

### **Feedback from the examiner of the bachelor thesis**

**Title:** Stitching New Belarus: Folk Embroidery Art as Resistance Strategy against Authoritarian State

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**Study programme:** Bachelor.

**Examiner:** MSc. Denisa Tomková, PhD.

The bachelor thesis entitled 'Stitching New Belarus: Folk Embroidery Art as Resistance Strategy against Authoritarian State' uses artist Rufina Bazlova's embroidery work to explore how collective folk embroidery art can challenge the authoritarian state, responding to the 2020-21 protests in Belarus that began after the 2020 presidential election. The aim of this work was to 'illustrate how non-traditional, nonviolent, everyday forms of protest rooted in solidarity can challenge authoritarian regimes and foster sustained protest movements.' (p.4)

The subsection 'Belarusian Protests of 2020' provides a clear historical overview of the political situation after the electoral fraud. The following subchapter 'Artistic Responses to the Protests' then provides an overview of the context of artistic political engagements in the period. Finally, the chapter 'Textile Use During the Protests' highlights the use of textiles as a form of protest, with particular attention paid to the traditional embroidered shirt known as the *vyshyvanka*. From this overview of the context, the thesis moves on to the 'Theoretical Framework' chapter. I appreciate the detailed analysis of literature and theoretical sources that inspired this thesis, including the theoretical analysis of Ewa Majewska's concept of 'weak resistance,' Judith Butler's theory of vulnerability, bell hooks' concept of solidarity, and engagement with LaVey's 'Reading Belarus: The Evolving Semiosis of Belarusian Textiles' (2021), Tatiana Sasha's 'The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns' (2022) and Tatian Shchyttsova's 'The Strength of the Strengthless: Women, Aged, and Disabled People as a Subversive Force in the Belarusian Protest Movement 2020' (2024) texts. The theoretical framework of this thesis is a well-researched and well-argued review of well-selected theoretical texts that are relevant and appropriate to the analysis this thesis provides. I very much appreciate how timely and urgent this research is and how it relates to current theoretical debates. However, the introduction neglects to define the state of the research (the existing literature) as well as to place the thesis in the context of the field. In particular, it would have been great to mention what has already been written about the use of embroidery as a form of protest, or even specifically mention what has been written about political art in the Belarusian context and the work of Rufina Bazlova, and how this work contributes to existing research. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that the work in the following chapters provides an overview of the historical, political and artistic manifestations from the Belarusian context.

The methodology clearly presents the research questions in a very logical and organized manner. The case studies are based on an exhibition that the student herself visited in 2023 at the GASK gallery in Kutná Hora. The research questions are presented very clearly: the first research question focuses on the project 'History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka' and seeks to answer the question of how the collective creation of folk embroidery can challenge the authoritarian state in a non-confrontational, sustainable, and non-heroic way, especially when direct political expression is not possible. The second research question relates to the letters from the '#FramedInBelarus' project and asks what impact the artistic creation of embroidery has on the lives of protesters in a context of constant political repression, forced migration and setbacks. To answer these research questions, the student undertook a visual analysis and interpretation of the 'History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka' series, combined with research into the wider socio-political context of Belarusian politics, as well as scholarly works on Belarusian folk and protest art. To answer the second research question, the student analysed the letters of the project participants.

The thesis makes the important observation that, 'This period created a need for solidarity, collective healing, and trauma processing. At the same time, sustained motivation and hope are crucial to keep the protest movement alive. Change does not happen fast, and it is difficult to continue resisting state

repression when the impact of one's actions seems unimportant and nonexistent, and the actions themselves seem too small to enact change. Many artists thus found themselves in search of therapeutic art practices, with embroidery becoming a choice medium for some.' (p.33) And by bringing in the theoretical work of bel hooks and Ewa Majewska, the thesis rightly argues that 'Many participants noted that the project's collective effort of expressing solidarity with political prisoners through embroidery also provided them with a feeling of support from being part of a larger community.' (p.37) Thus, in an important way, the student concludes that 'weak resistance' is not associated with weakness and passivity, but rather represents 'valuable insights and tactics that can help others avoid and resist similar traumas' (p.37).

Formally, the thesis does not number its chapters and subchapters, a formal recommendation for a thesis according to the FHS guidelines, 'The undergraduate thesis must have a clear structure and chapter divisions, and we recommend a multilevel division.' Omission of numbering would not in itself be a problem, but it is not entirely clear which sections are considered parts of larger chapters and which stand alone. For example, the table of contents shows that the introduction contains three subchapters: 'Belarusian Protests of 2020', 'Artistic Responses to the Protests' and 'The Use of Textiles During the Protests'. However, the last one, entitled 'The Use of Textiles During the Protests', begins as follows: 'This chapter describes the various ways in which textiles were used during the protests and how they became an unofficial symbol of Belarusian resistance' (p.10). The chapters could have been more comprehensively presented and could have been numbered or presented in a more accessible way to make them easier for the reader to navigate. Finally, when paraphrasing, there is no need to use page numbers in references to the source, but if it is a direct quotation of Majewska's work, the quotation marks are missing (p. 13).

The conclusion makes very important observation that these textual forms of protest were 'immediately targeted by the state, due to its perceived "low" impact'. This is a great point that would be great to develop further. What forms of protest are more visible or politically threatening? And how is it that something traditionally associated with low culture and women's crafts has such a wide political reach? What is the relationship between 'weak resistance' and 'low aesthetics'? Overall, this work is very urgent and relevant, and very well argued. I appreciate the student's engagement with very topical theoretical texts. It is work of a very high standard for this level of study. Of course, the structure of the thesis could be tighter, the arguments could be presented more confidently, and I can imagine that the thesis would have benefited from a first-hand interview with Bazlova, who is based in Prague. However, I can imagine this thesis being published in some edited form, and I would certainly like to support that. If interested, I would be willing to consult further with the student on this matter.

Proposed grade: 1