

Autocratic power and older citizens: the political subjectification of retirees in Belarus

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This article contributes to research on everyday resistance as a means of citizens' political subjectification in autocracies and advances the literature on the manipulation of news. Through analysis of state-controlled media and individual interviews, it traces how older people in Belarus engage in anti-authoritarian protests by relying on pre-existing patterns of interactions with the state. My analysis demonstrates that to promote its legitimacy, the paternalist regime cultivates dependence in older citizens and represents itself as the primary solution to problems associated with old-age vulnerability. In response to their systemic marginalisation in the job market, urban development and public health policies, older people claim their equal rights by resisting old-age vulnerability or performing it to challenge the system. The article argues that by practising low-key acts of insubordination, older Belarusians acquire the collective self-awareness and cultural competence that allowed them to engage in the 2020 protests as a distinct political subject.

Keywords

Ageing, autocracies, Belarus, everyday resistance, media, political subjectification

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Introduction

On 5 October 2020, hundreds of retirees marched down the central avenue in the Belarusian capital to demand the resignation of the country's longstanding authoritarian ruler Alexander Lukashenko. For the next three months, the 'Pensioners' March' became a weekly rally in

Minsk. These processions contributed to the largest anti-authoritarian protests in Belarusian history, which began in August 2020, following a heavily contested presidential election campaign and numerous reports of electoral fraud. Despite the unprecedented level of state violence against dissenters, including the unlawful use of force, arbitrary detention, and torture (Amnesty International 2021), Belarusians from all social backgrounds participated in street protests throughout the country for half a year (Onuch and Sasse 2022: 3).

The driving force of the protests was the new post-socialist class of skilled professionals, whose income comes from outside the state economy (Gapova 2021: 47). This article, however, takes inspiration from the 'Pensioners' Marches'. Apart from pensionable age, which has recently been raised from 55 to 58 for women and from 60 to 63 for men, the term 'pensioner' in Belarus is associated with economic dependence on the state. As after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the state retained control over key industries, the majority of those who are currently aged over 60 did not have motivation or resources to compete for better-paid jobs in private companies or start their own businesses. Employed individuals of pensionable age and especially those involved in the private sector are not imagined as 'pensioners' in the dominant discourse.

The regime's promise to control unemployment, wages and prices, for many years ensured the support of those who did not benefit from the end of Soviet socialism, including the majority of retirees, and factory and agricultural workers. This support, however, was never accompanied by the political self-organisation of retirees for pro-government action. Although anti-authoritarian mass protests had occurred in Belarus before, it was in 2020 that older citizens, despite their socio-economic differences, acted as a distinct political subject under the rubric of 'pensioners' for the first time.

Like the major demonstrations that gathered hundreds of thousands of protesters on Sundays, the participants of Monday's 'Pensioners' Marches' demanded fair elections and freedom for political prisoners. However, the banners carried by some attendees at the 'Pensioners' Marches' emphasised this group's special status in society associated with their greater social and economic vulnerability. Some banners stated: 'Grandmothers and grandfathers heal poorly from new wounds' (The Independent 2020), referring to mass repressions carried out against their children and grandchildren. Others reflected on the economic gap between the political elite and those for whom an old-age pension is the only source of income, addressing Lukashenko with sarcastic wishes such as 'May my measly pension be all you have' (Charter97 2020).

This qualitative study asks why the group for which social provision seemed more important than political freedoms engaged in anti-authoritarian resistance in 2020. To answer this

question, I have analysed representations of retirees in state-controlled media and conducted individual interviews with Belarusians of pensionable age. My analysis shows that the symbolic language of the 'Pensioners' Marches' mirrored pre-existing patterns of interactions between the state and less privileged older citizens. I find that to promote its legitimacy, the paternalist regime cultivates vulnerability and dependence in this group and represents itself in pro-government news media as an effective manager successfully solving problems associated with old-age vulnerability.

At the same time, the media regularly feature reports of people aged over 60 claiming their equal rights in the job market and urban development. However, in the absence of intergenerational solidarity in these domains, their struggles are systematically depoliticised by the official discourse and by the citizens themselves. In 2020, when Belarusians across social groups shared discontent about government measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, inspired by the unprecedented mobilisation of mutual aid networks, older citizens saw opportunities to use the special status of 'pensioners' to bring about political change.

While the participants of the 'Pensioners' Marches' belonged to various socio-economic backgrounds, using the fixed imaginary about older people as a homogenous group that the autocratic system promotes served the protesters two political objectives. Firstly, the attendees of the Marches intended to stop state violence in the hope that the riot police would not use force against the group that in the official discourse is represented as benefiting from the regime's special care. Another aim was to challenge the notion that retirees are Lukashenko's unquestionable supporters. Although the first aim was not achieved and the participants of the 'Pensioners' Marches' faced state brutality as the rest of society, older people's political subjectification came as a shock to the system.

The Belarusian regime exemplifies the extreme case of post-socialist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe that Baća (2023: 178) characterises as 'nepotistic and clientelist patronage mechanisms' which 'reduce politics to the technocratic administration of social issues'. In this socio-political configuration, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have become key actors in civil society function in a depoliticised mode, often detached from the actual needs and concerns of the population (Baća 2023: 176; Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2019: 131). As a result, low-key apolitical resistance activities in this region remain the primary means for citizens to recognise and articulate their grievances, and thus to become political subjects (Baća 2022: 2; Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2019: 134).

This article explores how the tricks of autocrats to maintain their dominance, along with direct repression, produce the conditions for anti-authoritarian resistance. In the following sections, I locate my study within the sociology of resistance. I then explore the production of older

people's systemic marginalisation in the job market, urban development, and Covid-19 policies reflected in Belarusian state-controlled media and individual interviews. I argue that by routinely resisting their marginalisation, Belarusian retirees acquired the collective self-awareness and cultural competence that allowed them to engage in the 2020 protests as a distinct political subject. I conclude by discussing the theoretical significance of my findings for research on everyday resistance in autocracies and for the literature on the manipulation of news.

Autocrats' resistance to change

Resistance is commonly understood as the act of opposing a motion. Irrespective of specific agents, Foucault (1978: 95) explains resistance as an integral element of power. If power for him is 'the multiplicity of force relations' emerging from the complex webs of uneven social relations, resistance is a reverse motion within power that incites 'force relations' to persist (Foucault 1978: 92, 95). In sociology the term 'resistance' has been used to describe a wide variety of individual and collective actions – from revolutions to hairstyles (Hollander and Einwohner 2004: 534). While resistance is typically associated with social movements and contentious political actions that aim to change the status quo, the tricks of modern autocrats to remain in power can be understood as their resistance to change.

Contemporary authoritarian rulers maintain their power by embracing the tools of modernity: rather than solely relying on violence, they use technological advances to make their dominance more efficient (Guriev and Treisman 2022: 22). While information manipulation is the main technique used by autocratic regimes to control the public sphere, their ability to influence public opinion has limits. Firstly, digital technologies provide citizens with access to information from alternative sources that they can compare with their own observations and the official presentations of news (Rozenas and Stukal 2019: 982). Secondly, pro-government bias in reporting news reduces the variety of content, thus decreasing media consumption (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014: 163).

To maintain the trust of their audience, state-controlled media in non-democratic systems must reflect political reality to some extent (Lankina et al. 2020: 140-142). 'Selective attribution' is a common way of manipulating news in such contexts: for the state to appear as a competent manager, bad news is systematically blamed on external factors, whereas good news is systematically attributed to domestic authorities (Rozenas and Stukal 2019: 982). Some academics argue that the manipulation of news in autocracies disables the ability of the audience to form consistent opinions, which ultimately leads citizens to support the government (Alyukov 2022: 337). Others theorise that partial media freedom in the sense of

access to independent sources of information increases the capacity of dissenters to mobilise (Gleditsch et al. 2022: 234).

My study will illuminate how by presenting the state as an effective manager successfully solving older citizens' problems, state-controlled media implicitly reflect the systemic production of a social hierarchy that creates these problems in the first place. Furthermore, my analysis will reveal how by persistently depoliticising older people's practices of disputing their discrimination, the pro-government media unintentionally document these struggles.

Everyday resistance for change

Sociologists disagree as to whether informal mobilisation around everyday problems qualifies as resistance. The main debate centres on whether resistance requires recognition from others and whether it must be deliberately directed against sources of domination (Hollander and Einwohner 2004: 533, 538). For example, Hervouet (2021: 224-6) does not classify the misappropriation of working hours and equipment, and petty fraud commonly practised by Belarusian agricultural workers to make ends meet, as forms of resistance to the official line. Since neither the workers nor the authorities interpret this deviation from rules as a form of protest, he believes it shows agreement with the regime that is responsible for poor living conditions in villages but allows citizens to supplement their wages by mobilising additional resources.

However, this reasoning contradicts the view that those who lack power may trick the rulers by hiding the real purpose of their insubordination, whereas the dominant narrative will tend to interpret it in psychological rather than structural terms (Goffman 1961: 189; Scott 1985: 34). Furthermore, translated into the language of rights claims, low-key defiance shares with open political confrontation the intention to decrease the power arrangements imposed by superordinate classes (Scott 1985: 32). In post-socialist contexts, where openly challenging authorities is risky, 'uneventful' mobilisations such as urban activism, for instance, often function as an available means for understanding the sources of one's problems and lead to organised collective action (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2019: 135, 139).

In the Western philosophical tradition individuals become subjects by taking on political and moral responsibilities and acting upon the world (Taylor 2014: 6). Foucault's (1978: 94) 'disciplinary power', which functions through discourse and encourages self-reflexivity in individuals, emphasises the role of repressive institutions in the production of subjectivities. Since my analysis focuses on the ways that older citizens in Belarus respond to their systemic marginalisation, I interpret their actions as resistance to unbalanced power structures.

Irrespective of whether those who oppose ageism support the ruling regime, I shall show how older Belarusians became political subjects in 2020 by relying on pre-existing patterns of everyday resistance. My analysis relies on Robert Butler's (1969: 243) definition of ageism as the production of discriminatory notions about older individuals that results in their unequal treatment.

Methodology

The research findings which I discuss in the subsequent sections derive from a project that investigates how older people's problems were addressed by the government response to Covid-19 in Belarus. To explore how the category of 'older people' is constructed in the official discourse, I analysed news reports published in 2020 in the online versions of the five largest newspapers owned by the state publishing house, 'Belarus Segodnya', and located on its media portal: 'SB. Belarus Segodnya' (SB.BS), 'Znamya Yunosti' (ZY), 'Respublika' (R), 'Narodnaya Gazeta' (NG) and 'Sel'skaya Gazeta' (SG).

In Belarus the state owns most news media and controls independent journalism through a complex licensing process and by terminating the operations of news organisations (Szostek 2015: 124). Nevertheless, in 2020, 54.3% of the audience primarily consumed independent media, 29.4% primarily consumed state-run media, and 16.3% consumed both, with citizens aged 55+ preferring state-controlled sources of information (Greene 2022: 97, 100).

As independent websites and social media platforms were instrumental for the 2020 mass mobilisation, the government subsequently blocked numerous news resources, nearly 600 journalists were arrested, and 120 of them were imprisoned. Currently, independent journalism operates from abroad through platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Telegram etc. Although the state labels some social media pages as 'extremist' and using them then can result in persecution, social media remain an important source for Belarusians to receive news independent from state censorship (CDAC 2022: 9-10, 15).

As the first step of media analysis, I applied the terms 'pensioner' and 'older people' to the search string of the portal 'Belarus Segodnya' in both state languages, Belarusian and Russian. Initially I identified 1,023 media texts, including transcripts, interviews and opinion columns and readers' letters. Of those, I selected 600 reports for a qualitative news frame analysis, excluding articles in which older people were mentioned in passing or where Belarus was not the focus (See the Online Appendix for the full list of included reports).

Entman (1993: 52-3) defines framing as foregrounding some aspects of a perceived reality in a text and obscuring others to promote a particular problem definition. Based on this

proposition, I coded the reports using the following categories: 'the problem', 'problem's framing', 'identities offered' and 'obscured aspects'.

The second step of media analysis showed that most of the publications portrayed people of pensionable age as a homogenous group in search of state protection. However, in presenting the state as an effective manager successfully solving their problems, the reports implicitly reflected the systemic discrimination that this group faces in the job market, urban development, Covid-19 policies, and politics.

To explore how citizens' responses to institutionalised ageism are framed in the news, I organised the reports under four secondary codes – 'job market', 'urban development', 'Covid-19' and '2020 protests'. The third step of media analysis showed that older citizens' civic engagement in the four domains was systematically depoliticised.

To elicit first-hand accounts about living through the pandemic, in 2022 I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with Belarusians of pensionable age. The interviews were carried out online using a snowball technique in which participants introduce the researcher to other participants. While most of my interviewees were urban dwellers, the sample varied in socio-economic backgrounds and political views.

Through the project information sheet, the interviewees were presented with a detailed overview of the study. The document indicated that any information collected from participants that could potentially identify them would be altered if used in publications. The interviewees gave oral consent and were informed that they were free to withdraw from the interviews at any time with no explanation required. They also had the option to ask for their data to be removed from the study within two weeks following the interview.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes. I asked the participants about their lives before the pandemic, whether it had affected their routines and how they evaluated the government responses to Covid-19. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonymised; all identifiable details about the participants were altered (See the Online Appendix for the interview schedule).

Using an analyst-driven thematic analysis that focuses on specific aspect of the data (Brown and Clarke 2006: 84), I read the interviews in search of overlapping themes with the four themes that I had identified in the media reports. While none of the interviewees mentioned their involvement in urban activism, the other three problems featured in the narratives. To explore how the participants saw the role of the state and their own role in addressing these problems, I coded the interviews using the categories of the secondary media analysis: 'job market', 'Covid-19' and '2020 protests'.

Next, I juxtaposed the excerpts from the reports and the interviews collected under each code, to identify patterns in how the media represented the approaches of older people to address the problems they faced in the three domains and how the participants in my study saw their role in problem-solving. This step of analysis showed that while the media featured older citizens as vulnerable individuals in search of state protection, the participants often emphasised their agency in solving the problems.

Similar to media reports, the interviewees depoliticised ageism in the job market, which they saw as a problem irrelevant to the rest of society. However, interpreting the government Covid-19 strategies as irresponsible, many of them explained their actions during the pandemic as motivated by taking on responsibility for the wellbeing of others. This motivation led some of them to participate in the 2020 protests.

Finally, as suggested by Brown and Clarke (2006: 84), I explored underlying ideas that inform the semantic content of the data sets. This step allowed me to identify the idea of age-related vulnerability as the main category that both the state and citizens of pensionable age implicitly used to promote their political and civic aims.

Findings

Turning to or away from the state to resist ageism in the job market

Stimulating longer careers is among the priorities of the National Strategy 'Active Longevity – 2030'. But with the pensionable age still relatively low, the pension system tacitly discourages people from earning a wage and a pension at the same time. While there is no mandatory retirement, only fully retired citizens receive the full old-age pension. The predominance of fixed-term contracts often allows employers to prioritise younger workers by offering those of pensionable age shorter contracts. Belarusians of working age who are registered as unemployed are eligible for free retraining, but citizens of pensionable age do not receive this benefit. While individuals who wish to retain post-pensionable-age employment are officially recognised as vulnerable workers (R 25 February 2020), they are largely left to their own devices to deal with formal and informal age discrimination.

The ratio of the average pension to the average salary in Belarus is about 40%. With a pension as the only source of income many retirees cannot afford expenses beyond those of energy bills and basic food. In this case, older Belarusians manage their expectations in relation to the quality of their lives, like Dana, a retired worker: 'What is poverty when you're 30 is enough to get by when you're 70'. However, the media promote the image of older people as satisfied

with their financial situation: 'You rarely hear our elderly complain about empty pockets' (SG 10 October 2020).

A few of my blue-collar interviewees shared that they had been happy to retire upon reaching pensionable age. Some of white-collar participants stated that they had not faced a pressure to end their careers and worked till their mid-70s. However, the struggles of Belarusians to retain jobs past pensionable age was also a recurring theme in the media and many interviews, although the approaches of citizens to secure employment differed between the two data sets.

In the news people of pensionable age were depicted as seeking state protection from what ultimately is the lack of anti-discriminatory regulations. Conversely, my interviewees who struggled to find jobs often mentioned resorting to the courses of action that can be defined as tricking the system. These participants relied on undocumented employment or used a younger relative as a proxy to work in their place to earn additional income.

Job-seeking difficulties often featured in the media coverage of the regular telephone helplines and 'public receptions' hosted by officials which the regime has designed to monitor social discontent and turn it into a source of its legitimisation (Astapova et al. 2022: 17). To illustrate: 'A 60-year-old resident of Berezino wants to work to have some extra income in addition to her pension. The pensioner will be assisted in finding a suitable vacancy' (SB.BS 12 June 2020).

As the regime does not allow critical debates in state-run media, the problems citizens bring up at such events are framed as private issues or as resulting from the negligence of individual bureaucrats that can be solved with the intervention of senior authorities. The officials who host the meetings are portrayed as the protagonists of such reports although their role is to collect complaints and redirect them to other competent organisations. While seeking state intervention can be seen as a proactive approach to solving problems created by the system, the attendees of the 'public receptions' are pictured as vulnerable supplicants grateful for the protection the regime provides for them.

On the contrary, my interviewees emphasised their agency in finding ways to earn some extra income. For instance, Vanda, aged 73, shares: 'After raising three children, my pension wasn't great. My part-time cleaner job didn't cut it. So, my daughter got a cleaning job too, and I worked in her place to make ends meet'. Another participant, Kapitalina, aged 77, recalls struggling to secure a job in her late 50s and resorting to working unofficially in her brother's firm.

The difference between individual approaches featured in the two data sets can be attributed to the varied employment prospects in rural and urban areas. While the attendees of the 'public receptions' are usually rural residents, most of my interviewees resided in cities where there are more employment options. At the same time, the media only select cases that present the regime as an effective manager successfully solving citizens' problems, whereas some of my interlocutors felt safe enough to anonymously tell me about the illegal methods they used to ensure their post-pension-age employment.

Similar to the media reports, most participants did not attribute ageism in the job market to unfair state policies, instead blaming it on individual employers. Yadviga, aged 63, a retired manager who now works as an undocumented carer, sheds light on the depoliticization of this problem. She explains that being on fixed-term contracts, 'people don't talk about it out of fear of losing a job'.

The lack of intergenerational solidarity in standing up for older citizens' labour rights is reinforced by the expectation featured in many interviews that individuals of pensionable age will prioritise looking after their grandchildren over holding paid employment. The decades of living under authoritarian rule also instils scepticism in Belarusians about the possibility of rapidly changing the situation: 'Even if we start talking about it, we won't see much change during our lifetime', reflects Yadviga, on her lack of motivation to engage in collective action to resist labour discrimination.

In summary, by portraying officials as regularly helping older individuals find jobs, the media implicitly reflect that this group faces institutionalised ageism in employment. Some citizens use the co-optation mechanisms created by the regime to maintain the status quo. Enacting the role of vulnerable supplicants that the regime imposes on older people might be the only means available to them to secure post-pension-age jobs. Others overcome age discrimination by bypassing official regulations.

In any case, although many citizens' disagreement with their marginalisation in the job market is not articulated in political terms, struggles over needs are also struggles over values, to use Scott's (1985: 1) terms. By seeking post-pension-age employment, Belarusians confront the dependent position the regime offers to them. Thus, by engaging in everyday defiance, they consequently although not necessarily intentionally challenge the tricks of the autocratic system to remain in power.

Demanding state intervention to challenge exclusion in urban development

Although my interviewees did not mention being involved in urban activism, many media stories reported older individuals campaigning for better transport links between rural and urban areas, confronting road constructions that violated the interests of local residents and drawing public attention to environmental problems. While I am aware of at least one time when one of the participants, who I had known prior to my study, was involved in urban activism, this person did not bring this experience up in their interview. This discrepancy can be explained by the interview schedule that was not originally designed to ask the participants about their involvement in urban activism.

But by 2020, initiatives by citizens concerning urban infrastructure were widespread and welcomed by the regime as a form of channelling public discontent (Astapova et al. 2022: 17). As reflected in the media, however, the participation of older people in urban activism involved a distinct power dynamic. The reports often included cases of older people living in residential areas who were challenging administrative urban development regulations that tacitly prioritised the interests of younger and more economically advantaged citizens.

Based on my analysis, the transformations of their environment which older citizens have disputed were similar in some ways and different in others from gentrification. In Western countries this process is defined as neighbourhood renovations that draw in people of higher social status and drive out the current residents (Buffel and Phillipson 2019: 989). In Belarus, younger, more affluent residents who, for example, work in the IT sector, prefer to move into more expensive central or newly built residential areas of the capital. The problems discussed in the media, however, concerned less privileged social groups, including retirees and younger employees living in neighbourhoods that were built during the Soviet era in provincial towns.

While the social background of dwellers in the same residential areas may be relatively similar, their generational disparity often results in a certain economic difference as for many retirees an old-age pension is the only source of income. This economic difference produces a status hierarchy reinforced by renovation plans which prioritise the interests of younger residents over those of retirees who are seen as no longer contributing to the economy and therefore less important.

Moreover, the new routines and activities that renovations bring to residential communities often undermine existing identities and customary forms of attachments to the place. As a result, older residents feel that they are no longer valued in their neighbourhoods (Burns et al. 2012: 1). While older residents are often portrayed in the media as standing up for their right to have a say on urban developments, their civic actions as a rule have no effect on top-down decisions.

To illustrate, NG (14 February 2020) addresses a conflict that took place in a town where the local administration had decided to expand a car park adjacent to the courtyard shared by several apartment buildings. Designed in the 1970s, the parking area was no longer able to accommodate the growing number of residents' cars. The renovation, which involved cutting down several trees in the courtyard, outraged some of the residents who were not car owners but had been regularly socialising in the courtyard enjoying its green spaces.

A local activist had sent a letter to a state-funded newspaper, which was the reason why the media outlet investigated the conflict. As the redesign of the courtyard divided the residents into two camps, the article provides a space for those on both sides to express their perspectives, and for the local administration to explain their decision.

The pro-trees camp claimed that, according to the sanitary standards, the percentage of trees should have been increased, not cut down. The other camp argued that with a broader road, their cars would have more space to park further away from the apartment buildings, which is a more eco-friendly arrangement. A representative of the local administration explained that the renovation had been planned in accordance with formal regulations and new trees were planted to replace the lost ones. While the official reasoning seems to accommodate the interests of both groups, it tacitly prioritises the interest of the car owners and dismisses the symbolic loss the older residents claimed due to the reconfiguration of their neighbourhood.

In summary, the position taken by the urban development authorities that prioritises the interests of younger residents is always framed in the media as based on optimal solutions. In the absence of intergenerational solidarity regarding urban infrastructure, telephone helplines and 'public receptions' often serve older activists as the only available means of articulating their grievances. While the media represent them as vulnerable citizens in search of state protection, the press also unintentionally document how older people regularly confront the marginal social status that various administrative urban development regulations offer to them.

Insisting on one's decency during Covid-19

Belarus was among the countries that did not introduce a lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. Contrary to the regime's widespread reputation as paternalistic, the official response to the pandemic delegated to the population the responsibility for managing the risks of catching the virus. In terms of epidemiological safety, the media sent mixed messages: while medical officials advised citizens to maintain a safe distance, wear facemasks and sanitise their hands, Lukashenko repeatedly denied that the disease was dangerous and disdained recommended anti-Covid measures (SB.BS 19, 27, 31 March 2020).

Comparing this approach to strict Covid-19 restrictions in other countries, many of my interviewees considered it insulting. For instance, Zoya, a 62-year-old employee felt that it was 'unsafe having to go to work during the pandemic' and that 'public events should've been cancelled'.

Other participants mentioned that Lukashenko's dismissive comments about the danger of Covid-19 stimulated them to engage in mutual aid networks. Vera, aged 65, who works part-time recalls: 'People felt that the state didn't value human life. They took matters into their own hands. Some started to sew facemasks, others delivered food to doctors or older neighbours who were self-isolating'. Another interviewee, Matvey, a 71-year-old retiree shared that he 'got vaccinated not to let others down'. Overall, many participants indicated that during the pandemic they had found ways of being appreciated for taking care of others.

The media, however, largely ignored the self-organisation of civil society. The official media campaign focused on advising older people to stay indoors, based on the widespread assumption of their greater susceptibility to the virus. In some cases, news reports specified that it was not chronological age *per se* that exposed individuals to the danger of the infection but various chronic diseases which often accumulate as people grow older (SB.BS 24 April 2020). However, to represent the state as an effective manager protecting the vulnerable, media stories often portrayed older people as infantile individuals in need of repeated expert guidance on their safety:

On the underground during the rush hour, I see people who are far over working age. Some of them can barely walk but they are socialising out of doors. One of my older relatives dismisses my advice: 'Well, what's wrong? I'm only popping in to the doctor's, or a concert'. Older people ignore calls to be careful with the carelessness of children (SG 9 April 2020).

Expert interviews and opinion columns about Covid-19 frequently objectified older people by addressing the younger readership and referring to older adults in the third person. The work of volunteers from state-approved organisations who delivered food and medicine to older people without immediate family was framed as a noble pursuit, in contrast to the portrayal of older citizens as passive recipients of care who were rarely given a voice in such reports.

At the same time, there was no clear definition of the 'older people' who were persistently told to stay indoors. While in some reports individuals in their late 40s (SB.BS 28 January 2020) and 50s were marked as 'older' (R 25 February 2020), in others the increased risk of catching the coronavirus was attributed to groups aged over 65 (SB.BS 20 March 2020) or over 75 (SB.BS 21 March 2020).

The absence of a clear definition of 'older people' deemed susceptible to the virus allowed some Belarusians to disidentify from the ageist objectification that the media were imposing. With no lockdown in place, they could easily challenge the idea of old-age vulnerability and dependence by engaging in social activities. While some of my interviewees had followed the advice to stay at home, others maintained their pre-pandemic routines because they did not associate themselves with the vulnerable older people in need of protection. For example, Antonina, a 74-year-old retiree shared that she had continued to attend theatres as her way of overcoming pandemic-related anxiety.

Unlike many other reports, a few opinion columns framed older people's desire to remain active not as a sign of supposed age-related cognitive decline but as an expression of their will for life: 'Recently the local doctor and I drove around and saw five pensioners sitting on a bench. They don't care about the coronavirus. They have no fear or panic. And maybe that's a good thing' (SG 16 April 2020).

The desire of older people to participate in social life despite the pandemic was overtly celebrated when it served the regime's ideological objective of justifying the decision not to introduce a lockdown. One of the main strategies by which the Lukashenko regime aspires to legitimise itself is its identification with the victory of the Soviet Army in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) (Marples 2014: 7). This explains why the possibility of holding traditional mass events on Victory Day in May 2020 was not questioned in the official rhetoric.

In some media stories covering the 75th anniversary of the Victory, veterans of the war who were self-isolating were interviewed while watching the celebrations on television in their homes. Other articles, however, featured former soldiers attending the festive events in person, like a 93-year-old veteran who brought flowers to lay on a war monument: 'I wasn't afraid to go to the front when I was 16, how could some virus scare me today?! I was and will always be a defender of the motherland' (SB.BS 11 May 2020).

The regime traditionally frames patriotic statements such as the one above as an expression of support for the government. In other cases, older citizens were portrayed as taking advantage of the state during the pandemic. For instance, in SB.BS (7 April 2020) the manager of a social service agency reprimands a 64-year-old man living in a village for requesting some food products delivered to him from the nearest city: 'Then it turned out that he actually goes to work every day and even owns a car'.

The manager explains that during the pandemic social services only deliver food and medicine to older people who are self-isolating and do not have immediate family. The man from the media story, however, 'could go to the mobile shop that comes to his village but doesn't do it out of principle'. This case illustrates how the dominant perspective fails to acknowledge that

the citizen from the report used the official Covid-19 rhetoric to insist on his 'minimal cultural decencies', to use Scott's (1985: xviii) terms. He took advantage of the persistent reference to older people's vulnerability to request the delivery of goods otherwise unavailable in rural areas.

Overall, despite an extensive media campaign promoting the role of the state in taking care of the population, many citizens from both data sets demonstrated that they did not trust the state during the global crisis. This concern motivated Belarussians en masse to take care of others, triggering unprecedented intergenerational solidarity in solving shared problems. Simultaneously, the regime ignored the self-organisation of civil society because the mutual aid networks did not voice political statements. As a result, the freedom to mobilise that Belarussians unexpectedly had during the pandemic turned into the driving force of the mass protests that followed later in 2020.

Becoming political subjects

Some of my interviewees shared that they supported the regime, while others avoided discussing politics during the interview. However, half of the participants in the study told me that the experience of self-organisation during the pandemic inspired Belarussians to protest in August 2020, when it was announced that Lukashenko had won the presidential election for the sixth time. Among the latter group of interviewees there were those who, like Gleb, a 65-year-old employee, attended the main protest rallies on Sundays to which citizens were invited via Telegram channels. Gleb recalls:

I cried with happiness at the sight of the endless queue of those who had come to give their signatures for opposition leaders to register as candidates. When I realised that they had fooled us again, I didn't care about the pandemic, the illness or death. The only thing that mattered was to act to change the country. The pandemic taught us how many people wanted it.

Other interviewees, like Vera, a 65-year-old retiree, joined the 'Pensioners' Marches'. The idea of old-age vulnerability informed the tactics used by both the attendees of the 'Marches' and the state in the arena of the political struggle. Vera reminisces that apart from demanding the release of political prisoners and a new transparent election, the 'Pensioners' Marches' aimed to stop state violence by putting the group commonly associated with vulnerability right in front of the riot police: 'When they started to detain us, it destroyed my faith in justice. I thought that was a line they'd never cross'. This quotation illustrates both the willingness of

older citizens to face the risks of the street protests and the expectation that their identity-based activism would protect them from state violence.

Judith Butler (2016: 24) argues that political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilisation of vulnerability, in the sense of one's exposure to potential violence. For Butler, the agentic exposure to the possibility of harm is simultaneously the condition of resisting one's vulnerability associated with passivity. From this perspective, to get their demands across, older activists used the double nature of vulnerability by putting themselves at risk but also testing the regime's limits in carrying out violence.

Participating in the rallies was not the only way of contributing to the mass mobilisation featured in the interviews. Some of my interlocutors did not attend the demonstrations, but they, for example, donated money, food and medicine to support fellow citizens detained for political reasons. In 2020 alone, the number of people who went through prison for protesting exceeded 30,000 (Kapustina 2020). Supporting dissenters in Belarus can lead to prosecution, and arrests on political grounds have continued up to the present moment (Viasna 2023).

The courage of older activists contrasted with the notion of old-age vulnerability exploited in media reports following the election campaign: 'Older people especially appreciate peace and quiet. This is what they are voting for' (SB.BS 9 August 2020). The metaphor of 'peace and quiet' in this context refers to the stability of the regime and the dominant media narrative that frames the payments of state-guaranteed old-age pensions as Lukashenko's personal merit.

Nevertheless, the 'Pensioners' Marches' sent a message that a portion of the older generation see the situation differently. Vera, whom I quoted above, explains her reasons for protesting: 'I'm fed up with Lukashenko. He cannot buy me by "paying my pension". I earned my pension. I just can't bear his lies'.

To discourage citizens from engaging in the collective action, the media repeatedly portrayed the main rallies as dangerous to protesters considered vulnerable: 'It's terrible that pregnant women, women with children and the elderly go [to the protests] and don't understand that any surge of emotions can result in a stampede' (SB.BS 8 September 2020). However, this quotation also illustrates that the full range of social groups were involved in the protests. To discredit the mass mobilisation, many reports also represented older people as victims of the protesters, who were disrupting the normal functioning of urban infrastructure and attacking those who supported the government.

Three months into the protests, the Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Irina Kostevich admitted that the previously stable notion of the social contract between the state and older citizens was no longer valid: 'My colleagues and I find it particularly distasteful that people

towards whom the state has a special attitude are being dragged into this confrontation with the authorities – pensioners and the disabled’ (SB 28 November 2020). By framing older people’s activism as orchestrated by external agents, the minister represents this group as vulnerable and lacking their own political will, but also implicitly acknowledges that the protests persisted for months, causing massive turmoil to the system.

By the end of 2020, the media were still seeking ways to discredit the participation of older citizens in the protests: ‘The Pensioners’ Marches’ don’t mean to criticise the authorities after all, it’s a cry of loneliness from those who aren’t listened to and get ignored by their children’ (SB.BS 2 December 2020). While framing the motivation of older people to join the protests in terms of psychological problems, the media implicitly acknowledged the important role played by this group in the biggest anti-authoritarian resistance in Belarusian history.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the relationship between the ruling regime in Belarus and older citizens. Building on Foucault’s (1978: 95) proposition that power and resistance are mutually constitutive, I have shown how the strategies of autocrats to resist change create the conditions for anti-authoritarian resistance. My analysis shows that to promote its legitimacy, the regime cultivates vulnerability and dependence in older citizens and represents itself as the primary solution to problems associated with old-age vulnerability. In response to their systemic marginalisation, older Belarusians claim their equal rights by resisting old-age vulnerability or performing it to challenge the system. These patterns of interacting with the state allowed older people to engage in the 2020 protests as a distinct political subject.

In this way, my study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it advances sociological research on mobilisations around everyday problems in Central and East Europe as a means of citizens’ political subjectification (Baća 2022; Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2019). I have shown that a portion of older Belarusians resists their marginalisation in the job market and urban development, but in the absence of intergenerational solidarity in these domains, their struggles are systematically depoliticised by the official discourse and by the citizens themselves. When the rest of society shares their concerns, as happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, older people turn their customary practices of everyday resistance into an open political confrontation with the authorities.

Second, my analysis shifts away from the tendency of existing research (Astapova et al. 2022: 2, 27) to define the significance of resistance in autocracies through its ability to lead to democracy. Rather than focusing on the possibilities of changing societal structures, I explore

how authoritarian oppression brings into being individuals' efforts to claim their rights. Older Belarusians often do not have the means available to dispute the power arrangements imposed by the regime other than by seeking the protection of the state from the marginalising impact of state policies. However, my study questions the assumption that autocracies survive because citizens lose their political agency succumbing to the dominant narrative (Alyukov 2022: 337) and that low-key acts of insubordination should be read as agreement with the regime when the opposite is not openly declared (Hervouet 2021: 224-6).

Finally, my project advances the literature on the limitations of media manipulation in non-democracies (Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Lankina et al. 2020). The case of Belarus demonstrates how the regime's manipulation of information in the state-controlled media implicitly reflects the production of social hierarchy that marginalises older people and the struggles of this group for their economic, social and political rights. My approach to qualitative news frame analysis suggests that despite their biased nature, state-run media in autocracies can be used as a source of data to explore pressing societal problems, the tricks of autocrats to obscure them and the struggles of citizens for social and political freedoms.

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Ethics statement

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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Biographies

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