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### Author

Pendse, Liladhar Ramchandra

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## Archiving e-phemera of Belarus Political Crisis 2020-2021

Dr. Liladhar R. Pendse

[Lpendse@library.berkeley.edu](mailto:Lpendse@library.berkeley.edu)

Introduction  
Literature Review  
Research Questions  
Methodology  
Collaborative and Consultative Approach  
Data Collection  
Scope and Limitations  
Findings and Learning Outcomes  
Final Thoughts  
Bibliography

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."

Walter Benjamin

Source: [On the Concept of History](#) (Theses on the Philosophy of History)<sup>i</sup>

### Introduction

It will be almost a year since the Presidential elections in Belarus; the elections took place last year on August 9, 2020. And the outcome of these elections did not surprise anyone when the Central Elections Commission of Belarus declared that the incumbent President Lukashenko was yet again elected with approximately 80% of votes cast. However, one can see that 20% of the votes that were cast and counted or counterfeited or undercounted meant there was an underlying level of dissent in the country.

While the outcome of these elections could have been predictable given the trajectory of President Lukashenko's past election victories in Belarus, as he has reigned as more or less as the supreme leader of Belarus since the Fall of the USSR in 1991, one could have assumed that well what's there to expect from some of these post-Soviet republics wherein the majority of times the old elite, the associated nomenklatura, and their collaborators from the subsequent generations continue to co-depend to form the current elite. While such generalizations could hide the nuanced realities of each society that has evolved in these republics, what one did not expect in Belarus was the expression of dissent and the degree where the "opposition" contested these elections.

The ensuing persistent popular demonstrations that continued although the police actions of OMON (Атрад міліцыі асобага прызначэння) and the use of social media by multiple individuals represented an opportunity to harvest robust and granular archival data related to social protest moment in Belarus.

Thus the idea of the web-archiving project took hold at UC Berkeley. At the same time, one can contest the ephemeral nature of digitally born content or even argue the need for documenting and preserving multiple views as expressed in the popular media of Belarus, the importance of preservation and representing the diverse voice in Belarus.

## Literature Review

What are an archive, printing, and technologies have been examined by philosophers Derrida and [Benjamin](#) in their respective works, "the Archival Fever" and "[The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility](#)."<sup>ii</sup> Thus, our digital ephemera are archives of the sort in the age of print. The manuscripts' similar exercise and methodological investigation have been undertaken by a Russian historian, archivist [Nikolai Petrovich Likhachev](#).<sup>iii</sup> While the theoretical works of these individual authors and philosophers can be perceived as dated, they enhance our understanding of what one can construct as an archive. A similar excursion about the archival nature of electronic records, whether these are texts, or tweets have been investigated by Luciana Duranti in her works such as [preservation of the integrity of electronic records](#) (2011), [Archives in a digital society = Les archives dans une société numérique](#) (2015), and [Trusting records in the cloud](#) (2019).<sup>ivvvi</sup>

In the field of Web Archiving, one can see the initial exploration of what is a web archive and the issues with web archiving was initially examined in great depth by Julien Masanès in his 2006 work, "[Web Archiving](#)."<sup>vii</sup> Niels Brügger and Ralph Schroeder have provided the methodological framework in their 2017 book, "[The web as history: using web archives to understand the past and the present](#)."<sup>viii</sup> While the digital archives can be construed as the repositories for historical exercises and preservation of the "memories," the question of why ephemera should be preserved is open to interpretation, mainly due to the complicated nature of social media-based proclamation, exclamations, or utterances.

On the one hand, these exclamations or utterances can allude to a meaningful way to understand social issues, problems. On the other hand, one can question the authenticity and integrity of such proclamations. Lastly, the questions about these utterances being weaponized have been examined by Singer and Brooking in "[Like War : the weaponization of social media](#)." In the recent article, "[Inevitable Weaponization of App Data Is Here: A Substack publication used location data from Grindr to out a priest without their consent](#)," by Joseph Cox on a popular investigative journalism site Vice News, allows us to postulate that "these utterances" can have evidentiary values and can lead to long-lasting consequences just as the archives of analog documents.<sup>ix</sup>

Belarus web is also not an exception, and it has been used by both the government and the opposition to convey their understanding of the "[stolen election](#)," "people's will," "democracy," and "legitimacy."<sup>x</sup> The voices that emerged in the aftermath of allegations and counter-allegations represented a set of cacophony and heteroglossia that [Bakhtin](#) alluded to due to the polyphonic nature of the protests and official governmental reactions to it.<sup>xi</sup> Social imaginary and our desire to preserve its interpretation through our non-judgemental lens was the primary driver for this web archiving project.

In the field of Slavic, East European Studies librarianship, there have been several works that examine the question of hidden collections, such as that of [Rakitayanskaya](#) (2021) entitled, "The late soviet and post-soviet ephemera collection at Harvard library."<sup>xii</sup> The previous works of Pendse, such as [Archiving the Russian and East European Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Web, 2013: A Pilot Project](#).<sup>xiii</sup>

Others have constructed websites as ephemera due to the impermanence of these websites. Sometimes, governmental restrictions, lack of funding structure, lack of interest, and others are some of the reasons

for the demise of some of the websites. However, constructing these artifacts as ephemera grants the theoretical framework to web archive these sites for posterity.

### Research Questions and Methodology

Several fundamental questions that confronted us were how to select the websites for harvesting so that we can represent all sides of the unequal equation defined by the opposition members, governmental entities, and the media websites sponsored by the Belarussian leaving outside of Belarus.

The project that at UC Berkeley library, we undertook was based on a simple proposition: the need for preservation of the reporting of the presidential elections, the ensuing protests in Belarus, including the ephemerality of websites of traditional press and the opposition was not only urgent but a responsible action to take. We avoided our implicit biases by inviting participants from different academic institutions to contribute to the project.

1. What were some of the select websites that required immediate archiving due to possible "taking down?"
2. What were some of the criteria that would help the curators to propose the sites for archiving?
3. Scope and Limitations such as depth of crawling, frequency of crawling a particular website, and this pilot's total duration?
4. What were some of the social media sites that were deemed necessary for crawling? We recognized that one could not crawl all of the websites manually each time, and a frequency for crawling was determined by automating the process.
5. What were some of the ways we would seek permission for crawling from the creators of these websites?

Like in any archive, we decided to preserve only select websites given the limited duration of this pilot project. The anticipated time of the pilot project was nine months since the first protests had begun. The curators were invited to participate through canned emails to selected curators responsible for East European Studies collection development and cataloging. The project managers envisioned this project to be an international collaborative project. We decided to use the UC Berkeley Libraries Archive-It platform. The title of the project was: [Belarus Crisis: 2020-2021](#).<sup>xiv</sup>

We had sent out an email Slavic Librarians List Server inviting our colleagues and faculty members to collaborate. The response to our initial call was limited, but we did get several enthusiastic curators in North America who wrote and showed their interest in collaborating. Our initial international collaborators were the curators from the Bavarian State Library and the British Library. And due to the ensuing zoom-based brainstorming, we came up with initial 25 websites, and as the project progressed, we settled on 59 different websites.

The criteria for this project were simple. The first goal was to see what social and popular media sites were considered endangered to a certain extent due to their differing stance and understanding of the elections. Second, to include also some of the select pro-government media in the crawls. The archive should have representations from all voices. Initially, we thought of crawling some of the YouTube channels to document and preserve the videos. Still, given the limited abilities of the crawler and limitations of the project space, we sparsely crawled only the necessary videos. We did crawl the Nexta channel, and it generated the rich data archive. However, the selective crawling of the sites like V Kontakte and Nexta proved to be problematic.

See image one below, which shows the backend of the landing page of the Belarus Crisis: 2020-2021 project on the Archive-It platform.

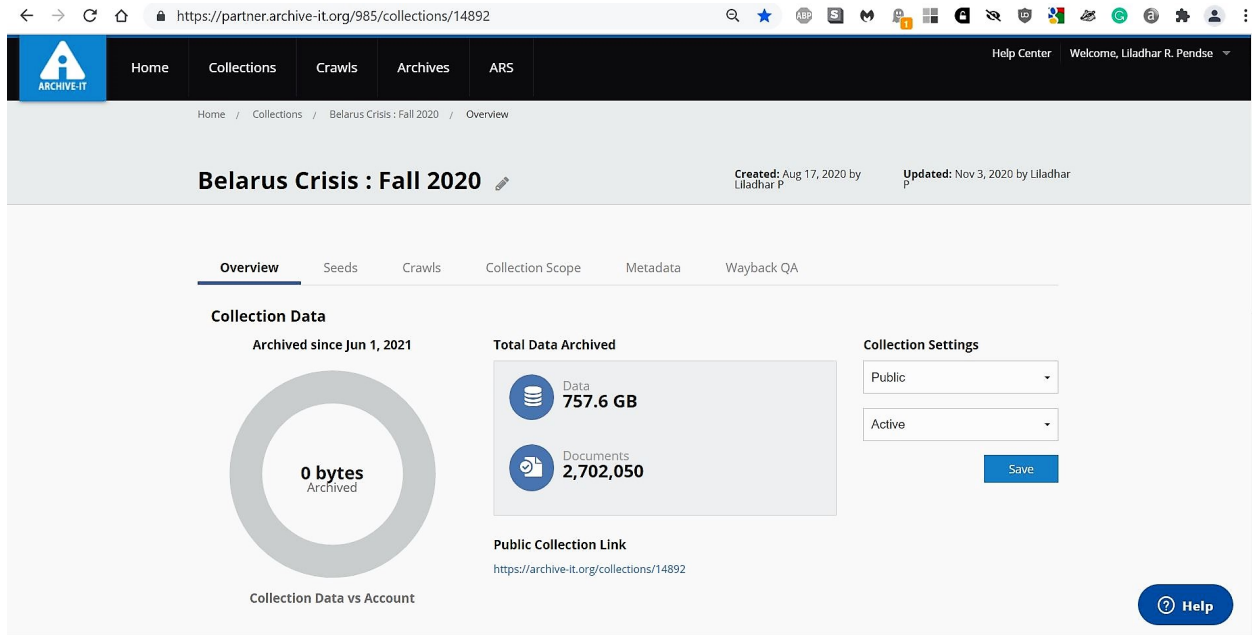


Image 1 The landing page of the backend of the Belarus Crisis 2020-2021

As of May of 2021, we had archived 757.6-gigabyte data with over 2.5 million documents. See the public interface of the project in image 2.

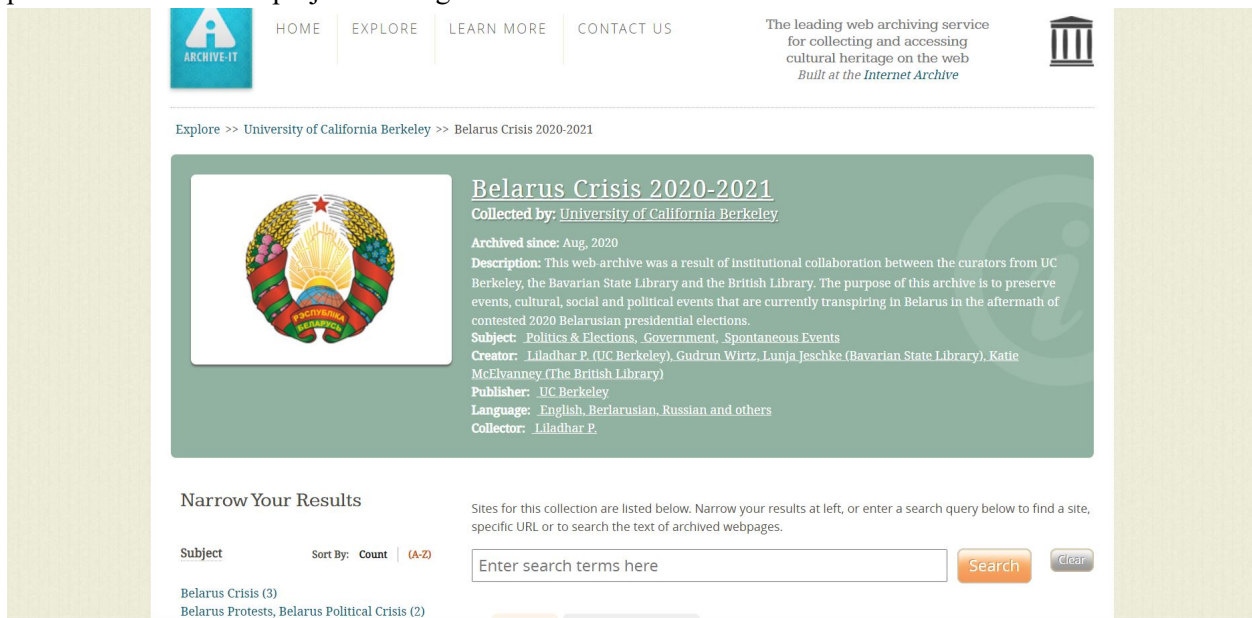


Image 2 The public interface of the Belarus Crisis Archive

In image 3, we see some of the seeds that were chosen for harvesting. One thing that was decided is to focus primarily on the organizations, both NGO and media organizations based in Belarus. Some of the organizations that began in Belarus moved out of Belarus to other parts of Europe once the crisis was earmarked with peaceful civilian protests.

Seed URL	Group	Status	Frequency	Type	Access	Last Crawl	Captures	Wayback
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://www.dekoder.org/">https://www.dekoder.org/</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	7	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="http://youtu.be/t7qyuCkbAtQ">http://youtu.be/t7qyuCkbAtQ</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	7	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://minkdialogue.by/">https://minkdialogue.by/</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	7	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://belarus2020.churchby.info/">https://belarus2020.churchby.info/</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	7	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://newbelarus.vision/">https://newbelarus.vision/</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	7	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/">https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	8	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://gomelspring.org/">https://gomelspring.org/</a>		Active	One-Time	One Page	Public	May 24, 2021	8	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://bysol.org/english">https://bysol.org/english</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	9	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://vimeo.com/473178381">https://vimeo.com/473178381</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	9	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://belaruscongress.org/">https://belaruscongress.org/</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	9	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://europeanbelarus.org/">https://europeanbelarus.org/</a>		Active	One-Time	One Page	Public	May 24, 2021	9	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://citydog.by/">https://citydog.by/</a>		Active	One-Time	One Page	Public	May 24, 2021	10	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://www.charter97.org">https://www.charter97.org</a>		Active	One-Time	Standard	Public	May 24, 2021	12	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLteOz8UI">https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLteOz8UI</a>		Active	One-Time	One Page	Public	May 24, 2021	11	Wayback >
<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="https://outride.rs/en/author/hannaliubakova/">https://outride.rs/en/author/hannaliubakova/</a>		Active	One-Time	One Page	Public	May 24, 2021	15	Wayback >

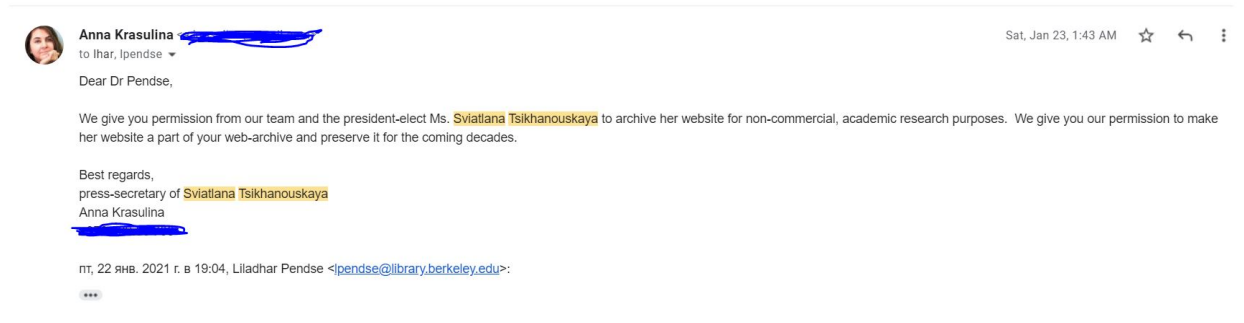
*Image 3 The seeds or websites that are part of this web archive.*

Before crawling a particular website, an email to request permission to crawl was sent, as shown in image four below.



*Image 4 The email requesting permission to the web archive.*

We proceeded with the crawling once we received permission, as shown below in image 5.



*Image 5 An email is indicating permission from Ms. Tsikhanouskaya's press secretary.*

In some cases, when we had sent an email and failed to get any response, we waited and sent another email after a month. Still, we did not get an answer, and a decision was made to crawl a particular website under fair academic use and for educational purposes only. The crawling history of the website of Sviatlana Tsikhaouskaya is shown below in image 6.

<https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/> Active Public One-Time

Created: Jan 22, 2021 Updated: Jul 29, 2021 In collection Belarus Crisis 2020-2021

Settings Metadata **Crawling History** Notes Seed Scope

Crawl List (8 Crawls)

Type to Filter Crawls [Download Seed Crawls List](#)

Crawl ID	Date & Time Completed	Status	Seed Status	Frequency	Data	Documents	Report Link
1421803	May 25, 2021	Finished: Time Limit	Crawled	One-Time	89.3 GB	260,879	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1397413	Apr 11, 2021	Finished: Time Limit	Crawled	One-Time	16.3 GB	21,962	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1394454	Apr 7, 2021	Finished: Time Limit	Crawled	Saved Test	206.1 GB	911,545	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1372821	Mar 2, 2021	Finished: Time Limit	Crawled	Saved Test	59.6 GB	133,313	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1361125	Feb 8, 2021	Finished: Time Limit	Crawled	Deleted (Expired) Test	139.8 GB	372,679	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1357137	Feb 1, 2021	Finished: Time Limit	Crawled	Saved Test	63.1 GB	189,483	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1352872	Jan 22, 2021	Finished	Crawled	Saved Test	857.6 MB	1,166	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>
1352653	Jan 22, 2021	Finished	Crawled	One-Time	263.1 MB	458	<a href="#">View Report &gt;</a>

*Image 6: The crawling history of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's website*

The files that were captured by the crawl for these specific sites appear in the following way. See the image below. The one problem that we face when we look at the data below, it shows all of the newly added data for all websites as shown in the image.



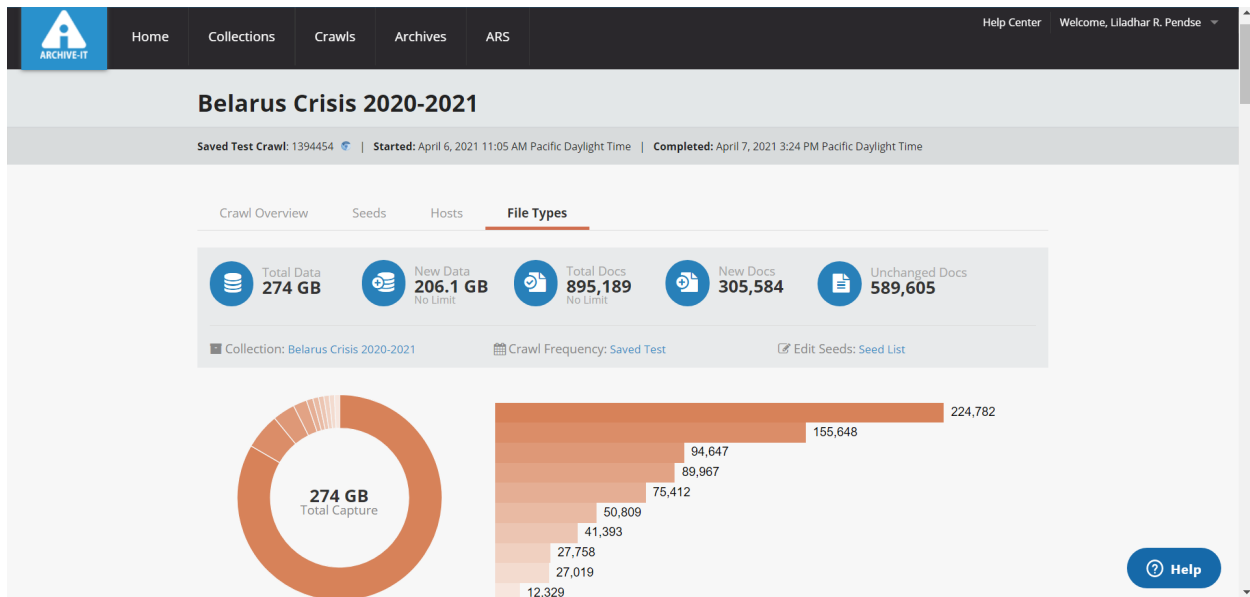


Image 7 The total capture of data on April 6, 2021

As an example below, the website of Ms. Tsikhanouskaya was crawled and captured six times during the pilot project. Below are the two separate images (images 8 and 9) of how the actual landing page of her website crawl appeared at the time of crawling on April 11, 2021.

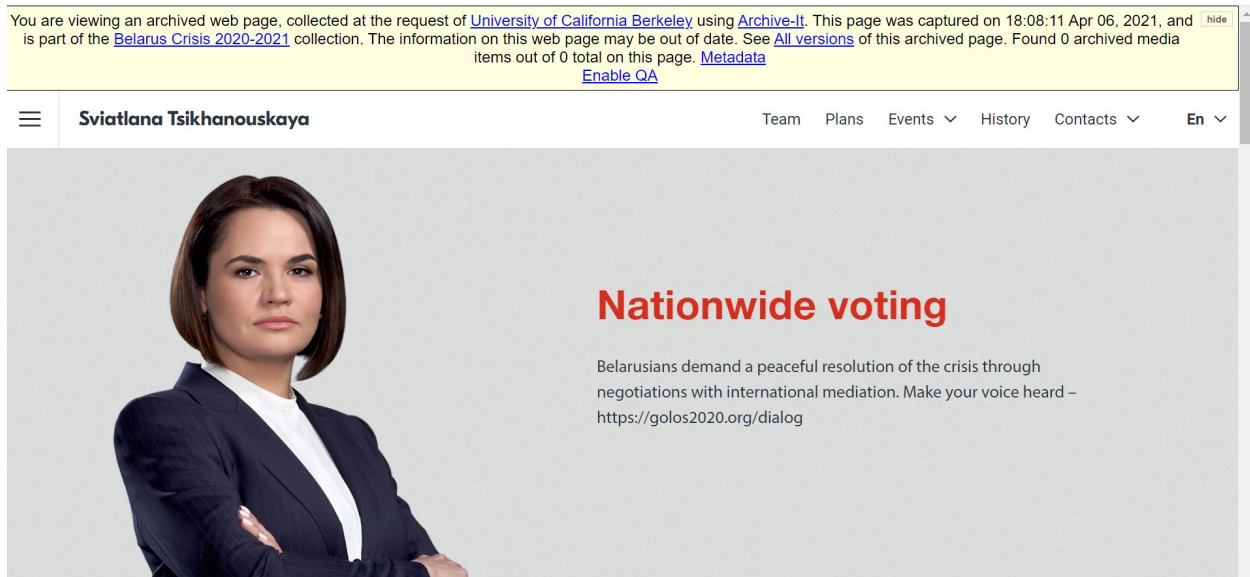


Image 8 An archived webpage of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's website (April 11, 2021)



You are viewing an archived web page, collected at the request of [University of California Berkeley](#) using [Archive-It](#). This page was captured on 18:13:44 Apr 06, 2021, and is part of the [Belarus Crisis 2020-2021](#) collection. The information on this web page may be out of date. See [All versions](#) of this archived page. Found 0 archived media items out of 0 total on this page. [Enable QA](#)

☰ **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya** Team Plans Events ▾ History Contacts ▾ En ▾

# Video

← Main / Events /





Image 9 Images and Videos archived from the website

We did not crawl all fifty-nine websites with the same frequency or at the same depth. In some cases, the crawl had to be limited to one page only, given the limited space from the beginning. We crawled some sites like Arch.by multiple times. Some sites like Arch.by, were scanned numerous times as we were able to capture a significant amount of data.

You are viewing an archived web page, collected at the request of [University of California Berkeley](#) using [Archive-It](#). This page was captured on 20:41:03 Jan 31, 2021, and is part of the [Belarus Crisis 2020-2021](#) collection. The information on this web page may be out of date. See [All versions](#) of this archived page. Found 0 archived media items out of 0 total on this page. [Metadata](#) [Enable QA](#)



**Title:** ARCHE - мысьлі крытычна  
**URL:** <https://arche.by/>  
**Description:** ARCHE, one of the key intellectual platforms in Belarus. It used to be a "thick journal" in the past but now, as I see, they have an online platform covering the elections as well as a page with their, and others, printed materials (Ostap Kin).  
**Captured 10 times** between Sep 1, 2020 and May 24, 2021  
**Rights:** © 1999-2020 Arche.by  
**Collector:** Liladhar P.  
**Contributor:** Ostap Kin, Archivist.

Image 10 Archy.by

The other focus was not to overlook some urban centers of Belarus, and to this extent, we crawled regional media as shown below.

**Title:** Гомельская вясна

**URL:** <https://gomelspring.org/>

**Description:** The site covers exclusively human rights issues, human rights violations - both civil and political and socio-economic, cultural, environmental, contains regular information on how to defend and defend their rights in the police, courts.

Captured 6 times between Jan 19, 2021 and May 24, 2021

Videos: 6 Videos Captured

**Subject:** Belarus- Politics, Belarus-Elections, Belarus-Political Crisis, Self-description; "Гомельская вясна" – праваабарончы сайт Гомеля і Гомельшчыны, які інсуе ўжо 7 год. Сайт асвятляе выключна праваабарончую тэматыку, парушэнні правоў чалавека – як грамадзянскіх і палітычных так і сацыяльна – эканамічных, культурніцкіх, экалагічных, змяшчае рэгулярна інфармацыю як бараніць і адстойваць свае правы ў міліцыі, судах."

**Language:** Belarusian

**Rights:** Email sent 11/15/2020

**Collector:** Liladhar P.

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**Title:** Пратэсты ў Гродне - Hrodna.life

**URL:** <https://hrodna.life/tag/pratjesty-grodne/>

Captured 15 times between Aug 20, 2020 and May 24, 2021

Videos: 17 Videos Captured

**Creator:** Алексей Шота, главный редактор

**Language:** Belarusian

**Rights:** © 2016-2020 hrodna.life

**Collector:** Liladhar P.

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**Title:** Народныя навіны Віцебска | Народные новости Витебска

**URL:** <https://news.vitebsk.cc/>

**Description:** This is an online newspaper from Vitebsk.

Captured 18 times between Aug 17, 2020 and May 24, 2021

**Source:** <https://news.vitebsk.cc/>

**Language:** Belarusian

**Rights:** Email to editorial board was sent on 17 August 2020. , © 2006-2020 Народныя навіны Віцебска / Народные новости Витебска

**Collector:** Liladhar P.

*Image 11 Gomel, Grodno, and Vitebsk-related websites.*

While most of the websites that we archived were in Belarus as time progressed, we started to add minimal relevant websites that were located in Germany and other parts of Europe.

Lastly, I postulate that any archive is usually an incomplete archive, which is not an exception. The purpose of this web archive was not to be a comprehensive collector of the digital ephemera. As curators, we had to make some difficult choices about what to include and not to include. We had several limitations about the space for crawling, and initially, one curator started the whole project. Although the call out to the professional listserve of Slavic librarians, most of the curators who responded were from the UK and European Union. We had several faculty members and recent Ph.D. recipients who were either of Belarusian descent or interested in Belarusian affairs.

The curator wishes to recognize the UC Berkeley Library, the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies to serve as the project's sponsors. Individual curators, faculty members, graduate students, and librarians who took a keen interest in helping as an advisory panel and selectors for the project: Dr. Gudrun Wirtz, Lunja Jeschke of Bavarian State Library, Dr. Katie McElvanney of British Library, Dr. Sasha Razor of UCLA, Ostap Kin, Archivist of Zimmerli Museum, Ihar Ivanou of the QA library, and Professor Volha Charnysh of MIT. I believe that our project would have been incomplete without their help.

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<sup>ii</sup> "Walter Benjamin (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)". *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/benjamin/#ImaHisCul>.

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<sup>iv</sup> Duranti, Luciana, Terry Eastwood, and Heather MacNeil. 2011. *Preservation of the integrity of electronic records*. Dordrecht: Springer.

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<sup>xii</sup> Rakityanskaya, Anna. 2021. "The Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Ephemera Collection at Harvard Library". *Slavic & East European Information Resources*. 22 (2): 210-227.

<sup>xiii</sup> Pendse, Liladhar R. 2014. *Archiving the Russian and East European Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Web, 2013: A Pilot Project*. Slavic & East European Information Resources. 182-196. eScholarship, University of California. <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/23r8r260>.

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<sup>xiv</sup> "Archive-It - Belarus Crisis 2020-2021". Archive-It.Org, 2021. <https://archive-it.org/collections/14892>.