

Emotional Predispositions and Cognitive Biases during the Pro-Russian Mobilisation in Donets'k, Eastern Ukraine, in Spring 2014

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Abstract

What role did popular mobilisation play in causing the war in the Donbas, eastern Ukraine? In this article, I focus on the micro-level processes leading to the war and demonstrate how street violence from late January to late February 2014 and the radical change of government in Kyiv produced the popular emotions of mistrust and indignation, fear, and resentment based on injustice frames in Donets'k. I situate my argument within the larger literature on emotions and conflicts. I show how, from a wide spectrum of emotions, the emotion of fear in response to existential threats emerged during this period in Donets'k and led the local people to form self-defence units and arm themselves. This presented unique problems for local pro-Russian activists in that they began losing control of the processes they unleashed.

Keywords: eastern Ukraine, Donbas war, Donets'k, conflict, emotions, popular mobilisation

Introduction

What role do emotions play in conflicts? How do activists politicise emotions and use them to mobilise people for political action? What effects do emotions have on the organisation of protest movements? Does the politicisation of emotion have unintended effects? In this article, focusing on the micro-level processes leading to war¹ in the Ukrainian Donets'k,² I argue that, from a wide spectrum of emotions, the emotion of fear in response to existential threats emerged as dominant in pre-war popular mobilisation. It forced people to form spontaneous self-defence units and arm themselves, which presented unique problems for movement organisers. I also

¹ I deliberately omit designating the war in the Donbas as a 'civil war' or 'inter-state' war or 'internationalised civil war' because it is a subject for another article.

² The Ukrainian spelling is used in line with the established academic practice.

demonstrate that even formerly politically marginal actors could skilfully use emotions to mobilise people for political action.

The article is organised as follows. First, I briefly review the theoretical literature on emotional pathways to violence. I then discuss the case selection and methods. I then focus on the events between the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich and the first major pro-Russian rally in Donetsk on 1 March 2014. Using evidence from the Russian social media platform 'Vkontakte', Pavel Gubarev's³ *Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa* (Donbas' People's Militia) live page, videos from meetings in Donetsk, newspaper reports, and activist testimony, I demonstrate that the people in Donetsk displayed several emotional dispositions which activists capitalised upon: mistrust of the new government, fear of the radical groups from western Ukraine and Kyiv, and resentment based on injustice frames. In the final section of the article, I demonstrate that the emotion of fear predominated, which had one tangible effect on the movement organisation: people began arming themselves and activists found hard to control what they aimed to unleash.

Emotions and Conflict

The broader literature on emotions has demonstrated that emotions are not only tied in with reason⁴ but are also 'built-in' reactions to ensure an individual's survival. In this way, emotions have an adaptive role. Frijda, for example, defines emotions as response systems or action sets, intended to adjust and tune the human organism to rapid and possibly threatening changes in the environment.⁵ Barbalet demonstrates how emotions guide reason and help direct the individual's attention to a pressing concern.⁶

Based on these broader findings of neuroscience and health research, the literature on emotions and politics directs our attention to the importance of popular emotions for social movements⁷ and

³ I have used the Russian spelling of this openly pro-Russian activist's name.

⁴ J. Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵ N. Frijda, *The Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁶ J.M.Barbalet, *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure: a Macrosociological Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷ J. Goodwin, J. Jasper, F. Polletta, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); R. Aminzade, et al., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

conflicts.⁸ Emotions of difference valence (positive or negative) and developed along different neural pathways (fear, anger, sadness) have been analysed and their varying effects on political action have been discussed.⁹ For example, sudden changes in the environment, particularly when the status hierarchies are rearranged, with one ethnic group being suddenly downgraded, can cause the emotions of anger and resentment.¹⁰ As Wendy Pearlman demonstrates in her work on Palestine, under the influence of anger, particularly righteous anger, for example, in the face of blatant injustice, individuals begin to value their own security less and engage in risky behaviour, such as assaulting government forces and engaging in direct political action against economic and political status quo.¹¹ Roger Petersen demonstrates how the emotion of resentment felt towards drastic status rearrangements forms “the best descriptive and predictive fit”¹² in explaining the violent conflicts in Yugoslavia. In a more instrumental vein, Roger Petersen and Stuart Kaufman have demonstrated that popular emotions can be skilfully used by political entrepreneurs to mobilise people.¹³

The literature on emotions and conflicts based on the findings in neuroscience and health research suggests that one of the pathways to violence is through fear. The emotion of fear arises when “a breakdown of the quotidian” (or, simply put, the breakdown of normal life)¹⁴ or a “moral shock” (as defined by James Jasper, a moral

⁸ E. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); R. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion : Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); R. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); R. Petersen, *Western Intervention in the Balkans: the Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹ T. Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*; D. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); T. Kemper, *A Social Interactional Theory of Emotions* (New York: Wiley, 1978).

¹¹ W. Pearlman, ‘Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings’, in *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, No.2 (2013), pp. 387 – 409.

¹² Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, p. 256.

¹³ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*; Petersen, *Western Intervention*; S. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ D. Snow, D. Cress, L. Downey, A. Jones, ‘Disrupting the “Quotidian”’: Reconceptualising the Relationship between Breakdown and the Emergence of Collective Action’, in *Mobilisation: An International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1998), pp. 1-22: 1.

shock is “a reaction to an unexpected event or a piece of information that creates a sense of outrage to such an extent that an individual becomes inclined toward political action”¹⁵) occur by themselves or in different combinations. When the quotidian breaks down, “routines and understandings associated with everyday patterns of making do”, Snow et al. write, “are now matters of doubt, uncertainty, and sometimes even confusion”.¹⁶ Fear can also occur in reaction to “suddenly imposed grievances”,¹⁷ which captures the sense of immediate threat that an accident or some change in the social order poses to the communities. In short, the emotion of fear arises as a result of unexpected and sudden changes in one’s surroundings, when the quotidian is disrupted or when there is a strong moral shock.

Fear fundamentally affects people’s beliefs and actions. As Petersen demonstrates in his work on the role of emotions in Yugoslavian conflicts, the emotion of fear affects how individuals collect information. Under the influence of fear, he shows, individuals begin privileging information and beliefs confirming their fears and downgrading information about the lack of threat.¹⁸ Elster observes similar effects of the urgent emotions such as fear on individuals’ information gathering and processing.¹⁹ This is because at the most basic level, as Petersen writes, “emotions alert the individual to heighten the pursuit of one basic desire above others to meet the demands of changing conditions”.²⁰ Certain concerns therefore become all-consuming under the influence of powerful emotions, particularly fear, and in need of satisfaction. On the other hand, as Barbalet demonstrates in his research on this emotion, fear is a “prospect-based emotion”,²¹ that is the one which heightens the individuals’ expectation of an unpleasant event.

Under the influence of fear, as Elster argues, people are normally induced to act sooner rather than later.²² These actions can be of two kinds. Since fear is a visceral emotion, that is, it occurs in

¹⁵ J. Jasper, ‘The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and Around Social Movements’, in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1998), pp. 397-424: 409.

¹⁶ Snow et al., ‘Disrupting the “Quotidian”’, p.5; Barbalet, *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure*, p. 168.

¹⁷ Snow et al., ‘Disrupting the “Quotidian”’, p.7.

¹⁸ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*; Petersen, *Western Intervention*.

¹⁹ J. Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 156.

²⁰ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, p. 3.

²¹ Barbalet, *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure*, p. 55.

²² Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour*, p. 149.

response to the perceived threat emanating from others, the response of the person experiencing the emotion is 'fight or flight'.²³ Petersen describes the fight reaction as follows: "when the perception of danger comes from the belief in the other's power and one retains an ability to respond, the action tendency will be to fight".²⁴ By contrast, other scholars highlight that the emotions of fear make people more risk-averse.²⁵ The action tendency of fear, in this interpretation, is the urge to separate oneself from aversive events and preserve the self. In other words, under the influence of fear individuals are less likely to engage in risky behaviour and prioritise security.

In what follows, I demonstrate empirically that the people in Donets'k experienced a whole panoply of different, often overlapping, emotions, such as mistrust and indignation, anger, resentment at perceived injustice, and the emotion of fear. These emotions developed as a reaction to the violent events and sudden change of government in Kyiv from late January to late February 2014. I demonstrate that the emotion of fear predominated and led the people of Donets'k to take risks and arm themselves, that is their response to the events was to 'fight' rather than 'flight'.

Case Selection and Methods

The conflict between the Ukrainian government and Russia-backed separatist republics of Donets'k and Luhans'k²⁶ in the east of Ukraine (known as 'the Donbas' or 'Donbass' in Russian) has been raging since 2014. It started locally, when numerous anti-government protests in the Donbas were sparked by the radical changes of government in Kyiv in February 2014. In April 2014, the protests morphed into an insurgency, with the help of Russian military reserve officers, military intelligence operatives, and various non-state actors.²⁷ In response, the Ukrainian government launched several offensives, some of which

²³ Frijda, *The Emotions*, p. 72.

²⁴ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, p. 38.

²⁵ J. Lerner & D. Keltner, 'Fear, Anger and Risk', in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2001), pp. 146-159.

²⁶ The Ukrainian spelling is used in line with the established academic practice.

²⁷ N.Mitrokhin, 'Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion. Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine', in *Osteuropa*, No. 8 (2014), pp. 3-16; 'Den Auslöser zum Krieg habe ich gedrückt', in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 November 2014, online at <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/russischer-geheimdienstler-zur-ostukraine-den-ausloeser-zum-krieg-habe-ich-gedrueckt-1.2231494>. Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 12 May 2020.)

were successful, but, later, it was repeatedly repulsed by the separatist and Russian state forces.²⁸ Since 2015, the 'contact line', that is the border between the government-controlled and separatist-controlled territories has 'calcified',²⁹ in that no side has been making any significant territorial gains. The Ukrainian and separatist forces continue attacking each other's positions; each side reports failed ceasefires almost every day.³⁰ The conflict has claimed over 10,000 lives,³¹ and currently, there is no conflict resolution plan on which all parties would agree.³²

I bound this case study to Donetsk region and to the period before 1 March 2014. There are several reasons for this. Donetsk was the first city in the Donbas where a major pro-Russian protest took place on 1 March 2014, with around ten thousand people gathering on Lenin Square between 1 and 6 March.³³ It was also the first city in the Donbas where pro-Russian protesters seized a government building, managed to stay there for nearly a day, and elected a people's governor, Pavel Gubarev, on 1 March.³⁴ After this, pro-Russian contention diffused very quickly in Donetsk region.³⁵ It was in the town of Slov'ians'k in Donetsk region where important government buildings were seized by the local separatists and Russian non-state actors on 12 April, making way for the first military action by the state from 13 April 2014.³⁶ It is, therefore, significant to account for the period before the first major pro-Russian rally on 1 March.

²⁸ J. Driscoll, 'Ukraine's Civil War: Would Accepting this Terminology help resolve the Conflict?', Policy Memo 572, in *Ponars Eurasia*, February 2019, online at <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/node/10146>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*; 'VSU otkryli pritsel'nyii ogon' po zhilym domam pod Donetskom', in *Rusvesna*, 3 February 2020, online at <https://rusvesna.su/news/1580724614>; https://vk.com/strelkov_info; <http://archive.is/WZO1L>.

³¹ 'RFE/RL: UN says nearly 10,000 People killed in Eastern Ukraine Conflict since 2014', in *KyivPost*, 15 March 2017, online at <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/rferl-un-says-nearly-10000-people-killed-eastern-ukraine-conflict-since-2014.html>.

³² D. Platonova, 'Peacekeepers in the Donbas: Pro et Contra', in *Strife Blog*, 30 May 2019, online at <http://www.strifeblog.org/2019/05/30/peacekeepers-in-the-donbas-pro-et-contra/>.

³³ 'Pro-Russian Rallies in Southeast Ukraine call for Secession', in *BBC Monitoring Newsfile*, 1 March 2014. Accessed via Factiva database.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See the prolific reports by BBC Monitoring Newsfile throughout spring 2014.

³⁶ 'Ukraine turns to Force to oust pro-Russian Gunmen', in *Agence France Presse*, 13 April 2014. Accessed via Factiva database.

The key actors in this story are Pavel Gubarev, his 'Donbas' People's Militia',³⁷ which emerged spontaneously on the spur of the pro-Russian sentiments in Donets'k; Kharkiv-based 'Oplot', whose activists began arriving to Donets'k after Yanukovich fled; and the Communist Party of Ukraine, who organised regular anti-government meetings. All three were key in galvanising and capitalising upon various popular emotions. Gubarev was elected people's governor on 1 March, and there is some indirect evidence that he provided some support to Igor Strelkov's group early on.³⁸

To gauge these popular emotions, I have used newspaper reports and videos, but also Gubarev's live page on the social media platform 'Vkontakte'. Social media presents a new platform for the expression of political views and beliefs. It also allows activists to disseminate information about protests.³⁹ Overall, social media has some distinct advantages, if used with caution. It can cover local events which are not covered either in the local, national, or international press, such as activists' meetings and the local people's actions. Second, it has the potential to replace extensive interviews on the ground as a source of information about beliefs, expectations, and some actions in real time. These remain valid because they were expressed at the time of the events in question, without the influence of hindsight, memory loss, or researcher impact, which *post hoc* face-to-face interviews are always hampered with, unless, of course, it has been determined with sufficient evidence that the user's or interlocutor's account is fake or the user did not post the comment in the first place (triangulation with interviews can help in this case). Thirdly, the Internet itself is a decentralised space, in contrast to newspapers, and there is little chance for the 'editorial bias' unless there are moderators who systematically remove offensive, excessively controversial, or "off-topic" content. Such practices are (fortunately or unfortunately) absent from the social media platforms I have used for this paper. In relation to the Donbas conflict, Vkontakte has been popular with pro-Russian movements, such as Donets'k People's Republic, Donbas' People's Militia, Anti-Maidan and their

³⁷ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 2019, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://vk.com/polkdonbassa>; <http://archive.is/Uix3n>.

³⁸ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 27 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?offset=47380&own=1&w=wall-67059574_328; <http://archive.is/NQPP3>.

³⁹ P. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (Pluto Press, 2012).

various local versions.⁴⁰ Such groups were created on V Kontakte to recruit people into the protest movements, to help military volunteers enter Ukraine,⁴¹ and to send humanitarian aid to the Donbas once the Ukrainian government launched the Anti-Terrorist Operation in mid-April 2014.

Emotions of Mistrust and Indignation

Following the radical changes of government in Kyiv, when Yanukovich suddenly left Kyiv on the night of 21 February, a member of rival party Bat'kivshchina, Oleksandr Turchynov, assumed power as interim president, and a new cabinet was announced on 27 February, the people of Donets'k began experiencing intense emotions of mistrust and indignation towards the new government. To use the terminology developed by Frijda, many people in Donets'k attempted to "establish a relationship" with the new environment through the emotion of mistrust.⁴² Here I demonstrate how they did so both online and offline.

During this first phase of the pro-Russian protest movement in Donets'k, almost all 'directive' posts and comments (that is, posts telling what had to be done) on Pavel Gubarev's *Narodnoe Opolchenie* V Kontakte page included some discussion of the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian Parliament; many were capitalised to emphasise the commentator's anger and indignation at the new government.⁴³ Some commentators experienced very strong emotions: one commentator conveyed his strong emotions about the new government in a post in which he said that he was 'crying' and at some point, 'thought about

⁴⁰ In fact, I created a (very) long list of these. Most of them have been taken offline now.

⁴¹ Gubarev has been recruiting Russians into his movement via his Vk.com page. See *Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa*, 13 March 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, https://vk.com/topic-67059574_29521374; <http://archive.is/f2H5D>.

⁴² Frijda, *The Emotions*, p. 71.

⁴³ *Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa*, 27 February 2014, 11:58, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=40&w=wall-67059574_427; <http://archive.is/eX175>; *Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa*, 27 February 2014, 5:13, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=40&w=wall-67059574_337; <http://archive.is/wHhjS>; *Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa*, 27 February 2014, 9:37, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=20&w=wall-67059574_388; <http://archive.is/QvQw3>.

committing suicide'⁴⁴ when watching the Narodnoe Veche (People's Council) on the Maidan in Kyiv on 26 February (the Veche recommended ministers for the new cabinet). He strongly appealed to action and urged people to stop being indifferent.⁴⁵ I attempted to interview this individual who did not deny making these comments, which means he was local to Donetsk, but he also said he was not politically active at the time. This means that he engaged with the new environment in a very emotional way but this did not lead to any offline political actions on his part. Similarly, during the meeting on 23 February organised by the Russian Bloc and the Communist Party of Ukraine in Donetsk, some people interviewed by journalists stressed their indignation at the fact that there were no representatives of the Party of Regions (the party that the people of the Donbas consistently and overwhelmingly voted for in the previous decade) in the new government, and expressed dismay at being deserted by the party.⁴⁶

These emotions of mistrust and indignation had some grounding in the physical reality. The new environment created by the Maidan⁴⁷ was actively shaping the people's responses. For example, the people of Donetsk became concerned about the new government's strong pledge to the International Monetary Fund and the alleged impact of the Maidan on wages. Some complained of wage arrears, thinking that these arrears were caused by the Maidan. One woman, for example, stated on Gubarev's Vkontakte page that her life was much better before the Maidan and that now she had not been receiving her wages.⁴⁸ Similarly, in an interview to an English-language newspaper, Serhiy Chernykh, deputy chief editor of the newspaper 'Donbass', described how, due to the lengthy domestic political conflict, the economic situation in Ukraine deteriorated. The result of this were layoffs of employees at important industrial

⁴⁴ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 27 February 2014, 12:32, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?offset=47280&own=1&w=wall-67059574_248; <http://archive.is/rjIZG>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Z3XC5, Miting v Donetske 23 Fevralia 2014. Chto na samom dele dumaiut zhiteli Donetska, 23 February 2014, in *Youtube*, 1:22:13, Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aklurujd9A>.

⁴⁷ The wide-scale protest movement in Kyiv that demanded President Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and effectively led to his ouster.

⁴⁸ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 25 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=60&w=wall-67059574_21; <http://archive.is/7kUvM>.

enterprises and delays in the payments of pensions. “People are frightened by the Maidan”, he said.⁴⁹

The pro-Russian activists in Donetsk seized the opportunity to capitalise upon these popular emotions. Both online and offline, they sought to galvanise both mistrust and indignation to make the local people attend their meetings and rally under their slogans. To use the terminology developed in the theoretical literature on emotions and conflict, some activists engaged in “emotion-congruent information-seeking”,⁵⁰ that is, looking for and presenting information that confirmed and even amplified the local people’s emotions of mistrust and indignation at the new government. To illustrate, on 24 February, Pavel Gubarev posted a picture of Iryna Farion,⁵¹ a Ukrainian nationalist writer and political activist, claiming that she had been appointed a new minister of education, when, in fact, the new government was announced three days later and the post went to Sehiy Kvyt, the rector of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.⁵² This misinformation was circulated widely on the Internet, with some Livejournal users claiming Farion to be the minister.⁵³ This invited voluminous comments on the social media pages and blogs. For his part, Gubarev retained this mistaken belief well into the first phase of pro-Russian mobilisation: he claimed that Farion was appointed the minister of education on 3 March when he was standing outside Donetsk city administration building with his supporters. People were reassuring him that the minister was in fact Kvyt.⁵⁴ It is unclear whether Gubarev deliberately misled his followers at that stage or whether he engaged in emotion-congruent information-seeking, that is seeking information that confirmed his cognitive understanding of the situation and his emotional engagement with it.

⁴⁹ ‘Atmosphere in Ukraine’s eastern provinces seen calm - Russian daily’, in *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, 22 February 2014. Accessed via Factiva database.

⁵⁰ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, p. 27.

⁵¹ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 25 February 2014, 2:23, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=60&w=wall-67059574_7%2Fall;http://archive.is/xprM7.

⁵² ‘Who’s Who in Ukraine’s “Kamikaze” Cabinet’, in *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*, 27 February 2014. Accessed via Factiva database.

⁵³ Nikitatimka, Marsh Osvobozhdeniia, 26 February 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <http://nikitatimka.livejournal.com/2014/02/26;http://archive.is/C3XIz>.

⁵⁴ Paulusky, Gubarev v 2014 godu, Donetsk, 1 January 2019, in *Youtube*, 5:01, Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xsm6tjxepAw>

Fear of Further Violence and the 'Banderovtsy'

In late February 2014, the people of Donetsk faced a two-pronged challenge causing fear. First, the government in Kyiv collapsed and was replaced by a new one. As Petersen writes on the emotion of fear caused by radical changes of government, "structural changes such as the collapse or weakening of the political center eliminate institutional constraints and guarantees to produce a situation characterized as anarchy or emerging anarchy. Under these conditions, Fear heightens the desire for security".⁵⁵ Second, from late January to late February, Kyiv witnessed an unprecedented levels of street violence against both the Maidan protestors and the riot police. Radical nationalist groups such as the Right Sector were instrumental in this wave of violence. This presented unique problems for the people of Donetsk in that they came to fear the Right Sector and other radical groups, whom they designated 'Banderovtsy' (followers of the Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera), obsessively. As Petersen writes in the context of the Yugoslav wars, political violence is likely to lead to intense experiences that disrupt normal life: "violence transforms and heightens specific preferences, in particular the desire for flight, retaliation, and vengeance".⁵⁶ As a result, if influenced by fear, individuals may come to obsess about the chances of a catastrophe. In such situations, individuals may concentrate only on information that stresses danger and ignore information about the lack of threat. As Elster shows, "we easily *believe what we fear* [emphasis in original]"⁵⁷ in that, in addition to the fact that we naturally tend to give excessive importance to low-probability risks, feelings of visceral fear may also cause us to believe that dangers are greater than they actually are.

Evidence shows that one of the other most common refrains during the pro-Russian meetings offline and on the social media pages was indeed the threat that the 'Banderovsty' presented to the people in Donetsk. Speakers at a pro-Russian meeting on 22 February stressed the need to defend "our families, wives and households"⁵⁸ against the supporters of the Euromaidan and the radicals of the Right

⁵⁵ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Conflicts*, p. 25.

⁵⁶ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour*, p. 156.

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odzC84iFY6c>. Video unavailable.

Sector, in particular.⁵⁹ People became highly wary of giving their personal details on social media because they feared for the well-being of their families. One woman, for example, when asked to give her details, said that she feared for the well-being of her child.⁶⁰

In addition, people seem to have experienced a strong moral shock at the violence perpetrated against the special government force Berkut, tasked with the dispersal of protesters during the Euromaidan in Kyiv. This loomed large on the locals' minds. As Petersen writes, "people strongly react when members of their groups are killed".⁶¹ On 22 February, 13 wounded police officers of Berkut were brought to Donetsk, where they were met with applause and cheering crowds.⁶² As one report states, all of these officers sustained gunshot wounds. The doctor receiving the officers confessed that the traumas sustained would result in many of the officers not being able to serve in the Ministry of the Interior, and disability for others.⁶³ Some people took to social media to discuss the violence against Berkut. The pro-Berkut discussions were particularly graphic. Strong words such as "radical" and "extremist" proliferated, while Berkut officers were portrayed as completely helpless in the face of armed Euromaidan activists.⁶⁴ This further exacerbated the sense of helplessness and uncertainty in the face of perceived danger coming from the Maidan.

The pro-Russian activists sought to capitalise upon the emotion of fear at their meetings by using strong rhetoric and direct appeals to fear. As Petersen writes in the more instrumental vein, "fear levels can

⁵⁹ The Right Sector activists were instrumental in escalating violence in Kyiv in late February 2014. See V. Ishchenko, 'Ukraine Protests are no longer just about Europe', in *The Guardian*, 22 January 2014, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/22/ukraine-protests-europe-far-right-violence>.

⁶⁰ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 25 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?offset=47280&own=1&w=wall-67059574_21; <http://archive.is/OmZzt>.

⁶¹ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, p. 11

⁶² Nikitatimka, Liudi vstrechaiut Berkut, 24 February 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <http://nikitatimka.livejournal.com/2014/02/24/>; <http://archive.is/gPzWy>.

⁶³ 'Bitter Regional Riot Police Wounded in Kiev Flown Back Home to Convalesce - TV', in *BBC Monitoring Ukraine & Baltics*, 22 February 2014. Accessed via Factiva database.

⁶⁴ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 25 February 2014, 9:37, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=20&w=wall-67059574_56; <http://archive.is/Px8nN>.

be manipulated by categorizing victims as in-group or out-group”.⁶⁵ Similarly, Kaufman shows how appeals that blame another group are apt to arouse people to action.⁶⁶ During the meeting on 22 February organised by the Kharkiv-based anti-Maidan group ‘Oplot’ in Donets’k, the speakers voiced concerns about the imminent arrival of ‘Banderovtsy’ to Donets’k.⁶⁷ One of the speakers emphasised the extent of violence in Kyiv in graphic detail by claiming that his men were “shot at” as if in wartime,⁶⁸ which was also echoed at the earlier meeting of the spontaneously mobilised “Eastern Front” on the Lenin Square.⁶⁹ He repeatedly stressed that the Euromaidan activists wanted to come “to kills us” and that “we cannot negotiate with them”.⁷⁰ The activist further accentuated the audience’s emotions of fear by saying that what was happening in Kyiv was so appalling that it could not be compared to Kosovo or Chechnya.⁷¹ These fears were echoed during the Communist Party’s meeting on 23 February, where the emphasis was put on the “specially prepared gangs of ‘Banderovtsy’ and fascists”, who had now overtaken the government and were vying to be included in the state security apparatus.⁷² In the end, the fact that there was no significant street violence in Donets’k until mid-March 2014 testifies that the ‘Banderovtsy’ were a myth. Yet, one source stated that they were stopped at the border to Donets’k. It said that some of them came on foot or by car to the city and tried to storm the city library,⁷³ but this was never confirmed in any newspaper reports or on any social media accounts I have read. Despite this, people continued to obsess about danger and proliferate rumours at meetings

⁶⁵ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, p. 83.

⁶⁶ Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 29.

⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odzC84iFY6c>. Video unavailable.

⁶⁸ The Russian word “*rasstreliany*” carries connotations of shooting in wartime.

⁶⁹ ‘V Donetske neskol’ko chelovek otkryli “Vostochnyi Front” - video’, in *Novosti Donbassa*, 22 February 2014, online at <http://novosti.dn.ua/news/201781-v-donecke-neskolko-chelovek-otkryly-vostochnyy-front--vydeo>.

⁷⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odzC84iFY6c> Video unavailable.

⁷¹ J. Hughes, *Chechnya: from Nationalism to Jihad* (Bristol: University Presses Marketing, 2007).

⁷² Z3XC5, Miting v Donetske 23 Fevralia 2014. Chto na samom dele dumaiut zhiteli Donetska, 23 February 2014, on *Youtube*, 1:22:13, Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aklurujd9A>.

⁷³ Haile Rastafari, Vrag u vorot, 30 January 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <http://haile-rastafari.livejournal.com/87171.html>; <http://archive.is/DUBZr>; Yadocent, Na yugo-vostoke sozdaiutsia otriady soprotivleniia-2, 6 February 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://yadocent.livejournal.com/525094.html>; <http://archive.is/6ncmw>.

and on social media. These had an effect on spontaneous armed mobilisation which I discuss below.

Emotion of Resentment at Perceived Injustice

As Petersen shows in his work on the conflicts in Yugoslavia, resentment results when status hierarchies are rearranged, that is when one group finds itself in a subordinate position to another group, which it perceives as unwarranted and unjust.⁷⁴ Status rearrangement was strongly experienced by people during pro-Russian meetings in Donets'k. According to one injustice frame, the people of the Donbas had been seen as "subhuman" by their compatriots in western and central Ukraine. During the meeting of the Communist Party in Donets'k on 23 February, two women described themselves as "the same people of Ukraine" and yet, "we are subhuman for them".⁷⁵ During the same meeting, people complained of being labelled "provocateurs" by the central government. A man stated: "if you have a different point of view, you are likely to be called a *titushka* (young athletic men hired by the local elites to disperse protests) or a provocateur".⁷⁶ A woman writing on Gubarev's page on 27 February described her feelings:

I am troubled to the depths of my soul by the fact that these 86 people were almost sanctified [reference to 'Nebesna Sotnia' (Heavenly Hundred), those killed during the Euromaidan protests]. At the same time, around 20 February, ten people were killed at one of the mines in Donets'k. Eight of them were 19 - 22 years old. In 2004, 106 people were killed at the Zasyadko mine, but nobody has sanctified them or wrote poems and songs about them. The state is not paying millions to their families in compensation.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Petersen, *Western Intervention*; Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Conflict*.

⁷⁵ Z3XC5, Miting v Donetske 23 Fevralia 2014. Chto na samom dele dumaiut zhiteli Donetska, 23 February 2014, in *Youtube*, 1:22:13, Accessed on 20 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aklurujd9A_.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 25 February 2014, 3:26, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?q=%D0%9C%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%8F%20%D0%B4%D0%BE%20%D0%B3%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8B%20%D0%B4%D1%83%D1%88%D0%B8%20%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%BC%D1%83%D1%89%D0%B0%D0%B5%D1%82%20%D1%87%D1%82%D0%BE%20%D1%8D%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%85%2086%20&w=wall-67059574_21_r139; <http://archive.is/sg5A5>.

Other injustice frames were galvanised upon by Gubarev in his prolific posts on Vkontakte. These injustice frames revolved around the issue of “separatism” in the south-east of Ukraine. For example, on 24 February, following the unrest in Crimea, Gubarev posted a picture⁷⁸ showing, on one side, a peaceful demonstration in Sevastopol, with orderly proceedings and cheery, colourful crowds, and, on the other, a violent demonstration in Kyiv, with charred buildings and disarray on the streets. The caption to the picture reads “the double standards: Sevastopol: aggressive separatists; Kyiv: peaceful protesters”.⁷⁹ The picture evoked the fact that, following the pro-Russian unrest in Crimea, the locals of the peninsula were immediately labelled “separatist” and threatened with punishment by the new government. A woman writing in response to another post on 27 February stated in a similar vein: “Marina, I have just watched the news. I’m having a fit. Those who have seized the buildings in Crimea and put out Russian flags have been labelled “terrorists”. Those who have not yet left the buildings in Kyiv are still “peaceful protesters””.⁸⁰ These injustice frames continued to proliferate, yet they were not responsible for the spontaneous armed mobilisation.

Effects of Emotions on the Movement Organisation

As the broader literature on emotions demonstrates, emotions can heighten the salience of a particular concern and create an urgency to act on a particular desire. As Elster writes, “urgent emotions are often triggered in situations in which the cost of waiting is high, that is, in the face of acute physical danger. In such cases, acting quickly without pausing to find out more is of the essence.”⁸¹ Sociologists observe that under the influence of strong emotions such as fear people stop collecting information which disconfirms their beliefs and obsess about the dangers of a catastrophe. As a result, they are likely to fight or flight in the face of fear. I demonstrate in this section that, contrary to the more widespread claims in the neuroscience research that demonstrate risk-averse effects of fear, the people in Donets’k were

⁷⁸ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 25 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?day=01032014&offset=60&z=photo-67059574_321767804%2Falbum-67059574_00%2Frev; <http://archive.is/SEIWM>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 27 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?offset=47260&own=1&w=wall-67059574_337; <http://archive.is/NSfLi>.

⁸¹ Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour*, p. 150.

spurred to action by the strong emotion of fear and began to form self-defence units to counter the perceived threats.

The fear of the alleged arrival of radical groups such as the Right Sector from Kyiv fragmented the spontaneously organised movements in Donets'k, such as Gubarev's Narodnoe Opolchenie, and led to the emergence of small armed groups, even before the government launched a repressive attack on Slov''ians'k on 13 April 2014. In this sense, the people of Donets'k experienced fear as predicted by Barbalet, a "prospect-based emotion ... is a displeasure about the prospect of an undesirable event".⁸² This was confirmed to me in an interview with Enrike Menendez, a politically active local of Donets'k, who stated that "nobody knew if Russia would intervene, therefore, they began arming themselves ... There were 37 armed groups by mid-March". Menendez also said that some enterprise directors formed self-defence units.⁸³ There is further evidence that, galvanised by the fear of violence, people began arming themselves. During the Communist Party meeting on 23 February, a man from the "Donbas defence unit" in Abakumovo proposed full military mobilisation, indicating that his unit might have possessed arms.⁸⁴ The chief of Donets'k police Mykola Kryuchenko claimed that due to the proliferation of rumours about the alleged arrival of extremists to Donets'k, some people began forming groups who "by using force and anything at hand [homemade weapons or household items] wanted to defend their lives and property".⁸⁵ He further stated that the police received daily information that there were unregistered groups of people gathering in the city each day.⁸⁶ Donets'k city mayor Luk'yanchenko claimed that he received calls for protection from various people daily.⁸⁷ In addition, the recruitment to self-defence

⁸² Barbalet, *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure*, p. 155.

⁸³ Interview with Enrike Menendez, online via Skype, 16 June 2019.

⁸⁴ Z3XC5, Miting v Donetske 23 Fevralia 2014. Chto na samom dele dumaiut zhiteli Donetska, 23 February 2014, in *Youtube*, 1:22:13, Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aklurujd9A>.

⁸⁵ 'V Donetske ekstremistov net. Sekretariu gorsoveta pokazalos'?', in *Novosti Donbassa*, 25 February 2014, online at <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/201960-v-donecke-ehkstremystov-net-sekretaryu-gorsoveta-pokazalos>.

⁸⁶ Peter_Slyadek, various, 23 February 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <http://peter-slyadek.livejournal.com/2014/02/23/>; <http://archive.is/hOH03/>

⁸⁷ 'Mer Donetska nazval provokatsiiami prizyvy k gorozhanam vziat'sia za oruzhie', in *Novosti Donbassa*, 26 February 2014, online at <http://novosti.dn.ua/news/202041-mehr-donecka-nazval-provokacyyam-pryzyvy-k-gorozhanam-vzyatsya-za-oruzhye>.

units was advertised on various LiveJournal pages.⁸⁸ There was a recruitment into armed units in Slov''ians'k.⁸⁹ Gubarev's Narodnoe Opolchenie probably possessed arms. In his memoir *Fakel Novorossii* (*The Beacon of Novorossia*), for example, Gubarev states that he used the money from his firm's account to buy arms.⁹⁰ In a post on his Vkontakte page, he claimed to have received information about people who were "arming themselves *en masse*".⁹¹ In an interview to Lenta.ru, he claimed to have a shaky command of disparate armed self-defence units.⁹² On 5 March in an interview, he said that his followers were armed.⁹³

This presented problems for both movement coordination and for the state. The state was yet to engage in any violent repressive action against the pro-Russian protestors, but the people were already anticipating such violent action, which is congruent with my discussion of mistrust, fear and injustice frames above. Many appeals to unity and organisation were voiced both at the meetings and on social media platforms. Yet the evidence shows that these first meetings were characterised by disorder and disorganisation, which was something that continued into the early March and even beyond. The very fact that pro-Russian organisers and sympathisers had to put so much stress on unity demonstrates that right from the start

⁸⁸ Aleksei Lotov, Otriad Samooborony protiv Maidana, 25 February 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <http://alexlotov.livejournal.com/581239.html>; <http://archive.is/u4z5I>; Antimaidan Donetsk, 2020, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://vk.com/club65054850>; <http://archive.is/8gvD5>; Aloban75, Informatsiia dlia tekhn, kto zhelaet zapisat'sia v narodnye druzhiny dlia zashchity goroda ot banderovtsev, 27 February 2014, in *LiveJournal*, [blog page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <http://aloban75.livejournal.com/595222.html>; <http://archive.is/7XMzJ>.

⁸⁹ Slavianskaia Samooborona, 2 March 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://vk.com/wall-67349914?own=1>; <http://archive.is/yGBtm>; Slaviansk - Novorossia, 27 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2020, <https://vk.com/wall-65540286?day=28022014&q=%D0%A1%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%20>; <http://archive.is/j5ljE>.

⁹⁰ P. Gubarev, *Fakel Novorosii* (Moscow: Piter, 2016), p. 85.

⁹¹ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 27 February 2014, 5:09, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?offset=47260&own=1&w=wall-67059574_332; <http://archive.is/Y4dmU>.

⁹² "Moia populiarnost' - eto ikh glupost'", in *Lenta.ru*, 5 March 2014, online at <https://lenta.ru/articles/2014/03/05/gubarev/>.

⁹³ "Narodnyi gubernator" Donetska priznal, chto ego boitsy vooruzheny', in *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 5 March 2014, online at <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/03/5/7017664/>.

mobilisation was hard to control. The appeals to unity were a common refrain both at the meetings and on social media platforms. Gubarev, for example, invited participants to come to the meeting on the Lenin Square on 26 February “to introduce each other and to feel unity”. He later claimed that his supporters were very inexperienced in organising movements.⁹⁴ Gubarev then repeatedly asked any activists and sympathisers to “listen only to me”. Such appeals to unity were also voiced by Zhilin’s supporters on 22 February and during 23 February meeting convened by the Communist Party, discussed earlier in this article.

Conclusion

The literature on emotions and violence alerts us to the importance of emotions in causing and protracting conflicts. Scholars, such as Roger Petersen and Wendy Pearlman, have charted the role of various emotions in conflicts ranging from those in the Balkans to those in Palestine. This literature suggests pathways to violence that develop through the emotions of anger, resentment and fear. The emotion of fear, in particular, arises when there is a sudden disruption of the normal life, a “moral shock” and an existential threat to the communities. Fear affects how people collect information about the environment and the actions they undertake. Research shows that fearful people privilege information about danger. As an urgent emotion, fear also spurs people to immediate action, such as flight or fight. Focusing on the pre-war period in Donetsk, I have demonstrated empirically that street violence from late January to late February 2014 and the radical change of government in Kyiv produced the emotions of mistrust and indignation, fear, and resentment based on injustice frames in Donetsk. People expressed these emotions both offline at anti-government meetings and online on social media. Some of these emotions had a solid basis in reality, whilst others, provoked by the Right Sector and ‘Banderovtsy’, were not. I have therefore situated my arguments within the larger arguments about emotions made by Roger Petersen and Jon Elster. In an instrumental vein and consistent with the observations made by Stuart Kaufman and Roger Petersen, these emotions were encouraged and capitalised upon by various broadly pro-Russian activists to rally the local people under their slogans. Mistrust, indignation and

⁹⁴ Narodnoe Opolchenie Donbassa, 26 February 2014, in *Vkontakte*, [group page], Accessed on 20 February 2014, https://vk.com/wall-67059574?offset=47280&own=1&w=wall-67059574_127; <http://archive.is/m0fBq>.

resentment, however, did not lead people to arm themselves. I have demonstrated that the emotion of fear predominated and led the people of Donets'k to take risks and arm themselves, that is their response to the events was to 'fight' rather than 'flight'. It also caused movements to fragment, and activists began losing control of the forces that they unleashed.