

Book review

Astapova, Anastasiya (2021). *Humour and Rumour in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

As an offspring of the Communist system, living through the late 1970's and the entire 1980's under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania, I should confess that reading Anastasiya Astapova's book revived the spectres of the fear, conformism, and repression that used to loom large in the Romanian society. The similarities with the current Belarusian situation under Alexander Lukashenko were striking enough and the situation unfolding in Ukraine (since February 24th, 2022) did not make the writing of this review any easier. A statement that ends the "Preface" to the *Humour and Rumour in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State* summed up its academic status and urged me to carry on with the endeavour with the detached, scholarly mind that should do justice to the volume: "What has been documented in this book will remain crucial, whether for the study of Belarus or any other country with a history of nondemocratic rule" (p. vii).

Anastasiya Astapova's research was conducted at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, Estonia, benefiting from the help and support of its valuable humour research team as well as from the help of Belarusian diaspora and political activists. The author's "Acknowledgements" also point to the financial assistance for her seven years of ethnographic fieldwork and the publication of this ground-breaking research in a field and a space that proved time and again that it is difficult to approach. Some "Notes on Transliteration and Translation" from Russian and Belarusian languages and the Cyrillic alphabet are also set in the opening part of the volume to explain the adjustments made by the author to toponyms, personal names, and the translation of examples in order to accommodate the needs of an international audience.

The "Introduction" of the volume sets the tone for the entire book and raises four questions which the author attempts to answer: "Why do people in authoritarian states need humour and neglect the risk of punishment to make jokes? How do people align with or oppose state policies and practices in nondemocratic regimes? What is their attitude toward the authoritarian leader, and why do they conform to his rule?" (p. 2, my emphasis). The introductory chapter dwells on the history of the Belarusian state (officially emerging in 1991), the political, constitutional, and social facts that determined the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice to call Belarus "the last dictatorship of Europe" in 2005. The section entitled "Hidden transcript, or political folklore: humour, rumour, and the agency of Belarusians" describes the emic perspective (pp. 10-11) employed by the author, with a focus on two intertwined genres: rumour and jokes, that "perform the same function(s)": provide a vent for frustration, help the performers navigate the harsh realities, negotiate "the hardships of everyday life, and shape the shared norms and behaviours" (p. 11). Belarusians are also discussed in terms of their changed perspectives (acting submissively or passively), specific to those living under repression, thus being "not deprived of agency when choosing to support Lukashenko eagerly, work[ing] complicitly within his social contract, or protest[ing]" (p. 12).

The authentic and incredibly rich linguistic and ethnographic material was gathered by the author via interviews with Belarusians living in or outside the country, social networks, volunteering activities for Belarusian NGOs, by living among Belarusian-speaking diaspora, and via extensive travelling. It has proven to have not only a local value, but also a global one due to the fact that many of the plots and motifs encountered in the Belarusian political folklore circulate globally in other former or current authoritarian regimes. The introductory part is completed by a few notes on the gendered performance of political folklore, a survey of the most important interview themes and topics as well as an organisational tour of the six content chapters of the volume.

The themes proposed in each of the six chapters of the book rise from recurrent jokes or rumours on certain Belarusian political realities that are unfolded and contextualised in detail, allowing the reader to fully understand the (maybe) unfamiliar practices of the repressive regimes the jokes allude to. The historical data are backed up by illustrative narratives excerpted from the interviews.

The first chapter, “Why does the jelly tremble? Surveillance rumours and the vernacular panopticon” sheds light on the practices of surveillance and persecution in the Belarusian society as well as on the context in which many of the jokes and rumours on the topic found a fertile ground. Rumours usually “emerge from a lack of information from the state” and “allow concealed sentiments to enter public debate” (p. 21), sometimes in the form of “contemporary legend(s)”, “based on traditional themes and modern motifs that circulate orally (...) and are told as if they are true or at least plausible” (pp. 21-22), other times as “conspiracy theories” (p. 22). A useful distinction between rumour and other connected genres of political folklore is proposed by Astapova in relation to surveillance stories (in cafes, of mobile and landline phones, of meetings of all kinds etc.), irrespective of the rumour’s truthfulness, but rather as a means to explore their deeper meaning in relation to all concerned and society at large. Although they have different backgrounds and consequences (depending on national traumas, history, politics, and politicians), surveillance stories, especially among dissidents, are global, recurrent, and illustrative of general fear, especially for “alternative thinkers, such as the intelligentsia, foreigners, youth, journalists, and other potential dissidents” (p. 27). Some of those fears are relieved through humour, while jokes about the lack of professionalism of Belarus KGB agents or militiamen or about the bureaucracy of the special services from the border control emerge out of the existent and persistent rumours.

The second chapter, “Why do all dictators have moustaches? Political jokes in the authoritarian state”, explores the shared history of Belarus as a former Soviet state and other dictatorships around the globe when it comes to the figure of their authoritarian leaders. The author points out that the metaphor included in “moustache jokes (...) is instrumental for understanding contemporary political jokes, especially within authoritarian regimes” (p. 43) and the way people choose to manifest against them. Given the difficulties related to finding good sources of Soviet or socialist political jokes (many of which are sealed in Russian archives), the author’s effort to collect and analyse a corpus of 140 Belarusian oral jokes and their corresponding jokes referring to other nondemocratic regimes throughout the world is truly remarkable. Astapova identified sixty-seven joke plots ranging in popularity and varying in form from full recitals of the jokes to common knowledge idioms that reference highly popular jokes and even to mere punchline mentions that recall the entire scenario, depending on the context in which they circulate. The chapter documents several strategies of adaptation, the amount of joke plots focusing on the authoritarian figure, the Belarusian ethnic stereotypes, and the evolution of the joke structure “from the traditional dialogue form concluding with a punchline to the monologue structure with no traditional narrative elements” (p. 62) and to the apparently amusing quotes ascribed to the leader and frequently cited by the informants.

The third chapter, “Joking about the fear (of joking)”, attempts to answer the question “*why* tell political jokes even in the face of danger and fear?” (p. 67). Defined in contrast to autotelic jokes, which are told for the sake of humour and carry an aesthetic function (Dynel 2017: 2), political jokes are heterotelic and carry at least one additional meaning or function. “They convey the meaning their tellers and audiences believe to be true” (p. 70). The author looks at how jokes about fear convey truths and beliefs, the heterotelic messages they carry, and the forms in which they circulate (i.e. narrative jokes, conversational humour, internet joking, humorous - yet pragmatic - nicknaming, and pedagogical and practical jokes). Apart from the main functions of heterotelic jokes (namely to deliver truth and belief, as perfect metaphors for the lifestyle under authoritarian political regimes or to serve as cautionary tales among insiders), they also reinforce the hegemony of knowledge (p. 82) and uphold the existing political system, by “providing constant reminder of persecution and surveillance” (p. 83), “recirculating fears” (p. 83), and ensuring humorous outlets for outpouring the aggression against the regime.

Chapter four, “The making of the President Lukashenko’s official image and vernacular ridicule”, addresses the symbolic manipulation of people’s beliefs associated with the image of Lukashenko and “how regular people digest the repertoire of authoritarian techniques via rumour and humour” (p. 85). The official biography of the Belarusian leader, especially his birth story and the elements of his childhood, portray a working-class, paternalistic figure, defending the rights of his people and ensuring the stability of Belarus. The highly contradictory and ambiguous nature of the pieces of information regarding Lukashenko’s life or ethnic identity “seems to be a conscious technique” (p. 99) that makes such political readers “hard to read” (Cassiday and Johnson 2013: 48). The counterpart would be “the resistance against the personality cult” that leads to the emergence of “aggressive and destructive rumours and jokes” (p. 99). Thus, by means of the uncontrollable political folklore, people undermine and erode official truths, systematised worldviews, and the moral teachings imposed by them (pp. 102-103).

The next chapter, “When the President comes. Potemkin villages”, introduces a term originating from the Russian Empire which is used to describe the construction of facades or mock villages on the route of important guests in order to conceal the actual reality from a short-term visitor. Idealising Soviet realities to Western visitors became a current practice in the Soviet Union, aimed also at indoctrinating its own citizens and showing off in front of the Soviet superiors. The Belarusian political folklore exploited the Potemkinist stories, thus offering Astapova the opportunity to discuss multiple geneses of jokes and rumours as well as the intercultural circulation of the phenomenon of ‘window-dressing’ that produced jokes based on stereotypes such as the stupidity and lack of professionalism of the higher-ranking officials (p. 111). The apparent flawlessness should extend well beyond the architecture of the Alexandria village and the so-called Presidential zone to higher education research, where one cannot confess to the lack of academic expertise, and to the very life of the Belarusians who struggle to decorate their apartments and buy new cars, despite their shortage of money (p. 116), in close connection with the self-representation of Belarus before international partners from former Socialist and non-EU countries. In recent years, the ‘window-dressing’ of Belarus for the international audience was dominated by the appearance of the country as a factor of peace and stability in the region, a pretence now seriously questioned by the Belarusian involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The sixth chapter, “There is a high probability of the mustachioed dude’s victory. Election without choice”, reveals multiple voting practices alluded to in the rich election folklore in Belarus, emerging especially after the 2015 and 2020 elections. Astapova discusses the “rituals of consensus” and the highly creative mass support displayed before the elections and during the Election Day, meant “to satisfy both international observers and his own citizens” (p. 129).

The Belarusian election jokes reveal the staging and the fraud by means of absurd scenarios, often de-contextualised, while the rumours emphasise the threat posed by certain social categories (the students, the citizens voting abroad) that have a high potential for protest. The borders between different humorous genres (jokes, news, and rumour) “do not only fluctuate; they become almost irrelevant” (p. 136) in a culture defined by paternalism and “a ritualistic demonstration of loyalty, even when it is mocked” (p. 136). Astapova also sanctions the citizens’ passive behaviour that normalises such practices by “reproducing the pictures of plenty at the polling stations, participating in election fraud, or presenting folk dances on Election Day to attract visitors” (pp. 136-137).

The book is completed by a concluding chapter, “Every joke has only a shred of joke to it”. Astapova notices the proliferation of political humour in a society marked by “nepotism, corruption, and a shadow economy which results in terrible unprofessionalism, especially for those employed in state apparatus” (p. 140), in which people, surprisingly enough for those living in democratic societies, have learned “to adapt to the situation (...), to survive, learn, and benefit from it” (p. 140). Instead of acting as a tiny revolution, humour helps in reactivating fears and endorsing hegemony. Still, the 2020 elections marked a slight change of attitude, by massive protests against Lukashenko’s authoritarianism and undemocratic election practices. Jokes and metajokes do not convey the idea of fictional narratives but set up a space in which “truth and fiction merge, and one cannot distinguish between humour and seriousness anymore” (p. 141). In authoritarian regimes, both rumours and jokes transmit information about a farcical reality, about the so-called “posttruth”, in a space in which “jokes cease to be merely jokes” (p. 142).

The volume also comprises an impressive list of references, a useful index of authors and subjects and a note about the author that complete the rich scientific apparatus displayed throughout the book. The amount and quality of the research material that illustrates every aspect of humour and rumour are noteworthy.

Anastasiya Astapova’s book is a useful read for scholars interested not only in humour, but also in the history and politics of authoritarian regimes, especially in the Belarusian one. An honest and provoking, original, well-documented, and enjoyable read, the volume stands out amongst other ethnomethodological and sociolinguistic approaches of the field of humour studies.

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