

“Belarusians are kitties”

how a verbal meme became a national symbol¹

Anna Rakityanskaya, Harvard Library

Keywords: Belarusian protest, Social media, Cats in culture, Memes, National identity, Internet and society

Introduction

The protests in Belarus that followed the contested Presidential election held on August 9, 2020, produced an unprecedented amount of creative output in the form of posters, artwork, verbal and visual memes, internet posts and many other formats.

While the bulk of the protest narrative was critical in nature and directed at president Aliaksandar Lukashenka² or his security forces and state officials, there was also a steady stream of positive narrative in which the protesters themselves were the subject (“Belarusians are incredible,” “Belarusians, I love you,” etc.). In this wave of self-affirmation one image kept reemerging - that of kitties. To be fair, the Belarusian protest bestiary is quite extensive and includes a cockroach, dogs, roosters, bison, sheep, rats, pandas, cuckoo, goose, etc., but only cats (or kitties, to be precise) were given the honor of directly representing the Belarusians in their own eyes.

Verbally this is realized in the humorous phrase in a catchy trochaic meter that has three language variants: *Belarusy – kotsiki* (Belarusian) / *Belorusy – kotiki* (Russian) / *Belarusy - kotiki* (Russo-Belarusian). The literal meaning of this phrase is “Belarusians are kitties,” which stands for “Belarusians are nice,” but also for an even stronger sentiment “Belarusians are lovable.” At the start of the protest it began gaining popularity first only as a verbal meme. For example, a photograph of protesters published by the Telegram channel Chai z Malinavym Varennem is captioned : “Belarusians are basking in the sun - more proof that they are kitties”

¹ With gratitude to Curt Woolhiser for his encouragement and wisdom.

² Transliteration in this article follows the Library of Congress transliteration rules, with the exception of some personal names for which we use the established transliteration or the transliteration from the persons’ own social media accounts. When more than one variant exists we chose the standard transliteration from Belarusian.

(Belorusy greiutsia na solntse — eshche odno podtverzhdenie, chto oni kotiki).¹ A young couple engaged in a domino game on the ground during a quiet moment of an early protest are “more proof that Belarusians are kitties” (Eshche odno dokazatel'stvo chto belorusy — kotiki)²

Gradually the verbal meme started materializing in various forms. A video published by the Telegram channel Vot Tak TV on September 2 shows a picket line of 14 women in cat masks and ears, meowing and holding posters that identify each of them as an opposition newsmaker or news media outlet. In front of them we see a kitty litter box filled with cards containing names of pro-government news media.³

The Belarusian artist Olha Yakubovskaya developed this metaphor even further. Since August 2020 she has been painting protesting kitties who represent not only Belarusians in general, but often specific protest leaders, like Nina Bahinskaia, Maria Kalesnikava and Viktor Babaryka or social groups like musicians, bloggers, athletes, IT creatives, industrial workers on strike, retirees, people with disabilities and even fallen heroes who have become angels.⁴

In the ultimate realization of the metaphor, the word “kotik” completely replaces the nation’s name, as in this comment under a video showing some protesters saving an actual kitten caught in traffic : “Kitties saved the kitty” (Kotiki spasli kotika).⁵

Clearly, the “Belarusians are kitties” meme has grown extraordinarily powerful and has risen from being a cute saying to a de-facto expression of national identity. In this paper we will explore the cultural aspects of this phenomenon and its connection to protest activities, as well as how it relates to the process of Belarusians’ spontaneous self-discovery and conscious identity-seeking during the post-election protests of 2020.

Methods and materials

The Belarus protest movement is deeply connected to the Internet, being organized, described and partially conducted online, primarily through Telegram channels and chats as well as various online news media and web sites.⁶ Because of this we chose to use data from social media as source material for our study.

We were interested in protest-inspired content that supports the notion that Belarusians identify themselves with kitties. At the same time, we were also looking for general instances of Belarusians describing themselves in the same protest-related context.

This study is based on two formats of source material: textual and pictorial (mostly static images). We used Twitter as a source for the former and Instagram for both.

We used December 31, 2020 as a cutoff date for all internet publications that we reviewed.

Textual evidence

Twitter posts

In scanning Twitter for instances of “Belarusians are kitties” we discovered that none of the expected hashtags #беларусыкоцікі, #белорусыкотики or #беларусыкотики is known to Twitter. However, the actual phrase search produced results. We used the following 3 renditions of it (the Belarusian, the Russian, and the Russo-Belarusian):

- Беларусы коцікі
- Белорусы котики
- Беларусы котики

The numbers of hits for each phrase are presented in this table:

Year	Беларусы котики	Белорусы котики	Беларусы коцікі	All
2013	0	2	0	2
2014	2	4	0	6
2015	1	3	0	4
2016	0	5	0	5
2017	5	7	0	12
2018	2	8	0	10
2019	2	3	0	5
2020	126	96	2	224

We learned that the formula “Belarusians are kitties” existed well before the protests. The earliest tweet with that statement was in Russian and published on May 8 2013⁷.

We see a drastic jump in the use of the phrase in 2020 with 126 hits (up from 2 in 2019). The following table shows the 2020 posts distribution by month:

Month, 2020	Беларусы котікі	Белорусы котікі	Беларусы коцікі	Total # of tweets
Jan	0	1	0	1
Feb	0	0	0	0
Mar	0	1	0	1
Apr	0	0	0	0
May	4	5	0	9
Jun	2	3	0	5
Jul	0	0	0	0
Aug	65	42	1	108
Sep	25	21	0	46
Oct	11	6	1	18
Nov	9	10	0	19
Dec	10	7	0	17

It is clear that in August the number of tweets about Belarusians as kitties was the highest, followed by a decline in September and then another in October, after which the number of hits remained flat through the end of the year.

Instagram hashtags

Instagram hashtags in general are applied inconsistently and do not always reflect the visual

content they are attached to, so the presence of the “Belarusians are kitties”-themed tag does not presume a protest post, often it simply accompanies pictures of cute people, but the very existence of this tag testifies to the popularity of a certain cultural myth.

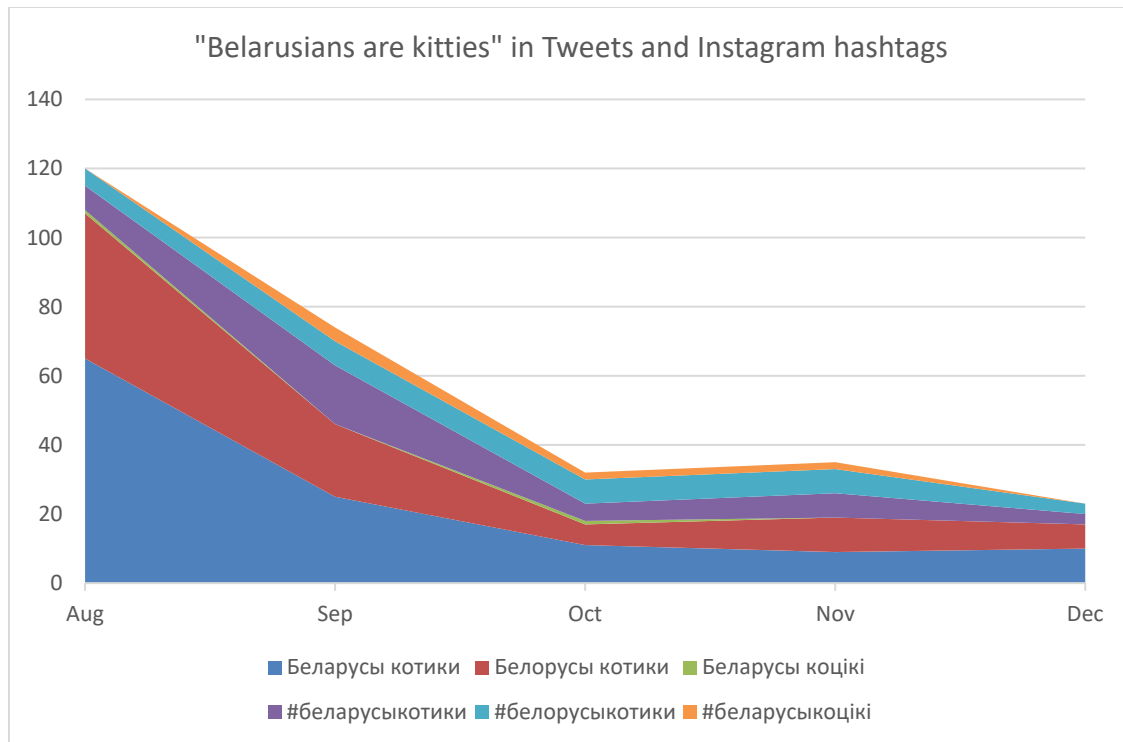
We searched all Instagram for these three hashtags, based on the three language versions of “Belarusians are kitties” phrase:

- #беларусыкоцікі
- #белорусыкотікі
- #беларусыкотікі

We found that posts with these hashtags started appearing in August 2020. Their chronological distribution is presented in the following table:

Month	#беларусыкотікі	#белорусыкотікі	#беларусыкоцікі	Total # of posts
Aug	7	5	0	12
Sep	17	7	4	28
Oct	5	7	2	14
Nov	7	7	2	16
Dec	3	3	0	6

As we can see from both Twitter and Instagram textual data combined in a graph below, the popularity of the “Belarusians are kitties” meme peaked in August and September. Out of the 3 language renditions the Russo-Belarusian one (*Беларусы котікі*) is clearly preferred over the other two, and the Belarusian one (*Беларусы коцікі*) is the least preferred one.



Pictorial Evidence

We based our pictorial content study on images published by the Instagram account Chai z Malinavym Varennem (@godofbelarus). It is a very active account with 43.7 thousand followers (as of February 2021). It was launched on March 21, 2018, but prior to August 9, 2020 it had published only 100 posts with nature photos and some political humor. From August 9 the account grew exponentially and by the end of December 2020 it had published over 4,500 posts, all dedicated to the post-election protest movement, focusing on photographs from the protest actions.

We scanned the visual content of the posts only, ignoring captions or comments, looking for the theme of self-identification with kitties, while making the following exclusions:

- Images of cats in which they appear next to the white-red-white “historical” Belarusian flag, because these images do not convey a clear association between the animal and all Belarusians.
- “Recycled” generic cat memes unless they were transformed in a way that implied that the cat(s) in the meme are Belarusians.
- Any instances of a discourse that draws a line between cats and people, such as “Kitties are with the people” (Kotiki s narodom), “Even kitties are for...” (Dazhe kotiki za ...), or “Even kitties understand...” (Dazhe kotiki ponimaiut...) We were interested only in the images in which cats are not WITH the people but ARE the people.

As a result, we identified 44 relevant posts, with the following distribution by publication date:

August – 13

September– 14

October – 14

November – 4

The subjects of these photographs vary: most of them (22) contain images of protest posters, 9 feature murals, 9 are artwork (including drawings, photo- and video art), there are also photos of cats with posters and individual posts featuring elevator art, a sticker and a cake decoration.

The content falls into the following groups:

1. **Belarusians are kitties** (11). Here we see mostly rally posters that declare in a plain and simple way “Belarusians are kitties”, or “We are kitties”, a variation on protest materials mentioning the “pawsies and clawsies”⁸ that kitties have.
2. **Kitties in action** (12). Here the kitties are actively participating in protest activities: they hunt a certain fat rat with a crowned head, hold white-red-white opposition flags, fight the OMON/AMAP (the Belarusian special forces police), hide from it, go on strikes, engage in municipal self-government and even sing the opposition songs.
3. **Cat memes** (11). Here familiar memes are politically reimaged, based on the assumption that the viewer is familiar with both the original visual meme and the “Belarusians are kitties” verbal meme. For example there is a new take on the popular Runet meme “Natasha,” which features a band of cats leaning over their sleeping owner (Natasha) and trying to persuade her to wake up and feed them: this time the cats are addressing “Sasha” and they are telling him that they “knocked the country down,” “there are lots of us, no end to us,” “we will knock you down too,” “so better run, Sasha”⁹; the content and the red-and-white palette used in redrawing the originally photographed meme leave no doubt as to the symbolic meaning of the cats who “knocked the country down.” Another example: a poster: “Sasha, kill yourself, we only have pawsies” (Sasha, ubei sebja sam, u nas lapki)¹⁰ – a political take on a cat meme featuring a cat who refuses to perform a task on account of it having only pawsies, i. e. not the hands necessary for doing it.
4. **Bitie-bitie for Belarus’** (Kus’ za Belarus’) (11). This laconic verbal meme implies that the speaker is a cat fighting for a better Belarus. Curiously, in the comments section of an Instagram post we witness a dialog between two users who both claim to be the creators of this verbal meme, while both agree that the meme was born in August 2020.¹¹

While it is unclear whether the phrase “Belarusians are kitties’ itself was coined in Belarus or outside, it is obvious that it has been willingly adopted by the Belarusians. Even though *kotik* as a positive characteristic of a person is widely used in both Russia and Belarus, it is only in

Belarus that we see the term applied to the whole nation. We will now attempt to assemble a more precise inventory of traits that Belarusian protesters assign to *kotiki*.

Kotiki and the Internet

In trying to deconstruct the image of a Belarusian *kotik* it is important to recognize the deep connection between the rise of the cat narrative and Internet culture. According to M. Thibault and G. Marino, cats are the “totemic animal” of the Internet (the free, playful, anonymous and humoristic segment of the Web, as opposed to its other segment, the Social Web which positions itself as an extension of real life).¹² When it comes to the Russian-language Internet, the situation is no different, with the omnipresence of cats in virtual dwellings ranging from popular memes and cute pictures to elitist and obscure internet communities and individual blogs¹³.

M. Thibault and G. Marino point out the following cat features that secured them this role: being anthropomorphic (or easily “anthropomorphizable”), cats’ “derpness” (silly, contradictory or inexplicable behavior), being “fluffy and kawaii” and their ability to also be “haughty and contemptuous” (appealing to the elitist Internet subcultures).¹⁴

Because of all these qualities cats came to represent a free, odd, non-standard, anti-authority and intrinsically right attitude, which makes them excellent candidates for a symbol of political resistance. And indeed, cat images have played a major role in a number of political or social campaigns (in addition to #Gattinisalvini and Cats against Brexit described by M. Thibault and G. Marino, one could mention “Kotiki protiv narkotikov” campaign in Saint-Petersburg (when the artist Petr Levin painted cats over the ads by drug dealers on building walls¹⁵).

It is highly likely that the staple feline softness and gentleness, in combination with the aptitude for quiet resistance of Internet cats, contributed to the Belarusian kitty mythologeme as it developed in the context of a protest carried out mostly by digital natives.

Kotiki and National Identity

It is clear to us that the verbal meme “Belarusians are kitties” uttered by protesters contains a positive albeit concise appraisal of their compatriots. In order to fully understand its meaning it is important to study the general self-image of the protesting Belarusians. To that end in our research of pictorial material from Instagram account Chai z Malinavym Varennem, we identified 33 posts that reflected feelings of Belarusians towards themselves. These images include protest posters (23), photos and videos of protesters at rallies (6), artworks (2), a craft work and a flier. The date distribution of these posts shows that August was the peak month for self-assessment:

August – 20

September– 8

October – 2

November – 1

Dec – 2

The sentiments expressed in those posts fall into several groups:

- Illustration of various specific admirable character traits perceived by the authors as “Belarusian,” which include good manners (like taking shoes off before stepping on a street bench or cleaning up trash after a rally), peacefulness, uncompromising nature, courage, intelligence, kindness, etc. - 11
- General declaration of love for Belarusians - 5
- Discovery of one’s wonderful fellow countrymen and women – often expressed through a line from a song by the Russian band Splin “My ne znali drug druga do etogo leta” (We didn’t know each other until this summer)¹⁶– 4
- Awakening of political consciousness, expressed in another poetic reference, a line from a song by the Belarusian group Tor Band “My ne bydlo” (We are not cattle)¹⁷ - 4
- Belarusians are incredible (using Maria Kalesnikava’s signature word¹⁸) – 3
- Belarusians are heroes – 2
- Solidarity – 2
- Unity – 1
- An opaque message “Belarusians are Jesuses” (Belarusy – Iisusy) - 1

Based on these samples the following positive personal characteristics appear to be perceived by protesters as Belarusian:

- Kindness
- Intelligence
- Good manners
- Peacefulness (even in protest)
- Solidarity (helping those who have been prosecuted)
- Ability to self-organize
- Ability to heroically withstand pressure

When we compare these traits with those associated with kitties we see that some of these qualities (kindness and peacefulness) easily overlap. However when it comes to solidarity and self-organization, these qualities are hardly feline, and yet they seem to be standard for Belarusian protest “kotiki.” On August 16 Chai z Malinavym Varennem published a photograph of a truck full of water bottles brought by volunteers with the caption: “Who are the kitties we have here? Belarusians!” (Kto u nas kotiki? Belorusy!)¹⁹ A story from September 10 about a man who lost his job because of his loyalty to the protesters and was immediately helped with finding a new place to live and a job, ends with a poignant “Because Belarusians are kitties!” (Potomu

chto belorusy - kotiki!)²⁰ Clearly, “kotik” stands for as an essentially good and highly ethical human being.

If we follow the official discourse used by the leaders of the Belarusian protest, we find them reaffirming all the aforementioned qualities as essentially Belarusian. They consistently create a charismatic image of a peaceful Belarusian, a quiet and honest individual who is fighting against an evil foe. For example Svetlana Tikhanovskaia in her August 17 videorecorded speech in her new role as an exiled national leader praises Belarusians for their peaceful protest, heroism, solidarity and mutual assistance (here and subsequently the highlights are mine):

Belarusians today show **miracles of heroism, solidarity, and decency**. Time after time we demonstrate to the whole world our **dedication to the ideas of non-violent resistance**, And by this we prove that Truth is not on the side of force and arms, Truth is on the side of **fortitude, honesty, decency and courage**. ... Belarusians are people who **do not accept violence**, Belarusians are **generous and fair**. ... We are Belarusians ... We **support each other, showing mutual assistance and solidarity, not abandoning each other when we are in trouble**.²¹

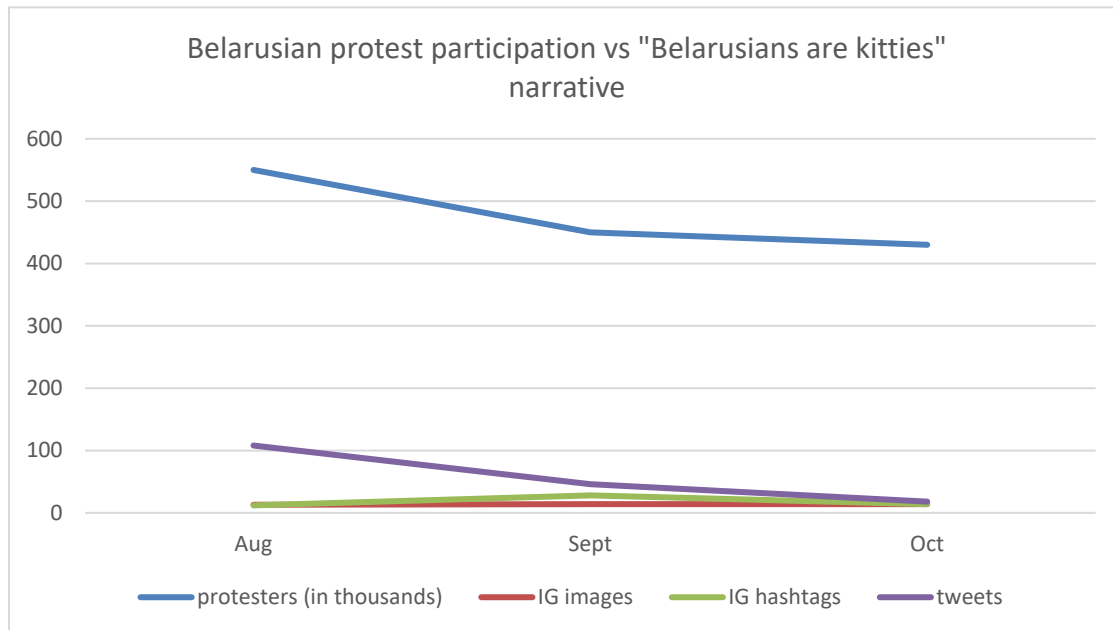
We find additional nuances in the portrait of a Belarusian protester in Maria Kalesnikava’s acceptance speech for the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought awarded to her and other leaders of the democratic opposition in Belarus. The imprisoned Kalesnikava wrote on December 15:

... Look at the Belarusians ... Those **talented and courageous** people ... So **touchingly** and so **honestly** every day Belarusians fight for what belongs to them by birthright.²²

In drawing this vivid image Kalesnikava remarkably uses the word “touchingly” which is evocative of the image of kitties from Belarusian protest narrative – fragile, fluffy, cute, peaceful, domestic and at the same time – proud, firm and unbending.

This image of a Belarusian is not new, it is built on the traditional Belarusian autostereotypes reflected for example in V. Karatkevich’s *Ziarniia pad belymi krylamy*, where love of freedom, perseverance, generosity, quiet bravery (*спакойная смеласць*) and willingness to help are celebrated as essentially “Belarusian” traits.²³ As for commitment to peace, it is even proclaimed in the opening line of the official Belarusian anthem :“We the Belarusians are peaceful people”.²⁴ It is obvious that the protest “kotiki” fit into this frame naturally.

In order to better understand the relationship between the kitties narrative and the actual protest we decided to compare their dynamics. We used the August-October protest participation data published by Radyio Svaboda.²⁵ In November the protest actions changed format, because of the repressions and the colder season. Mass demonstrations gave way to the tactics of dispersed, local actions, and because of that there are no estimated participation statistics for November and December.



It is easy to notice the decline in both protest numbers and in the popularity of the Belarusians as kitties narrative. We see at least two reasons for that:

1. The aforementioned changes in the protest strategies. The protest formats became much more discreet, and the mood more somber. The mass rallies with their atmosphere of summer festivals ended and took with them the proliferation of the creative and light-hearted rally posters.
2. The dynamics of the “Belarusians are kitties” verbal meme reflects the self-discovery process of Belarusian protesters. Repeatedly they admitted that they had been underestimating their own strength prior to the post-election protests. In Tikhanovskaia’s words, “This is the realization that we have lacked for many years”²⁶. As any newly found idea, this self-affirmation needed to be repeated, and this is why the statement *Belarusy-kotiki* enjoyed such popularity in August and September, at the early stages of the protest when many previously politically inactive people joined the action. However, self-discovery is a finite process and it was basically complete by October, and no longer needed frequent expression.

Despite the subsiding of the kitty narrative, kitties appear to remain part of the national identity. One of the latest examples is poster art published on January 20 by the social campaign *Hodna* to advertise the festival of Belarusian language *MovaFest*. It features a white cat with a red eye band (an unmistakable nod to the protest movement) and a word *Belaruskamiauny* (a pun on *Belaruskamouny*, i. e. “Belarusian speaker” or rather “Belarusian meower”).²⁷

In other words, Belarusians are still kitties.

Conclusion

In the months that followed the Presidential election in Belarus, especially in August and September, we observed not only the contemporary history of the Belarusian protest of the second half of 2020, but also mythologization of this history, the creation of the self-image of a small quiet, kind and deeply good individual standing up to a powerful evil, the “Belarusian kitty.”

The formula “Belarusians are kitties” existed well before the protests, but gained an extraordinary popularity in August and September 2020.

It appears that this image stems as much from the national cultural mythology as from the contemporary Internet culture in which cats occupy a prominent place and symbolize freedom, humor and quiet resistance. Belarusians added several unique characteristics to the cultural mythologeme, such as aptitude for solidarity and mutual help, and made the kitty a truly national symbol that is in sync with the national autostereotypes reflected in the opposition leadership narrative of Belarusians as peaceful, ethical, heroic and overall “incredible” people. For the Belarusian protesters (“the kitties”) the political confrontation is perceived first and foremost as a moral one, i. e. it is good vs. evil. In Maria Kalesnikava’s words, “The fight against evil continues, the Belarusians have not yet proved that good always wins, but they have already proved that good exists”.²⁸

Illustrations



Kitties fighting OMON. Artist: catpurrrs.



Kus' za Belarus'. Artist: Olga Sobenina.



Olga Sobenina's *Kus' za Belarus'* as a mural in Minsk. Photo by Kira Korshun.



A protester in August 2020 holding a poster “Belarusians are kitties, we have pawsies and clawsies”. Photo by Pavel Belavus.



This is our city! By Olga Yakubouskaya.



Poster featuring a cat wearing the Belarusian historic white-red-white flag as a cape and holding a rat in his mouth, with a small crown lying to the side. Photographer wishes to remain anonymous.

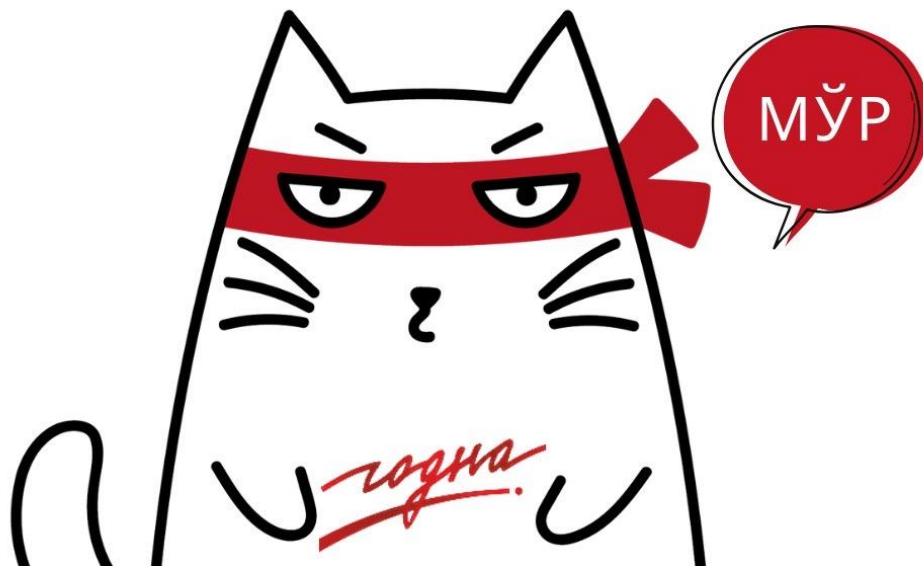


Poster reads: “We will win because kitties are stronger than rats.” Photographer wishes to remain anonymous.



Kitties as DJs of Change (Didzhei Peremen). This paper “mural” follows the iconography of the act of defiance by sound engineers (later nicknamed DJs of Change) Ulad Sakalouski and Kiryl Halanau raising their hands in the “we can” and “we will win” signs immediately after they turned on the protest-themed song *Change!* by Viktor Tsoi during an official event on August 6, 2020.²⁹ The installation is one of the many versions of the iconic image persisting in one of the Minsk courtyards, nicknamed Change Square. Photograph by an anonymous donor to the Facebook account Ploshchad’ Peremen. Minsk (@ploshchaPeramen).

БЕЛАРУСКА МЯЎНЫ



Belaruskamiauny (“Belarusian meower”). Artist wishes to remain anonymous.

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- ²⁹ "U liudei otkrylis' glaza". Interv'iu s didzheiami, vkluchivshimi "Peremen!", Radio Svoboda, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30789759.html>