Overcoming the 'Barrier of Fear' in Order to Resist: the 2020 Protests against the Lukashenko Regime in Belarus

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Abstract

In August 2020, widespread open resistance emerged against Lukashenko's regime in Belarus, in the wake of the presidential elections. Through a media content analysis, this paper assesses how the emotion of fear was presented by English language European and North American print and online media, with the departure point being the perceived loss of fear among Belarusians. It seeks to understand: how was fear discussed in relation to resistance in Belarus in the mainstream media accounts? How did fear manifest among Belarusians and what were its effects? For resistance movements, what are the practical implications of understanding how fear manifests and affects actors? Although several headlines in the key period of mid-August 2020 reflect the phenomenon of a 'barrier of fear' being broken, Belarusian resisters' perspectives present in some of the articles show how feelings of fear are far more complex. The themes are as follows: 'fear remains'; the 'loss of fear' among opponents of Lukashenko; 'pre-election loss of fear'; 'fear among the regime and security force elements'; 'taking action as imperative—regardless of fear', as well as a 'point of no return' being reached. It is clear that it is more accurate to talk about people making a decision to resist despite their fear. Moreover, there seems to be a crucial relationship between feelings of anger about regime brutality and the willingness to act regardless of fear about the implications.

Introduction

The same day that Belarus' presidential election finished on 9th August, an exit poll result predicting the landslide re-election of President Lukashenko triggered protests, following accusations of fraud and a stolen election result being levelled at his regime (BBC, 2020a). Various accounts show that this in the days following, there was swift, brutal and widespread repression by security forces against demonstrators (Kalinovskaya, 2020a; Vasilyeva,

2020a). At this initial stage soon after the events, not only has it been suggested that the regime's brutality was ineffective in suppressing protests, it may have made more Belarusians more determined to resist Lukashenko's regime (Melnichuk, 2020).

In explaining this dynamic, one phenomenon suggested as part of the narrative in some mainstream media accounts has been the loss of fear among Belarusians. This seemed to be particularly the case in mid-August, with a renewed impetus to the protests developing following immediate attempts at repression by the regime. Accordingly, this paper assesses instances of treatment of the issue of fear in Belarus appearing in English language European and North American print and online media. It seeks to understand: how was fear discussed in relation to resistance in Belarus in the mainstream media accounts? How did fear manifest among Belarusians and what were its effects? For resistance movements, what are the practical implications of understanding how fear manifests and affects actors?

First, this paper briefly introduces the understanding of fear and the breaking of the barrier of fear in some of the existing research; studies in the wake of the 2010/11 West Asia North Africa (WANA) revolutions are notable in this regard. The approach to the media content analysis is explained, followed by a presentation of the main themes that were apparent in the mainstream media perspectives of fear in Belarus. The themes are as follows: 'fear remains'; the 'loss of fear' among opponents of Lukashenko; 'pre-election loss of fear'; 'fear among the regime and security force elements'; 'taking action as imperative—regardless of fear', as well as a 'point of no return' being reached. The discussion draws connections between these themes, as well as emphasising the importance of working through fear over a longer-term period.

Fear and Resistance

It is understood that quite simply, fear among individuals and groups reduces dissent (Young, 2019, p.140). The breaking of the barrier of fear, as a precursor to more open and mass acts of resistance, is a prominent dynamic that has been discussed in relation to the 2010/11 WANA revolutions. For example, Salamey and Pearson (2012) effectively outlined how the barrier of fear was created by WANA regimes (pp.935-936). Given 'the persistence of authoritarian power', they identified breaking of the fear barrier as 'first and foremost among the major prerequisite challenges for the emergence of strong civil movements for reform and democratic change' (pp.936-

937). During their revolution, Tunisians have been noted particularly as being 'the first' to break the barrier of fear (Haseeb, 2011, p.115)—yet as a phenomenon it is often taken at face value (Haddad, 2012, p.48; Gana, 2013, p.9; Cavatorta, 2015, pp.142-143).

It was largely with Pearlman's (2013) analysis, in relation to the Tunisian revolution and wider 2010/11 revolutions, that an in-depth explanation was sought for the emotions behind the breaking of a psychological barrier of fear. Pearlman identified that 'a striking number of Arab citizens' referred to the barrier of fear being broken (p.387), and indeed this was the case among participants in my own research in Tunisia (Brown, 2019). Fear was considered by Pearlman (2013) in the context of wider emotions motivating or discouraging protesters, 'support[ing] an argument that cuts to the foundations of political science: actors' articulations of fear, outrage, courage, and joy deserve to be taken seriously in their own terms' (p.391). Overall, Pearlman suggests that:

> Emotions such as fear, sadness, and shame promote pessimistic assessments, risk aversion, and a low sense of control. Such dispiriting emotions encourage individuals to prioritize security and resign to political circumstances, even when they contradict values of dignity. By contrast, anger, joy, and pride promote optimistic assessments, risk acceptance, and feelings of personal efficacy. Such emboldening emotions encourage prioritization of dignity and increase willingness to engage in resistance, even when it jeopardizes security (p.387).

Crucially, Pearlman suggests that dispiriting and emboldening emotions are not mutually exclusive, meaning 'the question […] is not the conditions under which fear disappears, but under which people press on despite fear' (p.392). Pearlman (2016) expanded on the assessment of fear in the Syrian context, distinguishing 'silencing fear [that] motivates flight into disengagement', from surmounted fear that 'empowers the fight for political voice'. This occurs when 'one is aware of potential punishment for political transgressions, but musters the courage to act anyway' (p.25).

However, for fear to be surmounted, other feelings and emotions are necessary. In this regard, not only courage but anger and outrage (Pearlman, 2013, p.394) can be beneficial—identified as an emboldening emotion by Pearlman. One must be mindful of the likely range of emotions that have an influence on people engaged in politics, and the fact that the complexity of

specific cases will lead to different emotional responses (Bramsen and Poder, 2014, p.54; Benski and Langman, 2013, p.531). Yet there appears to be a more prominent connection between feeling anger or outrage and the will to action regardless of fear. Exploring the mix of anger and fear further, Benski and Langman (2013) identified how it is an example of 'contradictory or non-congruent emotions', where the behavioural outcomes diverge from what one would expect from either of the emotions' single influence (p.531). Contrastingly, congruent emotions 'work in a similar direction and thus amplify the basic expected behavioral consequences (p.531). This is significant in relation to the further distinction drawn between positive emotions such as love, joy and hope, which tend to be sought out by people, and negative emotions including anger, humiliation and fear that tend to be avoided (Benski and Langman, 2013, p.531); it has been suggested that anger is associated with hope because it entails motivation to struggle and a 'hunger for […] status and benefits denied' (Pearlman, 2013, pp.392-393; Kemper, 1978; Frijda, 1986, p.429). While this form of anger can therefore be directly linked to more positive emotions, and a willingness to engage in resistance behaviour, Bramsen and Poder (2014) indicate how non-congruent emotions can support actors during conflict; positive emotional energy is agency-generating, while negative emotional energy 'facilitat[es] and bind[s] the opponents to each other in a conflictual relationship' (p.77). In the case of Belarus and the framing of emotions, it will become apparent how anger at the Lukashenko regime's repressive actions actually enabled Belarusians to work through fear, in order to engage in open resistance. This was very much related to feelings of unity, solidarity, hope and dignity.

Media Content Analysis

The premise of this investigation was seeing—mindful of the prominence of the 'barrier of fear' in presentations of the WANA revolutions—a number of mainstream media articles discussing Belarus in relation to a loss of fear among the resisters, with several of those comprising the list of headlines on p 14-15. Working from this basis, I undertook a more methodical analysis of English language, European and US mainstream media headlines from a sample of media sources available on Factiva, an international news database run by Dow Jones (2020). When Factiva was searched in its entirety with the key words 'Belarus' and 'fear' for the three months until 25th September 2020, 2986 articles were returned. With this being too great a number to search manually, I narrowed the search to English and European news

resources, which still provided 2434 results. Searching 'Belarus' and 'fear' in a more limited number of sources for the three months until 25th September 2020 provided a more manageable 415 articles, with 80 duplicates. Of the remaining 335, I found 198 to be of direct relevance to the elections in Belarus and aftermath. This excluded daily news rounds ups, apart from BBC Monitoring round ups of foreign news, which I thought could provide some insight into Russian and Belarusian media.

The sources searched for the UK were The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, the Times, The Independent, BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union and BBC Monitoring European. The US sources were CNN, The New York Times and the Washington Post, while other European sources were France's Agence France Presse, Germany's Die Welt (English language version), as well as Belarus' BelaPAN Online.

Only four articles of the 198 mentioned something relating the loss of fear in the headline, which are indicated in the following section on p.15. I discovered another four through my general consumption of online media articles and a search of 'Belarus' and 'fear' in Google news. BBC News, Forbes, The Times, Al Jazeera English, CNN, the New York Times, Agence France Presse and the UK Financial Times have all had an article with a headline in this regard. I have no evidence as to the influence of this on shaping readership, although I believe that the basis of talking about a loss of fear is significant to our understanding of resistance. Among the 198 articles, there were 68 mentions of 'fear' and 'afraid' in relation to the resisters or population in Belarus. Multiple mentions in an article were counted once. Some examples and their context are discussed in the following section.

Fear in Belarus: The Mainstream Media Perspective

As mentioned in the introduction, mainstream media accounts identified the loss of fear among Belarusians as a reason why, by mid-August 2020, they were protesting in large numbers despite the Lukashenko regime's attempts at violent repression. The following is a list of article headlines pertaining to this phenomenon, in date order.

> Tatsiana Melnichuk. 'Belarus elections: Shocked by violence, people lose their fear'. *BBC News.* 13th August 2020.
>
> Katya Soldak. 'Belarus Protests in Largest Numbers Yet: There Is No More Fear'. *Forbes*. 16th August 2020.

Edward Lucas. '200,000 gather to show dictator that they are no longer afraid'. *The Times.* 17th August 2020. (Appeared on Factiva).

Step Vaessen. "'No more fear!": Belarus president heckled by striking workers. *Al Jazeera English.* 18th August 2020.

M. Ilyushina. 2020. '"He doesn't care if we live or die": How Belarusians shed decades of fear to rattle a strongman's iron grip". *CNN.* 19th August 2020. (Appeared on Factiva).

Ivan Nechepurenko & Andrew Higgins. 'No Longer Cowed, Belarus Has Message for Once-Mighty Dictator: "Go Away!"' *The New York Times.* [Online]. 19th August 2020. (Appeared on Factiva).

Vaidotas Beniusis. '"We are not afraid": Belarus challenger urges protest unity. *Agence France Presse.* [Online]. 23rd August 2020. (Appeared on Factiva).

Valzhyna Mort. 'Belarus protesters surf emotions of exultation and fear: When the day's protest ends and everyone goes home, dread sets in again'. *Financial Times.* [Online]. 9th September 2020.

The first article by Melnichuk has a headline where people's loss of fear is directly connected to shock at the regime's violence—a significant dynamic which is explored in greater depth below. The last article by Mort is curious, suggesting that it is during protests that fear has gone, yet in the domestic setting of one's home it returns, perhaps pertaining to a strong sense of collective security.

The mentioning of fear was far more common in the body of articles; there were 68 mentions in 198 articles of 'fear' or 'afraid' in relation to resisters or the population in Belarus. 39 related to people losing their fear, while there were 29 mentions of resisters or the population being fearful. This is not a particularly large difference and rather indicates the complexity of the phenomenon of 'loss of fear'. I will attempt to present some of the media portrayal below.

Fear Remains

One clear factor from the media articles is that in Belarus, fear still exists; whether it is quotes from protesters agreeing to speak on condition of anonymity due to fear for themselves or for their families (Khurshudyan, 2020a, 2020b; Vasilyeva, 2020a), or a general fear of arrest, brutality and

torture at the hands of security forces, leading protesters to be 'scared to go out' as reported in August 2020 (Blackall, 2020; Charevič, 2020; Higgins, 2020; Mort, 2020a, Nechepurenko and Higgins, 2020b, 2020c; Walker and Roth, 2020b). This fear of going out could also be noted in relation to Mort's (2020a) article just mentioned above, where there is 'dread' once protesters return home, pointing to a pervasive sense of fear.

A particularly prominent and of course widely reported case is of the opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya leaving Belarus for her safety and that of her family (Agence France Presse, 2020; Mort, 2020b; Thuburn, 2020); Vasilyeva (2020b) quoted Tikhanovskaya as saying about her decision to leave:

> I thought that this movement had given me the strength to withstand anything. But perhaps I remain the weak woman that I was at the start […] I made a very difficult decision. I know that many people will understand me, many will condemn me, and many will hate me. But God forbid you ever have to face a choice like I did. Children are the most important thing in our lives.

While this could have undermined the confidence of the opposition to Lukashenko, occurring soon after the election, resistance continued and Tikhanovskaya has remained prominent in the opposition. Before the election, Tikhanovskaya told a rally: 'You think that I'm not afraid? I'm afraid every day […] But I get up, summon my will, get over my fear and move forward' (Roth, 2020a). Significantly, she applied this to the whole country on 21st August: 'Every person in our country feels fear and is scared now, but it's our mission to step over all our fears and move further' (Thuburn, 2020). On 29th August, Agence France Presse (2020; also Dixon, 2020a) reported Tikhanovskaya as saying 'This regime is morally bankrupt and the only way it will attempt to cling onto power is by fear and intimidation […] this tactic will not work. Belarusian people are not afraid any more. We will win'. With the previous acknowledgement that fear is present but must be overcome, and later that Belarusians are no longer afraid, this may indicate the significant symbolism of the latter statement—even if not strictly accurate.

Another notable element of fear, perhaps less visible than the overt physical violence of Lukashenko's security forces, pertains to economic threats against resisters. This has been reported as having a particular effect on workers who are striking, due to the potential for losing their work:

> Natalia P Antonova, pleaded with fertiliser factory workers to join the protests and resume their strike. But just about all of them filed by quietly, ignoring her. 'People are being pressured at work, salaries are dismal and we all have loans', said one of the protesters, Olga Lebedevich, 45, a decorator. 'Everybody is afraid to lose their paychecks, so they live in fear (Nechepurenko and Troianovski, 2020).

As well as workers returning to work due to fear of job losses (see Birnbaum and Khurshudyan, 2020; Vasilyeva, 2020c), Antusevich (2020) suggested they are also 'afraid of being abandoned, afraid of reprisals'. Turčyna (2020a) reported on the strike committees at Minsk University and noted how 'Some instructors who were observers in the country's August 4-9 presidential election or members of candidates' campaign teams have fled the country for fear of persecution'.

The Loss of Fear

Looking at some of the reported perspectives of certain opposition leaders to begin with, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's different statements on fear have been noted above. In the last ten days of August and into September 2020 she was quoted variously as saying 'Belarusians are overcoming that fear [of the government]' (BBC Monitoring European, 2020a), and 'we are not afraid' (Beniusis, 2020; Kalinovskaya and Beniusis, 2020), as well as positing an awakening of self-respect over fear (Parfitt, 2020a). However, soon after the election results, on 11th August a joint statement from Belarus' opposition parties was released which stated: 'We are proud of the Belarusian people that has managed to overcome fear and shown that it can defend its choice [of Svetlana Tikhanovsskaya]' (Bykoŭskaja, 2020a). Indeed, Tikhanovskaya stated on 9th August that 'I believe my eyes, and I see that the majority is with us […] We have already won, because we have overcome our fear, our apathy and our indifference' (Kalinovskaya, 2020a; Jaraševič, 2020; The Times, 2020). These are much earlier statements regarding the loss of fear and may have sought to instil confidence and embolden opposition to Lukashenko.

This is perhaps indicated further by opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova telling protesters, 'I know how scared you are, because we are all scared. Thank you for overcoming your fear *and joining the majority* [emphasis added]' (Kalinovskaya, 2020b), as well as stating 'I'm not afraid. I feel a huge support from the Belarusian people and from my friends. All together we do not feel fear' (Schiltz, 2020). Meanwhile, jailed opposition leader Viktar Babaryka was quoted on 17th August as stating:

> Great things are done by ordinary people, people who have defeated their fear. Overcoming fear is every person's personal victory. People have overcome their fear, which means that we have a future. They have said that they don't want to live in fear, hate and blood (Turčyna, 2020b).

These sentiments suggests a significant element of unity and solidarity, as well as a sense that individual satisfaction should be derived, in the process of 'overcoming fear'.

Quotes in the mainstream media from individuals involved in protests also reflect the sense among some that 'there is no more fear' (Soldak, 2020; BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, 2020b; Dixon, 2020a; Walker, 2020f), that 'we are no longer afraid' (O'Reilly and Luhn, 2020; Turčyna, 2020c). More significant to understanding the 'loss of fear' are quoted individuals who discuss their fear in relation to other emotions and feelings. For example, Sergei Dylevsky, organiser of the strike at Minsk Tractor Works and member of the Coordination Council, is reported as saying 'I hate what he [Lukashenko] does with every cell of my soul […] I have overcome fear; my hatred for him defeated it' (Nechepurenko, 2020d; also Walker, 2020e). 'Overcome' does not necessarily mean an absence—although 'defeated' might. Additionally, Dylevsky may have encouraged others to join the strikes through his example, according to a striker called Vadim: 'The main thing is that he has no fear […] He's just a simple guy, not an opportunist, but he know what he needs to do […] People see it and trust him' (Nechepurenko, 2020d). Nevertheless, a calculation was still being made by many towards the end of August, according to Dylevsky himself:

> [He] said only about 3,000 of the plant's 15,000 workers had signed a protest statement, and only about 250 were ready 'to go all the way' even if it meant being fired. 'I have come to the point where hatred has overcome fear, but most people are still scared of losing their job,' he said. 'I am a bit disappointed, I had hoped more people would join us' (Walker and Roth, 2020a).

Similarly, Ščarbakoŭ (2020) reported that the chairman of the independent Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, Aliaksandr Jarašuk, had encouraged workers to cease their membership of the pro-government Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, saying many had 'overcome their fear' to participate in protests, yet 'a significant number' remained members of the Federation. A Belarusian academic, Katsiaryna Shmatsina, suggested 'there

is an unprecedented leve of solidarity and unification of people […] Even the fear of torture cannot stop people from protesting anymore (Triebert, Engelbrecht, Matsnev and Chavar, 2020). This is clearly not a clear-cut situation; with the sense of overcoming fear due to other factors or through a calculation—rather than fear's absence, we seem to reach a more realistic presentation of the circumstances.

Given these statements from Belarusian opposition leaders and people involved in actions against Lukashenko, some of the mainstream media's portrayal of a loss of fear is perhaps understandable. In an editorial from 12th August 2020, The Washington Post (2020) remarked that 'Citizens have broken the fear barrier and want change'. Parfitt (2020b) remarked that 'The workers appeared to have lost their fear' (also Auseyushkin and Roth, 2020). Ilyushina's (2020) article for CNN on 19th August had a headline partially stating 'How Belarusians shed decades of fear'; the article even states 'people here have shed decades of fear in the span of a few days'. Nechepurenko and Higgins (2020a) also implied that Belarus' opposition to Lukashenko has emerged swiftly in 'recalling the popular uprising that came out of nowhere to topple Romania's seemingly invincible dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989'. Nevertheless, other mainstream media articles reported evocatively on the present fear over the same period. There is a further issue that efforts to 'overcome' fear, as well as actions contributing to the emergence of open resistance to Lukashenko, have been running far longer than a few days. Incidentally, research on 'everyday resistance' in various contexts has shown that hidden and ostensibly disparate forms of resistance should not be overlooked (Bayat, 2021; Johansson and Vinthagen, 2021).

Pre-election Loss of Fear

Evidently, the overcoming or loss of fear was being discussed in Belarus prior to the elections; this indicates it was not a 'sudden' response to Lukashenko stealing this particular election and there has been an accretion of confidence over some time.

Again, Tikhanovskaya's perspective was regularly reported and offers insight, reflecting her mixed statements on fear after the election. At a rally on 4th August Tikhanovskaya stated: 'Now is the time when everyone must overcome their fear', while acknowledging her own fear: 'Do you think I'm not scared? I'm scared every day. But I muster my courage, get over my fear and go to you and go for victory' (Grebenkin, 2020; also Roth, 2020a). This reflected a similar sentiment in mid-July (Kalinovskaya, 2020c). On

3rd August at a rally she had said, 'the further I go, the less fear I have', and said 'supporters of pro-democratic change "can no longer be afraid and keep silence"' (Sierada, 2020a). On 22nd July Tikhanovskaya was reported as saying 'Now I'm not afraid, I feel your support and your strength. Being in this place now is my duty. My duty is to help make us and our children free' (Korovenkova, 2020).

The significance of this latter statement is that while opposition figureheads might have emboldened people through example, they were also emboldened through ordinary Belarusian's actions. This is indicated further in her explanation that:

> When I saw multiple lines of people [waiting for their turn to give their signature] during the collection of ballot access signatures, that gave me much strength. And I decided to move ahead and only forward no matter what, because I felt responsibility for the people who, just like Siarhiej [her imprisoned husband], want change (Sierada, 2020b).

Sierada (2020b) also reported a representative of the election monitoring group Honest People, connected to candidate Vikar Babaryka, as having received 'more than 10,000 applications from people seeking to become observers at polling station', while campaign rallies had attracted thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of people (Grebenkin, 2020; Roth, 2020a; Sierada, 2020a). The Belarusian political analyst Alesia Rudnik suggested that the three female presidential candidates had brought together 'Belarusians who would not normally participate in anti-government demonstrations' and 'people are not afraid now' (Grebenkin, 2020). On 29th July, The Independent quoted Tikhanovskaya as saying 'There wasn't a moment where she didn't feel "very, very frightened". But it was a fear the whole country shared, she insists' (Carroll, 2020). Ultimately, the impression is one of being united in fear in a way that acknowledging it led to a mutual emboldenment.

Crucially, even before the election and the regime and security force's subsequent severe crackdown, the opposition's overcoming of fear was being posited against the regime's fear. Two football matches in Minsk on 7th August were postponed, with the Executive Committee of the Belarusian Football Federation said to 'fear that thousands of supporters of presidential candidate Sviatlana Cichanoŭskaja [Svetlana Tikhanosvskaya] could legally gather in the stands' (Ulasaŭ, 2020); at a previous match 'Many fans chanted the opposition slogan "Žyvie Belarus!" (Long live Belarus!)' (Ulasaŭ, 2020).

Opposition members have said candidates were barred from the election because Lukashenko 'was afraid of them' (Sierada, 2020a). In response to Lukashenko's suggestion that military force could be used in response to election trouble, saying he had 'learned the lessons of 2010 [post-election protests…] I understand the need to have well-prepared soldiers ready just in case' (Carroll, 2020), Tikhanovskaya stated: 'I hope they [the military] will listen to their people—and never, ever send in the tanks or soldiers' (Carroll, 2020). Of great significance is Tikhanovskaya's direct appeal to the armed forces in early August:

> You are part of the army and when the army serves the people, the people is extremely grateful to it. We want to respect our army. Act in a way that will make us proud of you […] The police stand together with the people (Sierada, 2020a).

This shows a pre-emptive engagement with the security forces and a possible utilisation of their potential internal unease and discontentment, an engagement that continued post-election.

Fear among Security Force and Regime Elements

There was already a sense before the election that the aggressive stance of Lukashenko against his own people was proving counterproductive. With the regime implying that the security forces and military were preparing for post-election clashes, Roth (2020a) described Lukashenko as 'Backed into a corner […] the normal scare tactics have done little to dampen turnout at opposition rallies'. He quoted a former aide to Lukashenko in the 1990s, Alexandere Feduta, as saying:

> The more that he tries to scare them, the more it has a reverse effect… Right now, he is trying to convince everyone that he will open fire. If there's no shooting, it's him being weak. But if a shot is fired, it's his political death.

Many Belarusians' outrage at the post-election brutality of the security forces is discussed in the following section; here it is significant to note the 'fear' within the regime that this stance implies.

Andrei Sannikov, a presidential candidate in 2010, has suggested that 'Lukashenko has been scared to lose his power since 2020', with his subsequent crackdown being visible internationally 'for the first time […]

in 2020 he decided to use violence right away, even despite the presence of some international observers and foreign press' (Shevchenko, 2020; BBC, 2020c). Shevchenko (2020) noted that 'since then, the regime has used only more violence against the opposition, fearing a larger civil uprising, similar to what transpired in neighboring Ukraine' (Shevchenko, 2020). While this could denote anxiety, I suggest it might also be a genuine—even if misplaced—confidence or arrogance, that opposition could simply be brutally suppressed, having 'worked' in 2010. Violence is not equivalent to power; Tikhanovskaya's suggestion after the election is indicative of this, that the regime 'is shaking with fear […] strikes have driven the dictatorship into a corner, wounded in the very heart, that's why they are trying to divide you […] if we keep together, this regime will not stand a chance' (Nosava, 2020). This realisation that a regime is scared can prove particularly potent.

The political regime's fear was suggested as having been impressed on the security forces. BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union (2020a) translated an article from Russia,[1] comprising analysis from a former member of the Russian Internal Troops, psychologist Anton Belotskiy, who suggested that the indiscriminate chasing and arrest of anyone on he streets during and after demonstrations 'is the clearest sign of indecisiveness, jumpiness and fear'. Belotskiy noted that security force members may have been 'pumped' by 'being frightened with the ghost of Maidan, which happened in Ukraine in 2014; they probably were told about the losses among the security forces from the Ukrainian special forces Berkut'. This instilling of fear may have proven insufficient in certain instances; notable details from this report are Belotskiy's observation that away from Minsk there was evidence of the riot police, OMON, lowering their shields and 'fraternising with the protests […] this is insubordination […] it is unwillingness to shed blood. Apparently, the police assessed the degree of threat and realised that there was nothing threatening' (BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, 2020a).

Significantly, other cases of police refusing to attack protesters have been reported (Auseyushkin and Roth, 2020), even at least one report on record of resignation in disgust (Walker, 2020h)—finding its more open form of solidarity in the reports of veterans of the security forces binning their uniforms (BBC, 2020a; BBC, 2020b). It is a curious detail in Auseyushkin and Roth's (2020) report that:

[1] Maksim Kislyakov: "Russian State Security Officer Evaluated Work of Belarusian OMON [Riot Police]: 'OnEdge'" 'Moskovsky Konsomolets'. 10th August.

> At times even the riot police looked scared and confused about what to do. As the crowd called on a masked police officer to release an unconscious protester, he turned on them with a look of fear and exasperation visible through his balaclava 'I did let him go!' he yelled. 'Call an ambulance, you idiots'.

It is apparent that at least some elements of the security forces have felt a dilemma confronting the protesters, while it is significant that opposition elements seem to have acknowledged this and taken concrete actions to facilitate defections or at least refusal to join in the suppression. Mid-August, Maria Kolesnikova appealed to security force officers and diplomats at a rally, stating: 'This is your last chance to fight your fear. We were all scared too. Join us and we will support you' (Walker, 2020g; Walker, 2020b). Tikhanovskaya implored similarly, stating 'their past behaviour would be forgiven if they acted now' (O'Reilly and Luhn, 2020). This does not seem to have been an empty promise, with one example being the officer explaining his resignation in Walker's (2020h) article receiving €1,500 from the Belarus Solidarity fund to help cover his 6,000 Belarusian roubles (£1,823) fine for breaking his contract with the police.

This sense of an amnesty for defecting security force and regime members may contrast somewhat with the tactic that has emerged of protesters attempting to unmask security force officers. This involves removing the masks to expose their faces, using face matching technology or word-of-mouth and open-source information to uncover their full identities (Walker, 2020i). A Telegram channel called 'Black Book' is dedicated to identifying police officers in this manner. Given that many officers have run away or attempt to hide their faces when unmasked, it has been suggested as effective in stopping violence (Dixon, 2020b; Walker, 2020i). Both this action, as well as the act of being masked, could both be taken as an indication of the regime's fear (see Browne, 2020).

Unmasking the security forces is evidently a highly symbolic action, while having real practical implications for accountability (see BBC, 2020d), while also clearly indicating the emboldened actions among Belarusian opposition to Lukashenko. One video unveiling the use of facial recognition available via Facebook at the time of writing[2] is stylised and overstates the

[2] https://www.facebook.com/mein.name.ist.belarus/videos/1634806816700516

capabilities of the technology to unveil masked police, although the message's intention of intimidating and shaming Belarus' security forces is powerful. However, the implications of deanonymizing are likely more complicated. The Chief of the Interior Ministry's main security department, Andrei Parshin indicated that threats against police officers would be treated with 'the most brutal response' (Dixon, 2020b), with such deanonymizing and its potential implications maybe being vulnerable to being framed as threatening. Walker (2020i) reported the founder of Nexta, a Telegram channel organising protest actions, as saying if the security forces 'start kidnapping and killing people, then the killers will not be able to feel comfortable even in their own apartments. If the state cannot be responsible for dispensing justice, then ordinary people may take this function into their own hands'. Former British ambassador to Belarus, Nigel Gould-Davies, remarked in a report on 21st September 2020 that 'despite the protesters' innovative tactics, they have yet to achieve the kinds of large-scale defections in the security forces or divisions within the elite that are needed to topple Lukashenko (Dixon, 2020b). While this was still early in the struggle, my personal question is whether it could alienate some in the security forces in feeling they are invested in the survival of Lukashenko's regime, in order to avoid prosecution in a free Belarus, or simply their personal insecurity which could possibly be played upon by the regime, as Anton Belostkiy suggested had already occurred as noted above. Ultimately, creating a sense of unity among protesters and wavering security forces, or at least courting the empathy of the latter, seems more effective than utilising fear.

Taking Action as Imperative—Regardless of Fear

Resisters' engagement with and bold actions against the security forces is occurring within a context of severe and, from some perspectives an unprecedented, level of security force brutality, as mainstream media presentations show. These presentations are explored below, alongside the implications of Belarusians' apparent genuine shock at the level of brutality. Their responses have regularly been situated in relation to fear.

The acknowledgement of Belarusians being scared or having fear, yet that being overcome due to other emotions or drivers, has been noted above. On 10th August Tikhanovskaya acknowledged 'All of us are afraid but we call for fighting one's fear' (Spasiuk, 2020); another protester was reported saying 'I think that everyone here on the square is afraid and there is a reason to be scared, […] But there is faith, more faith than fear, so that's why we

came here today' (BBC, 2020g; also Walker, 2020c). Moreover, the violence of the regime seems to have directly affected this process.

Ultimately, the violence and brutality of the regime in confronting the opposition is widely reported as having proven ineffective in stopping resistance, even in its unprecedented nature (see Melnichuk, 2020)—and was potentially ineffective precisely because of the perception of it reaching new heights. Feduta remarked, 'the more that he [Lukashenko] tries to scare them, the more it has a reverse effect' (Roth, 2020a). On 25th August, Tikhanovskaya was reported as saying the 'violence crackdown on the people […] has not deterred our people and only strengthened the resolve of the nation' (Korovenkova, 2020). In various reports, it is indicated that despite security force violence and irrespective of any fear, open protests continued (BBC, 2020g; Harding, 2020), perhaps after some rejuvenation by bold female protesters after particularly severe violence in the few days following the election announcement (Shevchenko, 2020; Walker, 2020a).

Potentially the strongest comment in terms of analysis was from Steve Crawshaw (2020) in The Independent on 22nd August, in an article titled 'Repressive violence may only accelerate change in Belarus', who directly connects the loss of fear to regime collapse. In the face of violence:

> Peaceful and creative protests multiplied – not just in Minsk but across the country. Once-loyal servants of Lukashenko, from policemen and editors to ambassadors, lost their fear, saw the writing on the wall, or – as so often, with collapsing regimes – a mixture of the two (Crawshaw, 2020).

Other articles quoted Belarusians whose motive for resistance was directly the level of violence engaged in by the security forces, their anger and shock being only exacerbated (Abdurasulov, 2020; Glushakov, 2020; Ilyushina, 2020; Nechepurenko and Higgins, 2020b; Soldak, 2020). This includes the strike organiser Dylevsky mentioned above, who began the strike 'shocked by what he had witnessed', including a protester who 'lost an eye after being beaten' (Nechepurenko, 2020).

A Point of No Return

Very much related to the level of outrage at the regime's violence is a sense among Belarus' opponents of Lukashenko of a point of no return being reached (see Soldak, 2020). Rainsford (2020) noted that 'For [protester] Tatyana, the brutality of security forces against protesters was the breaking

point', quoting her as saying 'They're trying to terrify people, but the reverse is happening. No one will forget what went on […] There's no way back. The people will not forgive this'. Another protester, Lyudmila, was quoted:

> 'We are definitely not ready to get back to the life we had for many years now,' she said. 'We finally feel like we matter because we've been living in apathy for way too long, and now we just have this feeling of solidarity [...] so that's definitely not the time to give up' (BBC, 2020f; Troianovski, 2020).

Evocatively, a striking teacher explained:

> You are scared. And we have fear, too. But today each of us understands: if I back down, if I get scared, I will betray [others]. I will betray myself, betray my profession, betray my family, betray every set of eyes that is looking at me with trust and hope (Turčyna, 2020d).

This remark is a very personal sense of the compulsion of responsibility felt to her fellow Belarusians.

Moreover, this same acknowledgement of fear but that a point of no return had been reached has been reflected by opposition leaders and organisers. A protest leader in Molodechno, Valery Savitsky, suggested: 'Now everyone is a bit scared. It's clear that we won't go back to living in the same country we lived in before' (Walker, 2020d). Tikhanovskaya remarked that 'You can't lock everyone up. The spirit is so strong now. He cannot break everyone […] We are afraid, we cannot say we are not. But the yearning for change and freedom is rising above the fear' (Sierada, 2020c; also BBC Monitoring European, 2020b; The Guardian, 2020). Through these sentiments, there is an increasing sense that fear is being outweighed by various other emotions, rather than being absent.

An intriguing aspect of this is the compulsion to act that has been expressed, the need to do something against security force violence, or for one's fellow resisters or Belarusians. Denis Dudinsky, a well-known TV show host, was taken off air in August after an Instagram post condemning riot police, having seen them beating and arresting people (Troianovski, 2020). Explaining his need to speak out, Dudinsky said: 'When a man is drowning, you don't think, "Hmm, he's 100 meters away" […] You take your clothes off and jump' (Troianovski, 2020).

Closely interrelated to this compulsion is the sense of heavy investment in resistance activities. An opponent of the regime, Daria Danilova, stated: 'It's either the shame of not doing enough […] or the fear that you've done so much that there will be serious consequences' (Troianovski, 2020). Another opponent, Elizaveta, said: '[Lukashenko] just didn't care […] we then realised that he doesn't care if we live or die […] we had to do something' (Ilyushina, 2020). As prominent opposition members, Kolesnikova was reported as remarking 'The west, Russia won't help – we can only help ourselves. In this way it turned out that female faces became a signal for women, and men too, that every person should take responsibility' (Walker, 2020a). Tikhanosvakaya has possibly put it most bluntly: 'We have no right to step back now - if not now, we'll be slaves and our people understand this and I'm sure we will stand till the end' (BBC, 2020e). This investment in the resistance process in the wake of repression and fear I have previously described as a 'nothing to lose' mentality, or a 'do or die' sentiment (Brown, 2019, 314,427,434), the sense that the risk of continuing is no greater than ceasing resistance, and indeed resisters may have everything to lose if they give up 'now'.

Lastly, mainstream media's presentation of a sense of unity among Belarusians in opposing Lukashenko is perhaps already clear from the quotes above. However, resisters' sense that this unity is unprecedented and marks the emergence of something new is prominent. Rainsford (2020) quoted a correspondent in Minsk stating:

> They wanted to teach people a lesson, not to protest. But they got another result […] Never in the history of Belarus have we seen such united actions as now. I feel like it's already impossible to stop. We have such a feeling, like the Belarusian nation has been born.

A protester speaking to Abdurasulov (2020) mentioned 'we can breathe freedom for the first time in our lives!' and that 'many feel elated and optimistic that a new beginning is awaiting Belarus'. Protester Elena Molochko was reported on 16th August as saying, 'this past week has changed the mood of the nation […] this is the first time we feel such solidarity with each other, we feel this great cathartic happiness from this new feeling' (Soldak, 2020; Kurkovskiy, 2020; O'Reilly and Parfitt, 2020). Kolesnikova described the opposition to Lukashenko as 'not a struggle for power […] a struggle for human dignity and self-respect' (BBC, 2020f). Again, elsewhere she has posited fear against new emotions and actions:

> Nine million Belarusians have found themselves in a situation where each of us may be put in prison at any moment […] We have won a victory in that we have realized that we are free citizens of Belarus, we want a new life and we are ready to bear responsibility and bring us closer to this life step by step […] We have no illusions over how this government may behave, but we have coped with our fear and are moving forward (Bykoŭskaja, 2020b).

Similar to 'overcoming' fear, 'coped' with fear is a further notable clarification of the emotional situation.

Discussion

The mainstream media accounts presented above should be commended generally for drawing heavily on interviews and quotes with Belarusian opposition members at all levels. Much of the information about fear in the articles is from direct quotes, albeit translated in some cases. Based on the reported statements, to say that fear has disappeared is an overstatement, with it being more realistic to say that fear has been suppressed, managed or coped with by individuals involved in the resistance to Lukashenko. It is such surmounted fear (Pearlman, 2016, p.25) that appeared to be shaping the phenomenon of the barrier of fear being broken in Belarus; not a loss or absence of fear among many Belarusians, rather them pushing through fear regardless.

Locating what it was that enabled many Belarusians to do this, the regime's violence and brutality, triggering significant anger among the population, appears to lie at the root. Especially if we consider that the regime's decision to violently suppress opposition may have been driven by its own fears (plus animosity and anger), negative emotional energy on both sides that drives conflict may have fed into positive emotional energy for opponents of the regime (see Bramsen and Poder, 2014, p.77). The dynamics identified above, that: there was a point of no return; one had to act; there was nothing to lose, driving a 'do or die' mentality; there was a new unity, as well as rebirth of the nation outside the referent of the regime, were intimately connected to the regime's violence and associated popular anger.

Summarising these connections in the context of fear still remaining among many Belarusians, during the period of mid- to late-August 2020, when various headlines and articles were referring to the loss of fear, prominent opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya was reported as acknowledging

her fear. However, this is very much connected to the other theme of 'taking action as imperative', that was apparent in relation to fear. That is to say, Belarusians—including Tikhanovskaya and perhaps partially inspired by her—acknowledged the need to oppose Lukashenko's regime in spite of their fear. Outrage at the level of regime violence and brutality against Belarusians was a clear motive to this action. In turn, alongside the acknowledgement that fear remains and the imperative to act, there was the sense of a 'point of no return'. With this, we reach the most devastating implications of violence afflicted by a leader on their own people, with significant potential results for resistance campaigns. The 'unprecedented' violence of the regime led to an extraordinary feeling of unity and solidarity among Belarusians in their opposition to it, linked to something more than just 'hope'; alienated by the violence, it was the sense of a tangible (re)birth of the nation outside the referent of the Lukashenko regime.

Working through Fear Over the Long-Term

The resistance to Lukashenko in the post-2020 election period was at least partially triggered in the immediate term by his regime's violent repression of demonstrations, which encouraged Belarusians' willingness to work through their fear. The sense that fear was being lost, as well as an acknowledgement of fear but the need to act, also shapes the theme of 'pre-election loss of fear'. This was at least a short-term phenomenon in July and August leading up to the election. Notably, opposition leaders such as Tikhanovskaya were setting an example, acknowledging their fear but also the need for courage. During this pre-election period, the Lukashenko regime already seemed to be disconcerted by the increasing turnout for opposition candidates' election rallies, threatening the use of force. Seen under the theme of 'fear among security force and regime elements', such threats were perceived by some Belarusians as weakness; to recall Alexandere Feduta's words: 'If there's no shooting, it's him [Lukashenko] being weak. But if a shot is fired, it's his political death' (quoted in Roth, 2020a). Following the elections and the severe repression, this realisation that the regime feared citizens' resistance and unity was compounded. One of the anticipated weak points of the regime was the security forces, with defections being encouraged and promises of amnesty from the opposition to Lukashenko.

Much of this relates to the coercion-protest paradox (Pearlman, 2013, p.392), or the paradox of repression, referring to how repression may unwittingly encourage resistance and undermine the repressor's legitimacy

(Smithey and Kurtz, 2018, p.1). Notably, Pearlman (2013) suggested that the costs of dissent may not decline, rather, 'individuals accept costs that they previously had not accepted' (p.389), which appears to reflect the situation for many Belarusians; despite their continued fear over the potential 'costs' of dissent—including the potential of facing lethal force—their anger about authoritarianism and repression meant they were willing to resist.

Although it is significant how a regime's physical violence can 'backfire' and lead to outrage in the immediate term, there are varied forms of repression short of physical violence (Smithey and Kurtz, 2018, pp.2-3) that may be fear-inducing; Pearlman (2013) referred to the 'pervasive, structural form of fear' (p.392) underpinning the hierarchical structures of advantage, dominance and exploitation. Whether this form of ingrained fear is undermined over a longer-term period, perhaps by more hidden forms of resistance, is meaningful to consider. Pearlman observed that: 'For decades under authoritarian regimes, many citizens in the Arab world did not engage in public dissent for fear of danger and doubt about its ability to produce change' (p.387). While making reference to *public* dissent and the emboldened emotions and actions of nonactivists, thus leaving space for the role of hidden and everyday acts of resistance, the lack of explicit reference to or discussion of such resistance adds to the impression of a 'sudden' fall of fear at a specific point—something Pearlman notes shortly afterwards in referring to the barrier of fear being broken (p.388; also Salamey and Pearson, 2012, p.940).

In fairness, Pearlman (2013) also acknowledges that during the 2010/11 Tunisian revolution, it was established activists that acted as models of courage (p.394). Likewise, it has been suggested that leaders and activists can create situations where emotions such as anger could be nurtured to the extent people are 'angry enough to overcome fear and engage in action' (Bramsen and Poder, 2014, p.77; Smithey and Kurtz, 2018, p.15)—Brian Martin's (2012) *Backfire Manual* is significant in this regard in showing how various practices and events can be exposed in their nefariousness. Yet how leaders and activists themselves find the courage in the first instance is necessary to assess. Sørensen and Rigby (2017), drawing on academics and activists' contributions at a symposium on fear, suggested that creating a culture of resistance among more experienced activists is necessary to overcome fear (p.232), who can then 'lead the way' with their apparent fearlessness or courage. The nature of everyday resistance in Belarus requires further exploration, although 'regular opposition protest through

the 2000s' (De Vogel, 2022, p.10) alongside notable events of open 'mass' resistance, for example in 2006 (Sector, 2006; Korosteleva, 2009) and 2010-11 (De Vogel, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2011), indicates how resistance to Lukashenko's regime was being sustained. In summer 2020, there was increasing communication, coordination, mobilisation and public opposition running up to the elections (Mateo, 2022, pp.37-38; Carroll, 2020; Ulasaŭ, 2020). Ultimately, rather than a barrier of fear being broken, it may be more helpful to talk of a progressive emboldening despite fear.

Conclusion

The 'breaking of the barrier of fear' is an enduring rhetorical device, adopted in prominent articles' headlines in the wake of Belarus' August 2021 protests. Arguably, this simplistic assessment is countered by the media itself in the content of numerous articles directly quoting Belarusians, who acknowledged their fear in relation to other emotional dynamics and their activities. However, oversimplification could lead to misunderstanding of practical resistance actions. It is unlikely that action could be taken to remove people's fear, yet short-term responses such as effective coverage of regime mis-steps and violence, fomenting outrage at brutality and indignity, building solidarity, all seem to be interrelated in enabling fear to be worked through and 'offset'. Moreover, working through fear is likely to require longer-term confidence building, at least in terms of building up networks of actors willing to act and oppose the regime—both clandestinely and openly—with the sense of a barrier of fear suddenly breaking also giving insufficient consideration to the positive effects of such long-running yet potentially hidden resistance.

Notably, many of the elements of Belarusians' assessments of fear recall Tunisian resisters' sentiments relating to fear (Resistance Studies Initiative, 2021). The outrage at security force violence and subsequent compulsion to act, as a do or die mentality, is one of the most striking elements that evokes the Tunisia situation from the perspective of my own interviews with Tunisians (Resistance Studies Initiative, 2021). These are intriguing dynamics to how fear manifests in different circumstances that require additional research.[3]

[3] Brown, C.S. (n.d.) 'Overcoming the 'Barrier of Fear' in order to Resist: Reflections from Belarus and Tunisia'. *Unpublished research paper*

While the connection between anger and the ability to work through fear in order to act appears particularly salient, how this might differ according to the context and individuals involves, as well as the presence and significance of various other emotions, is important to consider. For example, this study provides some support for the link between anger and hope, in how Belarusians started to consider their country and society outside the referent of the Lukashenko regime and its violence. Therefore, resisters' ability to discuss and implement tangible alternative and autonomous political, economic and social structures outside of a repressive system could be a significant means of sustaining such hope.

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