic crises. The Lukashenko regime occasionally improved relations with the West and showed slight signs of democratisation in Belarus, to use as leverage in negotiations with Russia [91]. For example, after 2014, Lukashenko enhanced diplomatic and trade relations with the West, leading to the easing of European Union sanctions against Belarus [124]. Toward the end of 2019, the Belarusian regime was more hesitant to align closely with Russia but maintained a pragmatic relationship [91]. Lukashenko even deployed anti-Russian rhetoric during the 2020 election campaign, which quickly reverted to a fraternal stance as the 2020 Belarusian movement triggered domestic instability for him [36, 91].

Furthermore, Lukashenko has not banned multiparty elections; instead, the regime renews its legitimacy through the ritual conduct of the electoral process, where the opposition is institutionally marginalised, for example, through electoral fraud and asymmetric distribution of media coverage for candidates. The Lukashenko regime is also unhesitant in deploying the state's coercive capacity to violently repress democratic dissent. Moreover, his regime has been vocal about the Belarusian national legacy, emphasising the importance of bringing order to society and promoting economic development. His regime has consolidated political power through a "populist, personalist, non-democratic rule," marked by managed pluralism and neopatrimonialism — a continuum of legal-rational rule and patrimonial tendencies aimed at securing loyalty [47, 59]. The regime is not a static and stagnant vestige of the former Soviet Union; instead, by engaging in selective adaptation, Lukashenko exemplifies "continuity through change" [47]. Understanding Lukashenko's regime and how the diaspora responds to it requires examining these adaptive authoritarian strategies.

3.3 The 2020 Belarusian Protests

The 2020 Belarusian protests, sparked by electoral fraud and mounting opposition to Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, reflected the public rejection of an adaptive authoritarian model that repressed civic freedoms in an increasingly modern and technologically interconnected society [17]. In 2019, participation in anti-regime protests in Belarus stood at a mere 3% [79]. By 2020, this figure had risen sharply, with surveys indicating that 14% of Belarusians had participated in protests and 65% believed the electoral process was rigged [45].

In response, the Lukashenko regime perpetrated systematic human rights abuses, including unlawful killings, sexual violence, arbitrary prosecutions, arrests, and detentions of dissenters [2, 164]. Digital repression, such as internet shutdowns, communication blackouts, and censorship, was also deployed to suppress anti-regime social movements [68, 96]. As repression intensified, protestors adapted their strategies, shifting from large-scale demonstrations to neighbourhood actions and smaller local marches [80]. According to the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, at least 100,000 people fled Belarus due to this repression [2]. These events catalysed a civic awakening within the Belarusian diaspora, prompting protest actions and the formation of solidarity groups in countries such as the United States, Canada, Belgium, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Japan, and India [143].

Historically, Belarusian national identity orientations have been diverse, with some advocating for the cultivation of the Belarusian language and culture, while others, influenced by state-controlled Belarusian and Russian media, were indifferent to such efforts [21]. The 2020 protests, however, reignited interest in nationalist symbols, including the white-red-white flag and the Belarusian language, which became focal points for anti-Lukashenko social movements [21, 162].

3.3.1 Subsequent Transnational Repression. In the aftermath of the 2020 protests, the Lukashenko regime intensified transnational repression, targeting human rights activists and journalists in exile. While many prominent figures in Belarus were imprisoned, the state also expanded its reach abroad, targeting Belarusian news outlets and Telegram channels run by the diaspora. Amendments to the criminal procedure code in July 2021 allowed the regime to prosecute individuals outside the country. For instance, in January 2023, five Belarusian activists affiliated with the Telegram channel 'Black Book of Belarus' were sentenced to 12 years in absentia. The channel had disclosed personal details of officials implicated in the suppression of protests and human rights abuses. Further, in May 2024, digital forensic investigations conducted by Citizen Lab, based at the University of Toronto, and Access Now uncovered the use of Pegasus spyware against Belarusian political opposition figures, civil society actors, and journalists living in exile [135].

4 Data and Methods

Despite heightened political participation in the 2020 Belarusian protests, recruiting participants for this research was challenging due to the persistent transnational persecution carried out by the Belarusian state. Given Belarus's interstate cooperation with Russia and Central Asian countries [81] and concerns over Belarusian intelligence agents active in Europe [97], we continuously assessed the risk profile of this research project [156].

Our primary recruitment criterion centred on identifying participants who had actively engaged in the 2020 Belarusian protests within diasporic communities, or the Belarusian diasporic social movement community. Prior studies have highlighted that long-term Belarusian migration and diaspora are most prominent in Russia, Poland, Germany, the United States, and Canada [119]. However, ensuring participant safety was our foremost priority. Due to heightened security risks, we excluded members of the Belarusian diaspora in Russia from our recruitment efforts.

Members of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community faced comparatively lower security risks than their counterparts in Europe. Although two participants were initially recruited from Europe — where the Belarusian diaspora is both active and influential — we subsequently suspended further recruitment in the region following a risk assessment that identified elevated security concerns [156]. We mention these participants in the participant information table (Table 1) of this paper to ensure research transparency. However, for the purposes of this study, we excluded the transcripts of European participants, limiting our focus to the North American context. This adjustment reflects methodological flexibility, ensuring participant safety and adapting research methods in response to confidentiality needs and security concerns [54, 166]. Furthermore, the North American diaspora, despite being home to the world's oldest Belarusian government-in-exile, remains underrepresented in existing scholarship [27, 78, 112, 136]. Its significant geopolitical role in supporting Belarusian democracy further highlights the importance of focusing on North America in this study.

In the early stages of research, we mapped broad categories of known initiatives within the Belarusian diasporic social movement community. This mapping sought to visualise interrelations between diverse actors and identify key players within the diaspora. Based on this mapping, we prepared an initial list of potential participants and reached out to them through Twitter and LinkedIn. Recruiting participants was extremely challenging. However, after securing an interview with a highly respected Belarusian activist, doors opened for further participant recruitment. This activist' endorsement enhanced the second author's trustworthiness within the Belarusian diasporic social movement community, enabling refinement of our participant list and successful recruitment of further participants. We also ensured diversity among participants in terms of age, gender, occupation, geographic location, and year of relocation.

4.1 Participant Profiles

Our participants, actively engaged in supporting the 2020 Belarusian protests, belonged to the North American Belarusian social movement community. They spanned generations and migration waves from 1979 to 2022. Among pre-2010 migrants, we observed participatory affiliation with formal diasporic institutions such as community centres, diasporic organisations, and churches, which worked to preserve Belarusian identity and culture. In contrast, participants who migrated after 2010 were often unaware of or uninterested in these organisations and institutions, instead relying heavily on social media platforms to informally build communities and solidarity, facilitating collective actions during the protests. This indicates that the Belarusian diaspora was not well consolidated in the years preceding the 2020 protests [66, 143]. Moreover, older Belarusian organisations in diaspora spaces did not maintain strong ties with Belarusians within the country [130]. As a result, newer migrants lacked both awareness and familiarity with these organisations.

Despite these differences, both groups used online platforms to support the protests, albeit with varying degrees of engagement and participatory ethos. Most participants relocated to North America for reasons such as better economic opportunities, career advancement, higher education, and concerns about anti-Semitism in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), rather than due to political repression. However, two participants who migrated between 2018 and 2020 did so due to political repression associated with anti-regime activism.

4.2 Methods

We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews between September 2022 and May 2023, either on Zoom or in person, depending on participant preference and comfort. All participants except one consented to being recorded. Interview questions were categorised into sections about personal safety, relocation, protest participation, community identity, technology use, and expectations for

the study, concluding with an open-ended segment for additional comments. For high-profile participants, internationally recognised opposition figures against the Lukashenko regime, we tailored the questions to align with their areas of expertise, ensuring focused and insightful conversations.

The interviews averaged two hours, with high-profile individuals available for only one to one-and-a-half hours, and the longest session lasting four-and-a-half hours. One interview was conducted in Russian, while the rest were mainly in English, with occasional use of Belarusian and Russian phrases. Post-interview informal conversations often shifted to Russian, and these were neither transcribed nor included in our analysis. When using Belarusian phrases during interviews, we took special care to respect cultural sensitivities related to language.

To ensure confidentiality, all documentation (e.g., consent forms) was password-protected, and participants often used pseudonyms. We assigned made-up initials for each participant to eliminate any temporal information that participant numbers might disclose. After transcription, we securely deleted the audio files, retaining only the anonymised text documents. Transcription and translation were performed using an in-house application without internet access to preclude any third-party access. All translations were verified and edited by the second author, who conducted the interviews.

All interviewees opted against compensation, instead directing any potential remuneration towards organisations supporting the Belarusian social movement or political prisoners.

All the three authors (A1, A2, and A3) participated in identifying themes from the transcripts using a thematic analysis approach [25]. This iterative process involved coding the data to identify patterns and themes relevant to our research questions. We then narrowed our focus specifically to explore the dilemmas faced by the diaspora and their use of technologies to support the movement (see Table 2). The study received ethics approval from the authors' host university.

4.3 Positionality and Reflexivity

The authors have a combined academic background in Information Science, HCI, CSCW, Science and Technology Studies (STS), Political Science, and Sociology. The authors were self-reflective about their own positions in the research process and how their identities shaped the trust participants had in them, given the risk of transnational repression.

The second author (A2), who conducted the interviews, inherits her cultural lineage from a post-Soviet nationality. Born in Moscow during the USSR era, she identifies with a diverse Tatar-Georgian-Dutch-Chinese-Slavic heritage and does not align with being 'russkaya' or ethnically Russian, politically supporting suppressed cultures within the post-Soviet space. Her emigration to North America for safety and educational opportunities, coupled with support for activist causes against authoritarian regimes in her origin-homeland, fostered her sense of solidarity with the Belarusian diaspora and their struggle for democratisation. However, she was not part of the Belarusian diasporic social movement community. During interviews, she paid close attention to Belarusian cultural sensitivities and language nuances, familiarising herself with Belarusian phrases for communicative use. When introducing herself to participants, she openly discussed her ethnic origin, emphasised her research affiliation with a North American university, and clearly stated her political stance. Her critical reflexivity and political values enabled trust-building and dialogic engagements.

The other authors (A1 and A3) had an interest and experience in studying the use of technology in social movements. As outsiders to the Belarusian socio-political landscape, they engaged in a detailed study of Belarusian political history and culture before analysing the transcripts. Due to a lack of proficiency in East Slavic languages, they primarily relied on English sources. A3 critically assessed the data collection processes and methodologies, guiding the collection of data led by A2 and data analysis led by A1 and supported by A2.

Table 1. Participant Information

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Current Residence	Year of Migration	Reason for Relocation
DY	20-30	Man	Belarus	USA	2017-2018	Professional
SP	30-40	Woman	Belarus Canada	Canada	2009-2010	Economic (with parents)
IO	20-30	Woman	Belarus	Europe	2018-2019	Political repression
MK	30-40	Woman	Belarus Canada	Canada	2004	Economic (with parents)
FI	30-40	Man	Belarus	Europe	2020	Political repression
AP	40-50	Woman	Belarus Canada	Canada	2008	Professional
ON	40-50	Woman	Belarus USA	USA	2006-2008	Education
NZ	30-40	Woman	Belarus USA	USA	2017-2018	Education
SF	30-40	Woman	Belarus USA	USA	2014-2015	Economic
SZ	70-80	Woman	Canada	Canada	1979	Economic
AK	50-60	Man	Canada	Canada	2003	Political climate
YM	50-60	Man	Canada	Canada	1996	Professional
NW	30-40	Woman	Belarus	USA	2017-2018	Economic
KT	30-40	Woman	Belarus Canada	USA	2013-2014	Economic (with parents)
MR	40-50	Man	Canada	USA-Canada	2000: USA 2020: Canada	Economic

5 Findings

5.1 Ambivalence and Tensions in Social Movement Participation

Like most other diasporas, our participants' subjectivity, as part of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community, inherits tensions around identity, cultural imaginings of origin-homeland, belonging, and hopes and ambiguities related to the prospect of returning to their roots. Our participants negotiated the geographical disjunction between their host society and their origin-homeland by finding proximity and connections with fellow nationals living outside of Belarus. These tensions were particularly evident during critical junctures, such as the 2020 Belarusian protests, where our participants exhibited remarkable perseverance in providing support to their compatriots in the origin-homeland.

Participants particularly grappled with a dilemma concerning the form and content of their participation in the protests. They participated or contributed to politics and social movements in/for their 'imagined heimat' [6] — the Belarus, where they might or might not return. They lived their political life as remote participants, from a relatively 'safe space' compared to Belarus, with limited dangers of immediate repression. In other words, compared to protesters inside Belarus,

our participants enjoyed the benefits of mobility — migration, resettlement, stable income, and employment security — with either temporary or permanent residency outside of Belarus.

As SZ stated:

> *"There are two Belarus in the world. One is people who stay or have to stay, and the other is diaspora. We have a connection, but these are different worlds" (Interview SZ).*

Our participants signifying 'politics from away' — a remote participation with limited/distant material stake — were mindful of the disparate cost of authoritarian repression. Belarusians inside Belarus were immediate targets for the Lukashenko regime, and they paid a higher cost for their protest participation than diasporic communities. This awareness shaped the diaspora's right to 'voice' for Belarusians or their role in shaping/supporting an anti-authoritarian movement, eliciting ethical and moral conflicts.

We use the term "proximity dilemma" to encapsulate this moral and ethical tension that arises from participants' recognition of their relative privileges as members of the diaspora, because they were physically distant from the risks of immediate state repression. This dilemma was further complicated by the forced nature of some departures, as highlighted by participants who migrated between 2018–19 and 2020 due to political repression.

As AP recalled;

> *"Are people who run away bad because they're kind of leaving the country and not taking up the fight? So people who fled, do they have a right to comment on anything that's going on inside of Belarus? Or they just chickened out and the real heroes are inside? There is no good or bad answer. Actually, a lot of people who fled, they fled because of the same problems that happened in 2020. Very few people left because they wanted to have fun or money or a better life. A lot of it was forced" (Interview AP).*

Despite the authoritarian regime laying the conditions for most participants' departure/relocation from Belarus, our participants harboured moral guilt for their lack of proximity to the social movements within their origin-homeland. This led them to question their right to voice for Belarus or contribute to the ongoing movement.

For instance, DY emphasised:

> *"It's pretty painful for a person living outside of Belarus and just being outside of Belarus during the protests because you feel really helpless and you see people go into the streets and get punished. But, you are not, since you are in a safe country. It's a complicated question. Because no matter what you do, you feel that it's still not enough and you are not helping" (Interview DY).*

This sense of helplessness was a common sentiment among participants due to their remote involvement, which also reflected a persistent longing for physically participating in social movements back in Belarus. Driven by this longing, a strengthened sense of diasporic obligation and duty motivated participants to find meaningful participatory avenues to engage, contribute, and support the 2020 Belarusian protests in North America and satisfy their moral urges. As SF said:

> *"There was a point when I realised, if I don't go to the street, I just don't know where to put myself. I don't know what to do with myself. I realised that reposting and watching things and doing nothing tangible… I was burning out more than if I were to actually do something" (Interview SF).*

Therefore, efforts made by our participants included amplifying the protest discourse internationally and supporting the social movement by leveraging their skills and resources. For example, the formation of People's Embassies of Belarus in nearly 24 countries by the Belarusian diaspora (drawing legitimacy from the resolution of the World Congress of Belarusians) played a critical

role in expanding the public discourse on the repression faced by civilians and activists in Belarus, questioning the legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenko's re-election. They also maintained liaison with various national and international bodies as well as organisations to inform them of the repressive context and electoral fraud in their origin-homeland. Moreover, through several formal and informal forums, diaspora members provided assistance to those who had to flee Belarus due to authoritarian repression and conducted fundraising initiatives to support those affected in Belarus.

Despite these efforts, participants often felt powerless and helpless about the situation back home. While striving to contribute meaningfully to the anti-authoritarian social movement through remote participation, diaspora members had to contend with the constraints caused by Lukashenko's repressive regime. The proximity dilemma shaped their participation, amplifying the ambivalence and tensions inherent in their representative and participatory roles. Remote participants grappled with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and the ethics of speaking on behalf of those directly affected. Yet this same dilemma also provoked a heightened moral sense of obligation, driving the diaspora to actively contribute despite their physical distance.

5.2 The Political Opportunity Structures and Affordances

The proximity dilemma also created conditions for uniting an otherwise fragmented diaspora around a common cause. The anger against the Lukashenko regime and its state repression of Belarusian protesters was channelled both online and on the streets. Further, this facilitated recognition of the diaspora's political opportunity structures and affordances, encouraging members to contribute to the anti-regime social movement by utilising the relatively safe spaces they occupied.

As our participant SF emphasised;

> "*I could go in the street with the Belarusian flag. And I knew I would not be arrested of it. I would not be beaten up. I would not be charged. Yes, part of it is that I'm a white person in like, in New York. If you're a black person, can never be sure of that. And I realized that I have both privileges of race in the country where I live but also being outside of the country of actual unrest. I have like this double safety and it was liberating to actually be able to go in the street*" (Interview SF).

Perceptions of geopolitical alignment between North America's liberal democratic regimes and anti-Lukashenko protesters, coupled with the racial privilege of Belarusians in the region, contributed to a heightened sense of safety for participants' political engagement. Their socio-spatial position, combined with the political and cultural content of the protest, facilitated diverse forms of political action. The motivation to take to the streets was driven by anger against the brutal repression of the Lukashenko regime. Many participants believed — or at least hoped — that the 2020 protests would lead to the regime's fall, creating conditions for their return to Belarus due to the historic momentum generated by the protest mobilisations.

As NW said "*everybody believed that something can be changed. enough was enough.*" Similarly, SF asserted "*there was a ground to believe that things were going to change. If there was a new president, if there was a new government, I would probably go back to Belarus.*" Furthermore, they also took to the streets, seeking international visibility for their cause. Participant MK noted that Belarusians flocked to the streets driven by the "*desire for justice, desire to bring awareness here to what's happening back home.*" Hence, they aimed to engage North American public discourse and make their cause acknowledged.

Participants wanted international media outlets to amplify their cause and for global bodies to monitor human rights violations in Belarus. They were acutely aware of the geopolitical significance of broadcasting their protests in North America and regarded this as a moral responsibility.

As SF emphasised that;

> "*There was a strategic level to it by going protest next to UN. Find the hours when people actually are in the UN building and you can be seen" (Interview SF).*

Our participants leveraged the spatial dimension of social capital [46, 131], along with social relations, to amplify their cause internationally. They aimed to shape their host society's political response to Belarus's authoritarian regime by sharing experiences and perspectives, unfolding "diaspora geopolitics from below" [65]. Economic contributions were also significant. As MK explains:

> "*I participated in online groups where we would gather funds to transfer to Belarus, to political prisoners and to their families to support them. Also some initiatives to find work for people from there remotely" (Interview MK).*

Our participants, capitalising on ICTs, demonstrated transnational solidarity with those affected by Belarusian state repression. They raised funds for political prisoners and their families, secured remote employment opportunities, and sent household supplies and food online to those in need in Belarus. While these efforts were significant, participants recognised that their voices could not be easily censored, unlike in their origin-homeland. This freedom allowed them to use mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to expand protest discourse and build a sense of community within North America.

Beyond immediate political actions, participants were also deeply invested in preserving and promoting Belarusian culture, language, and history as forms of resistance. By doing so, they resisted the cultural erasure tied to the Lukashenko regime alongside their anti-regime activism.

5.3 Opportunities and Constraints in Technology Usage

Our participants experienced distinct opportunities for utilising ICTs, which stood in contrast to Belarusian protesters living under the Lukashenko regime. Expressing dissent within Belarus carried severe material and physical consequences, as highlighted by participants' accounts of state repression experienced by their friends and relatives. For example, SP shared:

> *"... they got fired from their jobs for Facebook posts that they posted. They got fired because they had a little white-red-white ribbon on their clothes, on their cars." (Interview SP).*

Similarly, NW shared:

> *"Most people in Belarus don't even dare to share their opinion on social media, because they don't want to be identified and put in jail. We [diaspora] are in a much better situation" (Interview NW).*

Our participants were not in immediate proximity to the Belarusian regime and, therefore, did not face direct state repression, such as expulsion from employment, physical torture, detentions and arrests, or state-imposed internet and communication outages, blackouts, and censorship of platforms. This allowed them to leverage social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to build North American and broader transnational solidarity networks and facilitate the circulation of protest-related information. The availability of this unique communicative autonomy enabled them to act as critical amplifiers of the Belarusian protest movement.

However, despite their communicative autonomy, participants remained cautious of transnational repression due to the Lukashenko regime's surveillance and punitive actions. As NW emphasised;

> "*They have plenty of time. They can find everyone. They already did it once in 2010. They used IP addresses and geo location from people's phones and then they arrested everybody [involved in protests]...The regime initially targeted the most active people involved in the protest within Belarus. Now the regime moved to locate and arrest people who subscribed to the anti-governmental telegram channels, who liked posts online or left*

(anti-governmental) comments in the past. They have now moved to target those who live abroad" (Interview NW).

Our participants were acutely aware of both the Lukashenko regime's historical and current repressions, as well as the rise of transnational state repression. Notably, in the aftermath of the 2020 protests, the Lukashenko regime intensified repression, mainly targeting diasporic human rights actors and journalists. Our participants highlighted the arrest of journalist Roman Protasevich of Nexta[1] and reporters from media outlets like TUT.BY[2]. They were aware of the July 2021 amendments to the criminal procedure code that enabled the Belarusian regime to prosecute and conduct trials of potential suspects outside the country, even in their absence, for various offences concerning national security and interests[3]. As a result, our participants feared the risk of being forced to succumb to punitive actions in Belarus.

Thus, while the lack of proximity to the Belarusian regime opened up opportunities and communicative autonomy for our participants, it was still constrained by their insecurity over transnational repression. Even as they used mainstream social media platforms, they remained cautious of potential repercussions. As DY highlighted: "*we can't be open enough in social media because all public social media is totally monitored by police, KGB, etc.*". Our participants were cognisant of the limits of their online activism, where their activities, histories, and traces were not merely temporal but also created an opening for transnational surveillance and repression.

5.4 North American Diasporic Social Movement Community's Use of ICTs

Our participants primarily used social media during the 2020 Belarusian protests for intra- and inter-community communication, as well as for outreach activities aimed at the international community. Therefore, their primary social media platforms were Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, along with YouTube and Zoom, which were more prevalent and familiar within the North American context. Mindful of the vulnerability of citizens in Belarus who could not freely express themselves, some of our participants, as members of the diasporic social movement community, also chose visible and active engagement on social media to raise awareness of the situation under Lukashenko's regime, despite plausible risks of transnational repression.

While Telegram was considered a 'protest technology' in Belarus [163], our participants primarily relied on Facebook. Facebook groups offered functionalities such as moderation and membership control, which facilitated their use as a tool for organising. As ON recollected:

"In Belarus, well, the situation is different there. It was easier with us. In Belarus, they had to hide [due to high proximity state repression], so it was Telegram, which is much more secure. But we don't seem to have it here, so all of this was formed on the basis of Facebook [groups]."

The 'proximity dilemma' triggered the need for meaningful involvement in the movement, and Facebook groups emerged as a key platform for facilitating the bottom-up self-organising of protest activities, enabling the dispersed community to mobilise effectively. Beyond information sharing, these groups also served as spaces of communicative autonomy, where the community could coordinate political actions and provide support while maintaining some level of privacy. During

[1]In May 2021, Belarusian authorities forced a passenger plane from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk, citing a fake bomb threat, to arrest Roman Protasevich. A key figure behind Nexta, a Telegram and YouTube-based Belarusian media outlet with 2 million subscribers, Protasevich played a pivotal role during the 2020–2021 protests.

[2]TUT.BY was an independent news, media, and service portal, the largest in Belarus, covering 63% of the country's internet users. In response to its coverage of the 2020–2021 protests, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs labeled TUT.BY an extremist formation.

[3]Similarly, the Lukashenko regime's September 4, 2023, regulation mandated that citizens abroad return to Belarus for passport renewal or ID-related documentation, a process previously managed by Belarusian embassies.

the 2020 Belarusian protests, older Facebook groups that were initially focused on Belarusian culture and identity pivoted toward supporting anti-authoritarian movements both inside and outside Belarus. At the same time, numerous locality-specific Facebook groups emerged to address the organisational and coordination needs of the diasporic social movement community.

As the administrators of the Belarusian Diaspora's Facebook group (ON and KT) shared:

> *"At some point, it just became clear to us that we needed to do something about it; we had to unite because, of course, there were these terrible emotional swings, roller coasters, also because victory was close at hand. So, that's why we naturally decided to unite. I knew someone here and there, so I just formed a group on Facebook. Admins are visible there, so I wrote, hello, hello, I'm X, from Y place (anonymized); in short, we are also doing the same; let's talk; we want to unite here. Most people agreed, this is the beginning of the formation of our group" (Interview ON).*

The emergence of locality-based Facebook groups and the transformation of existing groups underscore how a "social movement community" [145, 146] unfolded within the diaspora, mediated by ICTs. These groups fostered informal activist networks, formal organisations, and individuals united in advancing the movement's goals. Notably, the Facebook groups became the most crucial information source for Belarusian protest gatherings in North American cities. As NW emphasised, "*I would use Facebook to see group meetings in my city. You just go to Belarusian groups and ask, Hey, when do we gather again? Or Hey, let's meet next Sunday in Washington DC.*" In addition to announcements and discussions, these groups conducted polls to capture opinions and organised fundraising campaigns to support victims of Lukashenko's regime.

Most of these groups operated as closed or secret due to the risks of transnational repression. A few that remained public faced scrutiny from Belarusian authorities. A notable example involved a public group managed by a participant, which in 2023 was labeled an "extremist formation" by Belarusian authorities, posing legal risks for the group administrators returning to Belarus. The impact of these Facebook groups was significant because they both facilitated self-organisation and fostered in-person gatherings, leading to the formation of formal diasporic institutions, including registered organisations. Moreover, they led to a realisation among the community regarding its size, which had previously been unknown to them. As AP explains:

> *"What happened in 2020, is people just started to self-organise. They didn't have any formal registration or affiliations with organisations. They just, you knew through friends. They started posting in Facebook groups. Okay, there is a rally today; come and support Belarus. And then people would show up in numbers. They would meet each other, they would make some plans and from there, they would form a non-registered or registered groups. But a group nevertheless, that shares common goals and agenda and so on... At least a lot of people met each other, and everybody was saying, oh, I didn't know that we have so many Belarusians" (Interview AP).*

The online and offline realms complemented each other. Participants discovered Facebook groups through in-person events and vice versa. Belarusians revitalised their understanding of their culture and language within these Facebook groups, which was otherwise often lacking due to historical reasons such as Russification. Even the linguistic assertion of "Belarus" rather than "Belorussia" and intentionally used avatars featuring the white-red-white flags reflected a political appetite to assert the country's independent identity and distance it from historical associations with Russian assimilation. Since not all participants were fully acquainted with the Belarusian language due to historical reasons, the use of Russian in groups was not restricted. However, they viewed these groups as opportunities to engage with and learn the Belarusian language.

The closed groups that moderated membership, coupled with the influence of the North American context, turned these groups into relatively safe spaces for our participants to express their cultural and linguistic identity. The focus of these Facebook groups on maintaining and building a distinct group identity, preserving and promoting the Belarusian cause, while maintaining distance from dominant publics, gave rise to satellite publics [144].

Group administrators employed Facebook chat features to coordinate responsibilities and monitor member activities closely, safeguarding the integrity of the community. Despite its advantages, participants noted limitations in Facebook's organisational tools, such as the inefficacy of hashtags to organise conversations. Nevertheless, as KT summarised, these Facebook groups were an online community with a purpose: "*It's a community, it's not like just my group, it's our group, because we want to collaborate [for 2020 Belarusian protest]*."

5.4.1 Beyond Facebook: Public-facing Uses of ICTs. Notably, participants did not report significant use of Facebook outside in-group activities, primarily to avoid exposing their personal profiles to scrutiny or potential surveillance by the Belarusian authorities. Although to a lesser extent than Facebook groups, platforms like Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Zoom were also used.

On Instagram, our participants used private accounts to follow Belarus-related channels to stay informed and engage with protest-related content. These accounts showcased Belarusian culture, history, and news while also expressing anti-Lukashenko sentiments through memes and infographics. Instagram, being an image- and video-based social media platform, allowed our participants to employ symbolic means to assert their identity while also engaging with affective and playful content. As expressed by SP: "*We posted numerous videos from the protests. I liked them, re-shared some, and added frames for Belarus with the white-red-white flag [in Instagram stories]*" (Interview SP). The use of Instagram was thus not only to honour the 2020 Belarusian protests but also to celebrate Belarusian identity, culture, and history while envisioning a democratic future for the country.

Twitter engagement, in contrast, was led by public accounts of Belarusian diasporic groups, collectives, or organisations rather than individuals. These groups used the platform to target institutional actors in the West, such as political, diplomatic, and media figures, aiming to influence diaspora geopolitics from below. The goal was to raise awareness of human rights violations and authoritarian repression under Lukashenko's regime, garner support and solidarity from non-Belarusian allies, and influence public opinion and policy, particularly in Western governments and international institutions with diplomatic leverage over Belarus. These outreach efforts were typically in English to reach a broader audience beyond the Belarusian diaspora. As DY highlighted:

> "*We have a Twitter account of the diaspora that tries to reach those officials [North American political and media actors]. It's more like a public way of communication rather than just emails that are for individual correspondence with officials. Twitter is more like a community outreach*" (Interview DY).

Participants relied on YouTube channels such as Belsat and TV Rain for news related to the protest and updates on the situation in Belarus. Notably, they predominantly engaged with media produced by Eastern European counterparts, as these outlets had quicker access to critical information and visual materials essential for timely reporting. This demonstrated the transnational flow of resources and information among the various satellite publics of the Belarusian social movement community.

During the 2020 Belarusian protests, the transnational diasporic collective "Belarusians Abroad" organised a massive 24-hour online congress, inviting participants from various time zones and mobilising 5,000 live participants through a Zoom webinar. The North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community collaborated with various satellite publics, including European,

Asian, and Australian counterparts, to voice resistance against the Lukashenko regime. The Zoom webinar, held in late November 2020, aimed to reignite the energy and will of Belarusians in the face of severe repression that had dampened protest momentum within Belarus. As participant AP noted, "it is inspirational for people to see everyone under one kind of roof, a virtual roof. And there was some sense of unity and communication, even if it was for one day, but it was very inspiring."

For a historically fragmented Belarusian diaspora, this Zoom webinar created a collective virtual space to help foster a sense of unity and shared purpose, even amid geographical separation. This webinar aimed to bring together dispersed individuals from different regions, allowing them to communicate and express solidarity. Despite the temporal nature of this event — it lasted just for one day — it served as an inspiring reminder of the potential for collective action and cohesion, achieved by joining hands with satellite publics despite the challenges.

Zoom was a convenient platform for such webinars, as it allowed nearly 5,000 participants to join online, with a 24-hour, non-stop agenda that seamlessly spanned across time zones, from Australia and Japan to others, without disruptions. While Zoom facilitated real-time engagement, YouTube was used to broadcast this event to the wider public and preserve the public memory of the webinar without incurring additional costs. The recorded sessions were edited into shorter segments with English translations for broader dissemination. This use of YouTube not only preserved public memory but also allowed the diasporic social movement community to selectively engage with the wider dominant public and invite responses through comments. This event highlighted the potential of technology-mediated activism to unite the diasporic social movement community, fostering a sense of solidarity and sustained engagement against the Lukashenko regime.

6 Discussion

Our study demonstrates that ICTs are often critical in facilitating and supporting informal and grassroots activism in transnational contexts. For diasporas such as Belarusians, who had no prior legacy of asserting global agency or were historically invisible [118], ICTs were essential for community building, advocacy, and self-organising efforts. Our study highlights that ICTs not only reinvigorated the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community — which our participants became part of — but also facilitated their diaspora geopolitics from below [65], encompassing the diaspora subjects' everyday practices and understandings of political actions, such as protests and community building, against an adaptive authoritarian regime [47].

We contribute to CSCW scholarship by documenting the concrete ways in which diasporic social movement communities utilise ICTs to shape diaspora geopolitics from below, form collective actions, promote oppositional subcultures, and expand protest discourse in anti-regime social movements. In our study, we identify three primary themes that influenced technology usage, participatory logic, and community decisions: a) the ethical and moral complexities of participating in or influencing a cause or movement from a distance — which we term the "proximity dilemma" — coupled with the risk of transnational repression; b) the unfolding of diasporic social movement communities through the strategic use of ICTs, particularly by creating new Facebook groups and repurposing older ones from existing transnational networks or 'satellite publics,' converging on a common political purpose; and c) the nature of ICT deployment and use shaped by political regimes and the geopolitical positions of both the origin-homeland and the host country, which, in the Belarusian case, is a consequence of adaptive authoritarianism.

We discuss these themes in the context of CSCW research and offer insights into how technologies can support decentralised, geographically dispersed grassroots movements.

6.1 Protests in the Diaspora: The Proximity Dilemma

The North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community's representative and participatory role in anti-regime social movements is fraught with moral ambivalence and tensions. We refer to this as the 'proximity dilemma,' defined as a critical diasporic consciousness wherein diaspora members recognise their relative socio-political and material privileges alongside the political opportunity structures and affordances of the diaspora as (often) a 'safe space' for remote participation and contributions to (anti-regime) social movements. As remote participants with limited or distant material stakes in Belarus, they faced moral and ethical tensions due to their lack of proximity to their origin-homeland, which fostered a pervasive feeling that their efforts to act and care for people in their origin-homeland were inadequate and insufficient. Consequently, this provoked a heightened moral sense of obligation to contribute meaningfully to the social movement. Their choice, therefore, was between actively engaging in the movement from abroad, while facing the moral and ethical tensions of doing so from a position of relative safety and privilege, or offering minimal support or remaining passive, yet experiencing a sense of helplessness or guilt.

The proximity dilemma primarily concerns the agency of diasporic social movement communities, embodying continuities and discontinuities in constructing their identity, as well as their relationship with and sense of belonging to their origin-homeland. This explains why our participants inhabited a state of perpetual liminality, perceiving their existence in the "waiting rooms of the nation spaces" [40]. With the 2020 Belarusian social movement rendering a critical mass of political participation in the origin-homeland and a shared hope of regime change [23, 160], the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community realised the need to rediscover and renegotiate the Belarusian past, present, and future in terms of history, politics, and culture. Making a meaningful contribution to the social movement served as a means to realise and deeply connect with their Belarusian identity. Expanding upon prior research that underlines how diasporic identities are shaped not solely by migration but also by navigating crises and tensions related to connecting back to the struggles of their origin-homeland [4], we argue that the proximity dilemma is a key component of this dynamic.

Consistent with previous studies on diaspora engagements in conflict situations [72, 100, 115, 117, 154], our study also reveals a broader meaning of care for people in their origin-homeland, encompassing not only resource sharing and aid but also an emotional commitment of caring as remembering and acknowledging their situation. Our study indicates that the proximity dilemma provokes a moral urge to contribute meaningfully to social movements and increases participation in political actions. While direct engagement in the origin-homeland's social movements and conflicts can entail significant personal costs [115], the proximity dilemma helps explain why diasporic social movement communities continue to engage and contribute despite these risks.

Importantly, from a CSCW perspective, the proximity dilemma influences *which* technologies diasporic social movement communities use and *how* they employ them to support anti-regime social movements in their origin-homeland. While, in the context of Belarus and Eastern Europe, Telegram emerged as a critical protest technology [48, 141], our participants used platforms popular in North American contexts, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. The use of ICTs is shaped not only by the popularity of these platforms in the host country — allowing them to maintain everyday social networks and manage their multicultural identities [7, 98] — but also by the relative communicative autonomy they enjoy in liberal democratic settings. Although mindful of transnational repression, they were not subject to the periodic platform bans and internet censorship experienced in the origin-homeland [88, 89]. The perceived security of a social media platform for a social movement — i.e., the extent to which it is regarded as risk-free [51, 138] — is contingent on where one lives and the socio-political context.

This was observed in the use of Facebook groups, which were closed and predominantly used Russian or Belarusian, with access requiring references and verification from Belarusian community members. This served as a necessary precaution for community organising in the face of transnational repression. Similarly, on Instagram, our participants advanced the Belarusian cause by appealing to their social networks through accounts with restricted privacy settings. As noted in prior CSCW literature, this reflects efforts to create a safe space by fostering a community with shared values and goals, where restricting information flow and narrowing the scope of communication to the community is crucial [62].

The proximity dilemma also shaped the use of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Zoom for primarily strategic and tactical purposes, focused on community outreach, solidarity building, and expanding the protest discourse. On Instagram, our participants primarily shared memes or infographics illustrating human rights violations or asserted their identity-related frames through promoting affective content [32]. YouTube and Twitter were used cautiously, with content posted only through non-individual/organisational accounts, mainly for community outreach and appealing to international civil society. Further, the use of Zoom facilitated knowledge exchange and provided essential emotional and moral reinforcement, which was crucial for sustaining long-term activism. The technology usage reflects a deep commitment to collaborate and contribute to the anti-regime social movement and is not merely a product of the affordances offered by platforms [32], but rather shaped by geopolitical opportunities and constraints, as well as dynamic conditions like the proximity dilemma.

The analytical lens of the proximity dilemma allows CSCW scholarship to evaluate how ethical and moral tensions stemming from remote participation inform the form and content of political and collective actions, and how we can design participatory spaces mindful of the tensions surrounding political agency. As we see here, the proximity dilemma created conditions for diaspora geopolitics from below, with ICT use aiding in this process. Designing socio-technical infrastructures that are transnational and support diasporic social movement communities and diaspora geopolitics from below will have to contend with this proximity dilemma.

6.2 Social Movement community and Satellite Publics

Our study further contributes to CSCW research by examining the conditions that allow ICTs to successfully support the organisation of grassroots movements [51, 52, 56]. Even before the advent of ICTs such as the internet, the Belarusian diaspora maintained transnational social connections, primarily through the efforts of the World Association of Belarusians (Baćkaŭščyna) [118]. Though not consolidated, visible, or highly involved in political actions [66], they maintained satellite publics [144], characterised by their distance from dominant publics and their focus on maintaining and building a distinct group identity, as well as preserving and promoting Belarusian language and cultural education [112, 167].

In contrast to subaltern counterpublics [110], although these satellite publics discussed human rights abuses and the authoritarian turn in Belarus, they did not extensively or openly engage with the wider public to promote any (anti-regime) counter discourse. Instead, they primarily focused on appealing to and sensitising the Belarusian diaspora about their identity, language, culture, and heritage, as Russification and Lukashenko's policies had historically fractured and reconfigured Belarusian society and culture from within. These satellite publics predominantly existed as locality-based offline communities and — with the advent of the internet —Facebook groups, taking up representational roles (in-person and virtual spaces of homecoming, belonging, and cultural representation) and discursive interactions.

However, during the 2020 protests, the moral imperative to advance active participation catalysed the formation of diasporic social movement community [145, 146]. This community activated social

networks that encompassed a diverse range of actors — including informal activist networks, formal and informal organisations, Belarusians in exile, and other individuals dedicated to liberating Belarus from the Lukashenko regime. This led to a reorientation of satellite publics: in North America, many pre-existing Facebook groups, originally focused on facilitating the diaspora's socio-cultural representation, shifted their focus to the 2020 protest discourse. Additionally, new locality-based Facebook groups emerged from below, facilitating diasporic self-organising in support of the movement. This indicates that the formation of the North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community was not a sudden eruption [118], but rather informed and supported by prior efforts of these satellite publics. As CSCW researchers seek to understand and support organising, it is crucial to remember that social movements often leverage pre-existing structures to organise and mobilise effectively [56].

For several decades, North American governments lacked an effective strategy on Belarus and were mainly reactive in their policy approach due to the country's limited geopolitical significance and international media attention [139]. As a result, past diasporic efforts against the Lukashenko regime did not gain much visibility in wider public debates. However, during the 2020 Belarusian protests, satellite publics converged around a common political purpose, leading to the formation of diasporic social movement community aimed at advancing oppositional subcultures. Otherwise disparate satellite publics formed constellations that began engaging with the dominant public sphere, becoming nodal points for attracting participation from previously inactive diaspora members. This set the stage for the democratisation efforts of Belarus during the 2020 protests.

In this context, ICTs played a crucial role by offering platforms and affordances for coordination, as well as facilitating communication between diaspora members across waves of emigration. These efforts enriched wider public debates on Belarus's democratic future through political actions such as protest gatherings, anti-regime political messaging aimed at external audiences, and engagement directed towards international media and civil society. The open engagement of satellite publics with dominant publics was also largely due to the convergence of the Belarusian diaspora's interests with those of other dominant publics [144], for example, geopolitical and media support for the 2020 Belarusian social movement in North America. Therefore, while our participants felt a heightened sense of safety in their political engagement on the streets due to the racial privilege of Belarusians in North America, they also did not encounter significant threats to their safety in online spaces from actors in host countries. This was partly because their use of ICT platforms like Facebook and Instagram was largely private, whereas Twitter and YouTube accounts were primarily organisation-based when engaging with other dominant publics.

This context highlights how diasporic social movement community position themselves either in relation to or in opposition to dominant discourses [92] and actors, such as a repressive state, through satellite publics, reflecting historical and socio-political dynamics that shape their collective identities and strategies. It also demonstrates how, at critical political junctures, ICTs emerge as vital tools to leverage situations, enabling coordination, amplifying dissent, and fostering collective action.

6.2.1 Design for Alternate Publics. Existing CSCW research has primarily focused on counter-publics, specifically subaltern counterpublics [24, 49, 87, 133]. However, there is a necessity to broaden this focus to encompass a multiplicity of alternative publics, including satellite publics [144]. Since social movement communities encompass a wide range of actors, designers need to understand the unique location of their actors.

When examining diasporic social movement communities and transnational social movements, the complexities become even more pronounced. These communities can simultaneously navigate varying degrees of privilege and marginalisation. Yet, research on privileged diasporic communities

and diasporic privileges frequently takes a back seat to studies emphasising social and cultural marginalisation [67]

Contingent on geopolitical standings and the interplay between host and origin-homeland countries, some diasporas enjoy privilege in their host countries, while others encounter misrecognition or even double precarity [90]. As noted in our study, some of these communities leverage their relative socio-spatial privileges and geopolitical advantages to support social movements in their origin-homeland, with the types of ICTs used and the manner in which they are employed being context-specific.

To facilitate the creation of social movement communities in both diasporic and territorially bounded contexts, CSCW scholarship must engage with all the types of publics within which social movement communities unfold. Specifically, in relation to satellite publics, designers and researchers need to focus on how the needs of satellite publics evolve in response to their engagement with dominant publics and adapt to concerns such as transnational repression. Depending on the types of publics within which social movement communities unfold, actors and groups require varying degrees of control over their visibility, security features, and resource sharing capabilities [9, 39, 110, 144]. Similarly, design decisions regarding ICTs — such as developing digital tools to map and analyse protest discourse trends online, and providing avenues within platforms for communication and collaborative practices — can enhance the role of diasporic social movement communities beyond temporal protest cycles.

6.3 Adaptive Authoritarianism and Tech-Mediated Resistance

Authoritarian regimes exert control by constraining online spaces—potential sites of engagement in anti-regime politics — through surveillance, censorship, and repression of ICTs both domestically and transnationally. However, diasporic social movement community based in liberal democratic regimes experience relative communicative autonomy, which facilitates political action and the broadcasting of anti-regime campaigns internationally. Thus, the diaspora's ability to deploy ICTs in support of social movements in their origin-homeland depends on the political regimes and geopolitical contexts of both the origin-homeland and the host country.

Lukashenko's regime exemplifies "adaptive authoritarianism," characterised by pragmatic shifts between socialist and nationalist themes and dynamic foreign policy adaptations to sustain its rule [47]. This flexibility extends to domestic tactics, including periodic democratisation efforts to leverage better relations with the West [91]. Moreover, against the backdrop of transnational repression by an adaptive authoritarian regime — which is inventive and unpredictable in deploying repressive tactics — resistance strategies, including tech-mediated actions, must also be flexible and adaptable. For example, Facebook groups originally focused on exchanging Belarusian culture and identity shifted their focus to supporting the 2020 anti-Lukashenko regime movement, and later reverted or formed new locality-specific online groups, eventually facilitating the establishment of formal diasporic institutions. Such dynamic community responses from the Belarusian diasporic social movement community demonstrate how adaptable they were to changing circumstances. This highlights the need for the CSCW community to view social movements not merely as cohesive entities [55, 61, 158], but as coevolving populations of actions [116], responding to contingencies presented by regimes and other actors in their environments.

Furthermore, unlike other authoritarian contexts with stable, high-capacity political apparatuses that monitor and punish diaspora activities [41, 150], adaptive authoritarian regimes are less predictable. The intensity, tactics, and forms of repression are harder to decipher, as are state responses to the 'voice' of diasporic social movement community. Therefore, resistance strategies, particularly those that involve technology-mediated sites of action, must also be adaptable. Additionally, in contexts where no clear censorship policies or mechanisms exist to circumvent or subvert, there is

none of the plausible deniability or intentional ambiguity in content observed in other authoritarian settings [33]. Instead, caution is exercised through the choice of ICTs and the levels of anonymity and privacy in response to perceived threats of transnational repression. This also highlights how communicative autonomy is shaped by the relationship between technology companies and transnational geopolitics — for example, by determining how safe certain ICTs are to use and in what configurations.

Future studies need to explore how the diasporic social movement community's tech-mediated resistance evolves and responds longitudinally to adaptive authoritarian regimes, as well as its effects on organisation and collaboration. This analysis is crucial for understanding how ICTs can be leveraged effectively within CSCW to support social movements under varying authoritarian constraints. Additionally, the role of transnational collaborations and the differential impacts of ICTs in shaping the dynamics of social movements under authoritarian regimes warrant further investigation.

7 Conclusion

The North American Belarusian diasporic social movement community used ICTs to support the 2020 Belarusian social movement, strengthening their community-building, advocacy, and self-organisation efforts. In this process, the Belarusian diaspora shed its historical invisibility and, alongside other diasporic satellite publics, converged on the common political goal of overthrowing Lukashenko's adaptive authoritarian regime. However, they also navigated the tensions of the proximity dilemma and the regime's transnational repression. The proximity dilemma provoked the diaspora's moral urge to contribute meaningfully to social movements, increasing their participation in political actions. In response to transnational repression, they adapted their technology-mediated resistance. The nature of political regimes (adaptive authoritarianism, in the case of Belarus) and the geopolitical positions of both the origin-homeland and host country shaped the diasporic social movement community's ICT usage. Whereas Telegram emerged as the key protest technology in Belarus and neighbouring regions, in North America, the diasporic social movement community relied on mainstream Western platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter based on their assessment of risk and strategic considerations. The use of ICTs thus supported the emergence of diaspora geopolitics from below [65] — encompassing diaspora subjects' everyday practices and understandings of political actions, including protests and community-building. Moreover, how various social movement communities utilise these platforms, including their choices of privacy and security, is contingent on the nature of the publics they inherit (e.g., satellite publics) and is shaped by strategic concerns, such as transnational repression and surveillance. Therefore, for the CSCW community to support diaspora geopolitics from below [65], it is crucial to examine the ethical and moral tensions faced by diasporic social movement communities stemming from remote participation, as well as the internal configurations of these community and their related publics.

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A Appendix

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Table 2. Coding Categories

High-level Codes
Fear of State Repression
Motivation for Immigration
Diaspora's Motivation for the 2020 Protest
Racial Privilege and Diasporic Protest Politics
Social Capital of Diaspora
Community Building Efforts
Old Diaspora's Activities
New Diaspora
Experiencing Collective Action in Diasporic Spaces
The Self-realisation of Belarusian Identity in Diaspora
Impact of Diasporic Activism
Dilemmas of Diasporic Activism
Diaspora as a Safe Space
Diaspora's Online/Social Media Activism
Challenges in Diaspora's Social Media Involvement
Autonomous Tech Activism by Diaspora
Fundraising
Anonymity
Combating Information Asymmetry
Vision for Belarus of the Future