## "I Signed the House over to a Cat": Humor of the Belarusian 2020–2021 Protests

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Abstract

Post-electoral protests in 2020 were unprecedented in Belarus: not only in terms of their massive size and long duration, but also because of the abundant use of humor by the protesters. As a phenomenon that has both cognitive and emotional sides, humor plays an important role in political protests. It can help as a way to cope with anger and fear, but it can also mark people's belonging to certain social groups. Using Belarusian 2020 protest posters as data sources, we explore what topics of protest humor were popular, how protest posters functioned as a prominent instrument of political activism, and why humor played such a pivotal role in 2020 Belarusian political protests. We argue that one of the most significant and appealing aspects of the use of protest humor was how it allowed individuals to express their political views in creative ways as opposed to the more simplified and straightforward rhetorical tools of authoritarian systems. With the rise of police brutality and repression against protestors, humor became a way to demarcate clear boundaries between a violent "them" and a creative, intelligent, and peaceful "us."

Introduction

The year 2020 began normally in the Belarusian political landscape, despite looming presidential elections scheduled for August. Alexander Lukashenko, who has been president since 1994, and his supporters did not expect the election campaign to attract much interest or cause social upheaval. Indeed, despite consistent reports about election fraud [Yakouchyk 2016; Sejersen 2019], most of the previous (re)elections of Alexander Lukashenko did not provoke mass-scale protests across the country apart from several days of protests in spring 2006 and a large protest rally on 19 December 2010 that was brutally dispersed by police [Padhol and Marples 2011]. The 2015 elections did not provoke any upheavals, largely because Belarusian society was wary of the Revolution of Dignity and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in neighboring Ukraine and because many Belarusian opposition politicians were either imprisoned or tired of fruitless attempts to challenge Lukashenko's power [Astapova 2017: 39]. Moreover, international support was unequal for Belarusian opposition politicians and

Lukashenko's regime: while the latter enjoyed the ideological and economic support of Putin's Russia, the former were in favor of closer relations with Western countries, but they could not count on the same level of support from them.

However, the 2020 campaign turned out to be different. The unconventional reaction of the Belarusian government to the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020—when no lockdown or other disease prevention measures were introduced [Åslund 2020]—triggered contradictory feelings in Belarusian society. Belarusians felt that Lukashenko and his administration were not making any efforts to protect the population [Bedford 2021: 811-812]. Many people, including those who stayed away from politics before 2020 or were Lukashenko's loyal supporters, became critical of the government and Lukashenko's neglect of public health issues, and thus began doubting whether Lukashenko and his team should remain in power. The rise of independent news and social media also contributed to Belarusians' change of opinion as they started receiving information that was more reliable than state propaganda [Guriev 2020: 275]. This gradual evolution of Belarusian society that also began to favor political liberalization over traditional paternalistic political models became one of the less visible, though extremely powerful, factors in the 2020 protests [Bekus and Gabowitsch 2023]. When the presidential campaign officially started, several new candidates, including a bank manager Viktar Babaryka and a blogger Syarhey Tsikhanouski, appeared in the political arena alongside long-established opposition politicians. Unlike previously known Belarusian opposition politicians whose target audiences were mostly nationally oriented intelligentsia, new candidates reflected the previously underrepresented interests of the mostly urban middle class and thus provoked its active participation in political life during the last months before the election.

The turbulent 2020 presidential campaign in Belarus culminated with the election on 9 August. Its official results—Alexander Lukasheko was credited with 80.1% of the votes—were not recognized by dozens of countries, opposition leaders, and many Belarusians due to multiple reports of electoral fraud [Bedford 2021]. Dissatisfaction with the election triggered protest marches as soon as the results were announced. These protest marches were met with violent responses from the authorities and police, especially during the first four days of the protests, when around seven thousand people were arrested and subjected to police brutality in detention centers [Onuch 2020; Nikolayenko 2022]. Disagreement with the election results as well as the government's lack of willingness to stop police brutality resulted in further escalation of the conflict; hundreds of thousands of people all over Belarus have participated in protest activities since August 2020, and around 70% of them stated that they had never participated in protests before 2020 [Onuch 2020; Bedford 2021]. Protests became a catalyst for Belarusian civic society [Kazharski 2021], and they took various forms ranging from peaceful mass rallies to flash mobs, showcasing the symbols of protest in local (online) communities [Paulovich 2021].

One of the common features of most forms of post-electoral protests in Belarus was folk humor. It penetrated both real-life and digital realms, resulting in the creation of many memes and "virals" [Shifman 2014]. Several news satire groups such as *Чай з малінавым варэннем* [Tea with raspberry jam], *Ха-ха, я тут жыву!* [Ha-ha, I live here!] and *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* [Soviet Belorussia] became very popular on social media. The former two provide ironic perspectives on Belarusian news, while the latter is the namesake of one the most prominent Belarusian newspapers and publishes parody news mimicking official Belarusian news rhetoric (1); its postings were sometimes mistakenly treated as genuine. Other humorous products include comic sketches (*Хай Так TV* [So be it TV]), humorous political songs ("*Arystakratychnaia blednasc'*" [Aristocratic paleness] and "*Krasnaia zelen'*" [Red greenery]), (2) stand-up comedy shows performed outside of Belarus by comedians of Belarusian origin, such as Slava Komissarenko's gags and Andrey Skorokhod's show *Pobedy Shoushenko* [Shoushenk's Victories], (3) and countless vernacular/user-generated humorous images, videos and textual jokes. Interestingly, new humorous media that ridicules the repressive Belarusian reality continues emerging even two years after the massive post-electoral protests: for example, the ByLol Tiktok channel that humorously comments on Belarusian news was created in August 2022.

Apart from its omnipresence on the internet, humor was especially visible during mass protest rallies in the summer and autumn of 2020. Rallies included elements of carnivalesque aesthetics [Bakhtin 1984]: some of the protesters wore costumes, others came out with a coffin (referring to the Dancing Pallbearers meme); they also carried the material representations of protest symbols such as cockroach figures, sneakers, etc. (4) There were plenty of humorous slogans and chants at rallies, such as "Are there drug addicts?" "Are there prostitutes?" (5) Many protesters also carried humorous protest posters that we analyze in this article.

The massive popularity of humor during and in the aftermath of the protests is especially striking given that humor is a relatively recent phenomenon in Belarusian political communication. The ruling classes of contemporary Belarus have almost never used humor in the public sphere and do not consider it an important feature of the contemporary political establishment. Quite the contrary, Belarusian officials' political communication style is based on strict discipline, the repression of creativity and the freedom of speech, and even often on humiliation. This puts the Belarusian government and members of parliament in sharp contrast with the "new politics" and personalization strategies of their Western European and North American colleagues [Van Aelst et al. 2011; Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño 2017; Laineste et al. 2022]. Meanwhile, the Belarusian opposition had already sometimes employed humor before the 2020 elections. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the satirical newspaper *Navinki* made fun of Lukashenko's regime. (6) Humor was also occasionally used in opposition political campaigns. For example, one of the opposition presidential candidates in the 2010 election, Andrei Sannikov, used the slogan "Пора менять лысую

резину" [It's time to change bald tires] for his electoral campaign, alluding to Alexander Lukashenko's lack of hair. Another ironic slogan was occasionally used by Belarusian oppositional activists in the 2000s: "Беларусь в Европу, Лукашенко в жопу" [Belarus must be in Europe, Lukashenko must fuck off]. However, such attempts at humor were relatively rare and remained marginal in Belarusian political discourse.

The 2020 political crisis clearly stands out—not just in terms of the massive participation of people in protests, but also in the unprecedented popularity of protest humor. This has inspired the current study where we aim to respond to two research questions: what topics of protest humor shaped how it functioned as a prominent instrument of political activism and why did humor play such a pivotal role in the 2020 Belarusian political protest.

Theoretical background

As humor has social, cognitive, and emotional components [cf. Martin 2007], we look at our research questions from a broader perspective than simply as emotional expressions. We also consider the social and cognitive functions of humor in the context of Belarusian protests. We discuss why a considerable part of Belarusian society that had previously been reserved in its public expression of emotion became suddenly very vocal in it and used their moral indignation and loss of fear for mass mobilization [Nikolayenko 2022]. We also discuss how this vocality and its accompanying humor helped to establish an emotional community of protesters [Vazianau 2023]. By looking at the use of humor, we gain insights into how Belarusians underscored their belonging to certain social groups and how they used protest memes as hallmarks of humorous expression. Understanding these issues lies not only within the boundaries of political communication, but also in the cultural background of contemporary Belarusian society and its political folklore that remains a less studied area. (7)

Emotion in Politics

When studying political humor, it is necessary to consider the issue of emotion in politics. Although humor is closely connected to cognition and intelligence, in many cultural environments, including the Belarusian and Russian-speaking ones, people often discuss the sense of humor. Thus, the vernacular perspective on humor places it into the realm of feeling and emotions. Moreover, humor, especially political humor, always evokes both positive and negative emotions [Lee and Kwak 2016]. Therefore, political humor must be considered in relation to people's emotions. The Belarusian political protests of 2020 were extremely emotional [Vazianau 2023]. In the current study, we do not analyze the individual characteristics and emotional states of the people who participated in the protests; we limit ourselves exclusively to the social features

of humor and emotion. We analyze people's emotional reactions to contemporary political circumstances [cf. Marcus 2000: 221–250].

Emotion in politics and its connection to political humor are understood as evaluations that arise because of emotional processes, regardless of previous or accompanying cognitive processes [Marcus 2000]. These processes can influence not only emotional expression, but also thoughts and political behavior [Marcus 2000: 223]—including the use of political humor. As Marcus puts it: "[I]t is highly unlikely that any [political] target of consideration is devoid of emotional content or influence" [2000: 232].

Emotions accelerate and amplify political protests [Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013]. While many emotions that tend to be associated with protest are negative, such as anger, fear, and shame (negatively valanced emotions), positive emotions also play a part in fueling and sustaining political protest: for example, the combination of anger and joy was instrumental for protests in rural Australia [Ransan-Cooper et al. 2018], and anger and hope were combined by a peace movement in Israel [Halperin 2022]. These combinations of positive and negative emotions create so-called "moral batteries" that energize action and generate protest [Jasper 2011].

The role of emotions in the political space, e.g., hate speech and stylistic reductions, irony, and memes in the public sphere, has long been the object of research of scholars belonging to the irrationalism movement [Lebon 1913; Sorokin 1925; Edwards 1970]. Scholars were interested in the emotionality of crowds and the suppression of basic human instincts during revolutionary movements. Political scientists and sociologists have repeatedly raised questions about the role of emotions in political movements and revolutionary transformations [Smelzer 1962; Gurr 1970; Feierabend et al. 1972; Midlarsky 2011]. Their starting point was the idea of deprivation, and they regarded political violence as a reaction to deprivation when there was a mismatch between expected and received benefits. Here we should also recall the J-curve theory of the sociologist J. Davies [1962], which was based on the hopes and expectations of people and the determination of the role of emotions in political conflicts. Goldstone et al.'s [2022] studies on revolution recorded the emotions and feelings of people as an influential factor in political movements and conflicts and thus had a significant influence on studies of emotions in politics.

Emotions are very important for the creation, maintenance, and organization of collective political actions [Goodwin et al. 2000; 2001; Selbin 2010]. Spontaneously arising collective emotions are shared by communities that, thanks to them, have the opportunity and desire to express their agreement or disagreement. According to Ron Eyerman [2007: 42-43], it is emotions that set the process in motion, triggering mobilization mechanisms.

The well-known anthropologist Sara Ahmed notes the social nature of emotions and argues that collective emotionality also depends on how the government gives meaning and values "others" [(2004) 2014: 9]. Collective emotionality also depends on the circulation of information and its emotional

coloring in social networks, being together during protests, mass communications through social media channels and mainstream media, etc. Emotions can be considered a form of social presence [Ahmed (2004) 2014: 10]. Politics provides a fruitful ground for this, and humor becomes not only a matter of individual ability but also a social phenomenon.

Belarusian Protest Humor from the Perspective of Humor Theories

One of the most popular theories of humor—the relief theory—is also closely connected with the emotional side of vernacular expression. Its proponents argue that using humor is a way to express ideas and thoughts that are difficult or even impossible to express in a serious manner and thus vent the pressure off our psyche [Spencer (1911) 2009; Freud (1905) 1963]. This theory can at least partly explain Belarusian protest humor: in summer 2020, especially immediately before and after presidential elections, the tension in Belarusian society reached its apogee as the government's activities contradicted moral and legal norms [Bedford 2021]. Among other ways to respond to these atrocities, the psychologization of resistance to Lukashenko's regime was employed to help people cope with the tension caused by the absurdities, atrocities, and violence of the Belarusian government [Vazyanau 2023]. Political humor became one of the means to release this tension in a creative and non-violent way.

As mentioned earlier, humor had not been a typical element of political communication in Belarus before 2020, so its prolific use during the 2020 protests was unconventional for the participants themselves and transgressed their emotional norms and cultural expectations. During the protest rallies, participants took photos of humorous posters, laughed at them loudly, pointed at them, and were surprised by them. They did not deny the posters' relevance, but rather they embraced and welcomed them. This might be partly explained by another widespread humor theory—the incongruity theory, according to which humor stems from the discrepancies between our expectations and reality [Attardo 2014]. However, not every incongruity provokes laughter; Elliot Oring [2003] introduced the concept of "appropriate incongruity" to show why some incongruities result in humor while others do not. In the case of Belarusian protest humor, the humor creators and sharers acknowledged the gap between how the election process ideally should look and how it actually looked [cf. Davies 2011: 273]. Being aware of the broader political and social context of Belarus, they also understood how different, and seemingly unrelated, elements of political life can be appropriately combined for humorous effect.

Humor not only has psychological but also social and cognitive functions during oppression and political protests. Opinions on the role of jokes in political confrontations vary: while some researchers consider jokes as a form of protest that becomes more pertinent under more oppressive regimes [Banc and Dundes 1986: 14], others point out that the existence of jokes that ridicule political institutions does not mean that joke tellers and listeners protest against these

institutions but rather that participants use jokes as a form of entertainment [Draitser 1989]. Christie Davies [2007: 300] argues that political "jokes are a thermometer not a thermostat; they can be used as an indication of what is happening in a society but they do not feed back into the social processes that generated them to any significant extent." In other words, humor appears alongside serious political protests, not instead of it. Approaching this issue from the other perspective, Oring [2004] notes that jokes told under repressive regimes do not aim at confronting the power or changing the political system, but rather at creating a private space that was not penetrated by official propaganda, hierarchies, and economic conditions. Similarly, Alexei Yurchak considers Soviet political jokes one of the ways of "pretense misrecognition" [1997: 178]; according to him, the existence of these jokes shows that people understood that official propaganda was lying to them, but they pretended that they believed it and acknowledged that they could not fight against it.

Most of the scholarship on humor under oppressive regimes has focused on the use of humor in private [cf. Yurchak 1997: 179]. In the case study analyzed in this article, however, protest humor became a part of the public sphere. Even though much of it circulated in private oral and digital interactions, humorous protest posters were also visible on the streets, funny memes were published in news outlets, and humorous videos were made publicly available on popular social media websites such as Facebook or YouTube.

The public humor of Belarusian protest is in many ways like what Sørensen [2013] label "humorous political stunts." Humorous political stunts are public, and they confront a dominant worldview and mostly aim at transforming the status quo. The butts of political stunts are usually those in power; stunts go from the grassroots level upwards and not vice versa. In her study of humor in Serbian political movement "Otpor," Sørensen outlines the key functions of humor as a non-violent resistance tool: "Facilitating outreach and mobilization… facilitating a culture of resistance… [and] turning oppression upside down" [2008: 175]. Based on their analysis of humor during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Anagondahalli and Khamis [2014: 12] add an enforcement function of humor as it was—alongside other means—aimed at bringing social change. Moreover, humor in political protest movements may be used to expose the inconsistencies and incongruities of the ruling regime. This function was noted by Takovski [2020: 504] in his discussion of humor in the Macedonian Colorful Revolution. These functions could be also traced in the use of humor in Belarusian political protests, as the subsequent analysis will illustrate.

Sørensen [2015] also discussed various challenges that activists face when they opt for the use of humor—from the risk of being misunderstood to the possibility of trivializing the issue with a non-serious approach to it. Dumitrica further illustrates the ambiguous nature of protest humor by showing that it not only "subvert[s] dominant political discourses, signal[s] grassroots agency, help[s] amplify a collective message and build[s] collective identity" [2021: 13], but it also can reproduce and reinforce established hierarchies and conservative

norms. Therefore, public protest humor should be analyzed in its complexity, and its multiple aspects should be contextualized against the background of the political, social, economic, and cultural affiliations of its creators and sharers.

Methods and Data

The data for this paper come primarily from humorous protest posters that are either in the authors' personal collections (seventy-two photos of posters) or among the photos of protest posters that were published in Lesha Pearce's [2021] book *"Ia vykhozhu"* ["I'm coming out"] in the category of "Humor" (101 photos of posters, two of them depict the same posters that authors have in their personal collections). The photos were taken at protests rallies in Belarus between August and November 2020. The humor of the photos in our personal collections was assessed based on our deep knowledge of Belarusian context and familiarity with the mechanisms of humor production [cf. Dumitrica 2021: 6].

We analyzed the data using the qualitative methods of content (both visual and verbal) and context analysis. We categorized the posters based on the topics they reflected. We then grouped these topics into two broad categories: general issues and particular humorous memes. The former included posters that reflected the most prominent topics of Belarusian protest, namely, electoral frauds, police brutality, (lack of) freedom, the persona of Lukashenko, and the identity of protesters. The latter category consisted of posters that directly referred (visually, verbally, or both visually and verbally) to events during the protest. In cases of photos from personal collections, we arranged the posters diachronically to trace the dynamics of their use. While posters constituted the core of our data, in some cases we also analyzed other forms of humorous and non-humorous expressions (such as internet memes, jokes, protest slogans, etc.) to trace the intertextual references that abound in our data.

General Issues: Frauds, Freedom, Police Brutality, Lukashenko's Persona, and Protesters' Identity

Humorous posters' topics often mirrored those of serious ones, and, generally, reflected protesters' demands for free elections, democracy, Lukshenko's retirement, and punishment for those involved in police brutality against the protesters. The humor of these posters clearly demonstrated the stances of their creators and left no room for ambiguity in their interpretation. Among the most popular humor mechanisms were wordplay, juxtapositions between image and text in the multimodal posters (or, in some cases, also between the text and the form of the placard, see fig. 1), and the recontextualization of folk and popular cultural references.

*Figure 1. The inscription on the straitjacket reads in Russian "Смирись ты уже" [Calm down finally]. In Russian the word for straitjacket (*smiritel'naia rubashka*) is related to the verb meaning "calm down" (*smiris'). Photograph from authors' personal collection, 30 August 2020.*

Among the folk references were well-known proverbs. For example, one humorous poster visually alluded to the Belarusian militia and read, "Сила есть, ума не надо" [Once there is (physical) strength, intelligence is not needed]. An equivalent English proverbial expression is "Strong like a bull, dumb like a stump." There were also tongue-twisters. For example, a poster rephrased the Russian tongue-twister "Тридцать три корабля лавировали, лавировали, да не вылавировали" [Thirty-three ships were tacking and tacking, but did not manage to tack], so that it became "Стабилизировал, стабилизировал, да не выстабилизировал" [(Lukashenko) was stabilizing, stabilizing, but not did not manage to stabilize]. The poster alluded to Lukashenko's constant claims that he has made Belarus a "stable" country devoid of social, political, and economic upheavals that happen elsewhere in the world, and this stability rests on the relation between him and the people [Maples 2014: 17]; however, the protests showed that the presumed "stability" of Belarusian social and political development was not as absolute as Lukashenko had hoped. Another example of traditional folklore that was adapted to the context of political protests was a rhyming inscription on a poster in Belarusian: "Баба сеяла гарох і казала: 'Каб ты здох'" [Granny was sowing peas and said: "I hope you die"]. This is a remake of a popular nursery rhyme that reads, "Баба сеяла гарох і казала дзеду 'Ох!'" [Granny was sowing peas and told Grandpa: "Oh!"]; it has been used in children's

play on water to accompany rhythmic movements such as splashing water or diving in and out of it.

While such short forms of traditional folklore were the easiest to appropriate on humorous posters, some of the posters also allude to less formulaic genres of folklore, for example, folk beliefs. Figure 2 shows a man who looks as if he is sitting on a Santa Claus, and the poster in his hands evokes the belief that only those children who behave well get presents from Santa Claus (or *Dzed Moroz* [Grandfather Frost], as he is more commonly known in Belarus).



*Figure 2. Poster in Russian: "Саша, ты себя плохо вёл в этом году" [Sasha (Lukashenko]), you've misbehaved this year]. Photograph from authors' personal collection, 30 August 2020.*

Obscene and sexual references were also sometimes used to ridicule Lukashenko and/or his supporters. Similarly to what Dumitrica [2021] described in her analysis of Romanian protest posters, Belarusian posters that employed sexual references reinforced patriarchal values, symbolically depriving the Belarusian regime of its masculinity (see fig. 3). Given that Lukashenko positions himself as Belarus's father and embraces the discourse of his hegemonic masculinity [Kascian and Denisenko 2021: 126], such ridicule appropriately challenges this image and hints at its flaws.



*Figure 3. The poster is held by a young girl, and the inscription (in Russian) reads: "У моего парня дубинка больше" [My boyfriend has a bigger baton] and includes a picture of a police baton that became one of the symbols of police brutality against protesters in 2020 [Pearce 2021: 164].*

While humorous posters reflected protesters' serious demands, the very use of humor added new shades of meanings to these demands. Whereas one of the aims of the 2020 Belarusian protest was to make Lukashenko step back from power, humorous posters often alluded not just to his retirement, but also to his death as a desirable outcome. He was also compared to other unpleasant human and non-human entities: other authoritarian leaders, cockroaches, COVID-19, etc. Humorous poster creators also alluded to Lukashenko's flawed mental health and excessive alcohol consumption. When the falsified outcome of the presidential elections was mentioned, protesters sometimes openly accused the regime of electoral frauds, but in other cases approached the issue more subtly and ironically suggested that the results might be unintentionally wrong (see fig. 4).

*Figure 4. The inscription in Russian reads "Женщина, у вас калькулятор сломался" [Lady, your calculator is broken] and obviously addresses Lidia Yermoshina, the head of the Central Election Commission of Belarus who is also depicted on the right with buttons instead of her eyes and "80%" instead of her mouth. This is a reference to the percentage of voters, that, according to Yermoshina, voted for Lukashenko. Photograph from authors' personal collection, 16 August 2020.*

Finally, a smaller but visible group of humorous posters was directed at the protesters themselves. Mostly, such humor revolved around the incongruity of particular people, or groups of people, who were engaging in political protests. One of the photos in *"Ia vykhozhu"* book, for example, depicts an old lady holding a poster in Russian: "Всё так плохо, что вышли даже глухонемые бабушки" [Everything is so bad that even deaf-mute grannies came out (to protest)] [Pearce 2021: 176]; similarly, another portrays a girl of color with a poster in Russian: "Всё настолько плохо, что вышли даже чернокожие" [Everything is so bad that even Black people came out (to protest)] [Pearce 2021: 175]. A poster in the authors' personal collection reads in Belarusian, "Ідзі ты ўжо! Праз цябе ў хаце месяц падлога нямытая" [Go away finally! The floor in the house has not been washed for a month because of you]. The photo was taken on 6 September 2020, almost a month after the protests started. Another poster that found its way both to the *"Ia vykhozhu"* book and our personal collection features a "coat of arms" of armchair warriors (see fig. 5).

*Figure 5. The coat of arms reads in Russian: "Диванные войска. Группа медленного реагирования" [Armchair warriors. Slow reaction force]. The slogan next to it reads "Даже мы с вами!" [Even we are with you!]. Photograph from authors' personal collection, 23 August 2020.*

By calling themselves "unconventional" protesters, the creators of these humorous posters not only engaged in self-irony, but they also showed that protests had become so widespread that even groups of people that had traditionally been on the margins of social and political life in Belarus (e.g., elderly people or people belonging to other ethnic or racial groups) or had just been too passive to engage with politics (preferring to be "armchair warriors" and stay at home minding their own business) had suddenly become active participants in the protest activities. The atypical amplitude of protest in Belarus thus became a topic of humor in and of itself.

Humorous Memes

Alongside more general topics that were central to Belarusian protests, some humorous posters also referenced more specific events and instances that could be labeled as memes due to their quick and broad spread across Belarusian society. Many such memes stemmed from the incongruous words or deeds of Lukashenko and his supporters [cf. Takovski 2020].

For example, at the end of a protest rally that took place on 23 August 2020 in Minsk, Lukashenko flew in his helicopter over the city and observed the protesters—most of whom had already left by then—from above, making comments such as "*blizhe, blizhe*" ("closer, closer") (addressing the pilot) and "как крысы разбежались" [(the protesters) ran away like rats] [Reform news 2020]. As the video of Lukashenko in the helicopter was posted online, it immediately became the target of ridicule in social media, and during the next protest rallies on 30 August 2020 and 6 September 2020 some of the humorous posters alluded to this helicopter ride. Not only the posters themselves, but also

protestors' outfits creatively engaged with Lukashenko's comments, exaggerating their absurdity in a humorous way (see fig. 6).



*Figure 6. The poster written as if on behalf of the rats reads in Russian: "Саша, нам некуда бежать, я/мы у себя дома!!!" [Sasha, we have nowhere to run! I/We are at home.]  Photograph from authors' personal collection, 6 September 2020.*

Another instance that stimulated viral humorous reactions was the meeting between Lukashenko and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin on 3 September 2020, when Lukashenko claimed that his security agency had taped a conversation between Berlin and Warsaw where the agents from these countries allegedly denied that Russian oppositional politician Alexei Navalny was poisoned. The day following the meeting, Lukashenko's press service posted an audio clip where two people's voices (referring to each other as "Mike" and "Nick"), dubbed into Russian, discuss not only Navalny but also their failure in dealing with Lukashenko who turned out to be "a hard nut to crack" [EUvsDisinfo

2020]. (8) Both the technical aspects of the audio clip and its content made it clear that it was fabricated, and the dialogue between "agents" became yet another reason to ridicule Lukashenko (see fig. 7).



*Figure 7. The poster reads in both Polish and Russia: "O, kurwa, нас спалили! Перезвони на Viber" [Oh shit, we are revealed! Call me back on Viber] [Pearce 2021: 186].*

In both cases described above as well as in other similar instances, humorous reactions underscored the contrast between reality as it was and Lukashenko's attempts to see—and impose on the others—a distorted version of it. Humor was employed not only to point out the gap between reality and its representations but also to do it in a playful and enjoyable manner, representing the protesters as more sound-minded and reasonable human beings than Lukashenko—even though some of them had to dress up as rats to make this point.

Temporal and Spatial Aspects of Belarusian Protest Humor

Even though it is impossible to make exact calculations, the proportion of data in our personal collections, as well as the backgrounds of the *"Ia vykhozhu"* volume's photos, in which people are mostly dressed in summer clothes, indicate that the temporal distribution of humorous posters was uneven. Many humorous posters and costumes appeared at protest rallies during the first few months of large-scale protests, but many fewer were documented during late autumn and winter. One possible interpretation lies in the fact that the danger of being arrested increased, repressions intensified. To expand McGraw et al.'s [2014] theory, the psychological distance from the tragic events of 9-11 August 2020 increased to

allow for humorous reactions. But as the situation became threatening again, the psychological distance decreased, and thus less humor was involved. Moreover, protesters had to become more cautious as it became increasingly difficult to get to protest rallies' meeting points without being detained, and bringing posters could have increased the danger because they helped the police to identify protesters more easily.

As mentioned earlier, the humor of the Belarusian protests was not limited to the posters that people carried during rallies. Much of it was also created and disseminated in the digital realm. Internet humor and posters were not separate from one another; they influenced each other's form and content [cf. Blank 2013]. Belarusian independent media often showcased protest posters—including humorous ones [e.g., Nashaniva 2020], and the photos of protest posters circulated widely on social media after each rally. Thus, the posters moved from the face-to-face to digital realm and could be seen by those who were not physically present at the protests.

There was also a drift of humor in the opposite direction, from digital media to the face-to-face settings of protests. Some protest posters either implicitly referenced popular internet memes or even quoted them directly. For example, in figure 8 a protester is holding a poster that depicts a popular internet meme that had been spreading across Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus for more than a decade. The formula of this meme—a grandmother finds out that her grandson did something inappropriate and thus deprives him of his inheritance—is generally used in political contexts and most likely originates from Ukraine [Ratsybars′ka 2012]. In 2020, the meme spread both online and in the form of leaflets and posters in Belarus.



*Figure 8. A protester holding a poster that reads: "Узнала, что внук омоновец. Переписала хату на кота!!!" [I found out that my grandson is a Special Police officer. I signed the house over to a cat] [Pearce 2021: 169]. (9)*

This meme-based poster reflected the demographics of Belarusian protest: the participants of protest rallies were mostly young and middle-aged urban dwellers who were active internet users [Titarenko 2022]. Therefore, it was natural that they, on the one hand, drew upon familiar digital popular cultural references while making their protest posters, and, on the other hand, transformed many of the protest rallies events and slogans into humorous internet memes, such as Lukashenko's helicopter flight or the "Nick and Mike conversation" described above. It also is emblematic of the impact of social media on the 2020 Belarusian protests. Social media was employed to coordinate protest activities and share news and reflections on the protests [Bush 2020]—including the humorous ones. Moreover, it is a part of a more general trend of using digital/technological metaphors in contemporary face-to-face protests [e.g., Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014: 11].

Conclusion

Political upheavals trigger strong emotions. The 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and subsequent protests were no exception. For the first time in many years, many Belarusians felt the possibility of change, participated actively in the elections, and felt new emotions that inspired and united them. In these conditions, evident falsifications during the elections, as well as an unexpected level of police brutality against peaceful protesters, shocked many people [Nikolayenko 2022]. Undoubtedly, numerous social and mass media outlets contributed to this by broadcasting video and photo coverage of these events.

During the 2020 Belarusian political protests, many participants got the opportunity to publicly, openly, and creatively express political emotions for the first time in their lives, including using unprecedented humor in the public sphere, in contrast to a much more common practice of using humor in private settings [Fiadotava 2021]. One of the most significant and attractive aspects of using protest humor was using it as an opportunity to express one's political views in a creative way as opposed to the more simplified and straightforward rhetorical tools of an authoritarian system. The use of humor in protest posters both emphasizes protesters' messages and makes them more subtle. The reliance on incongruities helps humorous posters, on the one hand, to trigger emotions and thus attract attention, but on the other hand, to interpret these incongruities as appropriate and understandable within their protest agendas. Using humor during protest rallies also mirrored many patterns of communication on social media, as the latter is frequently punctuated by humor.

Political humor became one of the ways to release emotions and show the absurdity and inappropriateness of Lukashenko and his regime. Many of the protest posters in particular targeted Lukashenko, thus adding to the personification of the Belarusian authoritarian regime. Posters also reflected broader issues in Belarusian protests, such as election fraud and police brutality,

in creative ways. The mechanisms, styles, and forms of humor were diverse: from verbal puns to visual juxtapositions, from subtle irony to openly aggressive ridicule, and from internet meme-like posters to carnivalesque costumes that were essential to delivering a humorous protest message.

The community of the creators and the audiences of protest humor was also a crucial aspect that affected posters' contents, forms, and popularity. Many protestors belonged to the so-called creative class [Florida 2012], and thus they used creative forms that aligned well with their self-identification. In line with Sørensen's [2008] observations outlined above, humor also contributed to protesters' solidarity. The use of humor in protest posters could be connected to the increasing globalization and digitalization of Belarusian society that allowed Belarusian protesters to follow and partly mimic the humor of other political movements and protests, some of which happened close to Belarus, for example protests in Poland [Brzozowska and Chłopicki 2024].

The ability to understand and create subtle and clever humor became an important aspect of belonging to the protest community in Belarus. With the rise of police brutality and repressions against protestors, humor became a tool to demarcate a clear boundary between a violent and reliant-on-physical-power "them" and a creative, intelligent, and peaceful "us" [cf. Davies's 2011]. Therefore, protest humor not only helped Belarusians cope with their anger and fear, but it also provided an outlet for their creativity and helped to create and maintain group boundaries [Meyer 2000]. These multiple functions of humor that appealed to protesters emotionally, cognitively, and socially conditioned the broad spread of humor in the 2020 Belarusian protests.

However, the use of humor during political protests does not only bring positive effects, as described above. The playful and ambiguous nature of humor also contributes to the trivialization of messages that are expressed in humorous forms [Negrea-Busuioc et al. 2024]. The humor of protest communications could make it seem less persuasive and more focused on entertainment than on addressing serious issues in the political agenda. Because humor can facilitate the reduction of uncertainty [Graham 1995], its use in Belarusian and other protest movements can also be a way to cope with the uncertainty of political crisis without engaging it in more serious and practical ways for resolution.

In Belarusian protest movements, humor tended to be a handy tool, as it fit into the protesters' social identity and helped them to underscore contrasts between their creativity and the brutality of Lukashenko's regime; nevertheless, on a more general level humor always plays various roles in political movements, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its use is always context dependent.

## NOTES

1 Currently the newspaper is called *SB—Belarus' segodnia* [SB—Belarus Today], but it is still colloquially called *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*.
2 The name refers to the colors of Belarus' official flag, which has become one of the most notable symbols of state propaganda since the beginning of the protests.
3 Shoushenk is a fictional character in the show that alludes to Lukashenko.
4 "Cockroach" was one of the symbols Sergei Tikhanovsky used to refer to Lukashenko. Sneakers, flippers, and other footwear were also actively employed by Tikhanovsky and some of the other candidates as an allusion to killing cockroaches.
5 These chants refer to Lukashenko labelling protesters as prostitutes and drug addicts. Protesters humorously reappropriated these labels [Laineste and Fiadotava 2024].
6 The title of the newspaper is both a non-standard, diminutive form of the word "*naviny*" ("news" in Belarusian) and a colloquial name for a psychiatric hospital in Minsk, which is in the district of the same name. The archival copy of the newspaper's website is available here: https://web.archive.org/web/20060712220222/http://www.navinki.net/portal/.
7 For exceptions, see [Astapova 2015, 2017, 2021; Laineste et al. 2022; Laineste and Fiadotava 2024].
8 "A hard nut to crack" (in Russian, "*krepkii oreshek*") is also the Russian translation of the *Die Hard* film title; the reference was probably meant to highlight Lukashenko's toughness and masculinity.
9 Special police forces (AMAP in Belarusian, OMON in Russian) have been particularly brutal in suppressing protests.

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