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Authoritarianism from Below. Lessons from Ethnographic Studies in Belarus

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Abstract: Belarusian society is often studied through a top-down perspective. My ethnographic approach aims to explore the effective ways through which “ordinary people” express their agency to build their everyday life inside this authoritarian context. The authoritarian system in Belarus produces harsh constraints. The article explores the ways people cope with these constraints, and how they sometimes succeed within them. Three topics of everyday life are analyzed. At the dacha, people transform deprivation and drops in social standing into the expression of a social status based on work ethics and technical competences. In *subbotniki*, they transform a political ritual into a social ritual celebrating the “us.” In the kolkhoz they defend some ethics governing their lives. Fieldwork in Belarus shows that the world of everyday life under an authoritarian regime may make sense for people. This sense is not the simple reproduction of ideology. Instead, this sense is composed by people themselves through situations and routines in which they sometimes borrow from official political discourse but do not mechanically model their thoughts and actions on them.

Keywords: Belarus, dachas, *subbotniki*, kolkhoz, everyday life, dictatorship

Belarusian society is often – almost always - studied through a top-down perspective. In academic works focusing on this country, Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime is described through its apparatus, its control organs, and its media propaganda (Wilson 2011). Lukashenko was elected for the first time in 1994. He then changed the Constitution in 1996 and created an autocratic regime in Belarus. Lukashenko has been using repression against the opposition for more than fifteen years: some opponents disappeared physically, some were jailed, sometimes tortured, most of them have been victims of constant formal and informal pressures (such as threats and fiscal controls). The structure of society and social action are perceived as the consequence of the political regime. In the media (especially newspapers), in political discourse (especially western political discourse), and even in academic literature, Belarussian society is most of the time considered to be divided into three groups: the activists who support the regime, the dissidents who resist the regime, and the others, a passive and atomized society governed and alienated by the political regime¹. Concerning the last group, the discourse can be qualified as “miserabilist”² in so far as the majority of the citizens are perceived as silent victims of the system. However, very few researchers have done fieldwork in this closed country and explored effective ways through which the “non-activists” and the “non-dissidents” – the “ordinary people” – express their agency and adopt “tactics” (Certeau 1990: 60-61) and secondary adaptations (Goffman 1968: 245) in order to build their everyday life and to define life projects inside this authoritarian context.

For this reason I have pursued an ethnographic understanding of the experience of “ordinary” Belarusians for more than ten years. In particular, I worked and lived five years in Belarus. I taught economics and sociology at EHU (European Humanities University) from 1999 to 2001 and I was the French director of the Franco-Belarusian Center of Political Sciences and European Studies from 2009 to 2012. My long immersion in the Belarusian society allowed me not only to questions that I probably wouldn’t have raised if I had not personally experienced everyday life in Minsk, as well as to have good friends and different acquaintances who constituted real allies during my fieldwork.

How can we characterize the effects of authoritarianism on the everyday life of ordinary people? How do they deal with these constraints? How can we qualify the spectrum of attitudes adopted within such a system?

In this paper I will expose my three different works on Belarus and their stakes: the dachas, the *subbotniki*, that is, voluntary work on Saturday, and the condition of kolkhoz worker. Grounded in this fieldwork, I then formulate some propositions that attempt to characterize everyday life under this post-Soviet European dictatorship.

The everyday life of ordinary people at the dacha

In my earlier work on Belarus, I described the everyday life of urban citizens through their practices at the dachas and in the kitchen gardens. I worked on this theme for five years, until 2004. My work was based on about 40 life stories. I showed how the “ordinary people” tried to deal with harsh economic, social, and political constraints in these territories and how they invested their search for happiness in these places (Hervouet 2003; 2009).

What is the link between the authoritarianism and the vegetable gardens? In fact, everyday life under Soviet and post-Soviet dictatorship can be characterized by different procedures of dispossession of the self. I think that we can speak about the “etatization of time,” as Verdery wrote about Romania in the 1980s (1996: 39), stressing the direct and indirect ways used by the authorities to control every moment of the everyday life of the citizens (e.g. shortages, queues, water cuts, etc.), but also about “the etatization of space” and about the “etatization of work.”

I speak about the “etatization of work” because the general economic situation and rules of the state define the conditions of work; in Belarus the model is organized around the suspicion and the control by the hierarchy, whose members often explain the difficulties of the country by asserting the laziness of the population. Some facts can illustrate this reality. Since 2002, you can be fired very easily if you do not express your political docility (Bennett 2011: 167). During the economic crisis of 2011, the police controlled the workers outside of their workplace, in shops, to fight against absenteeism (Hartja 2011). Recently, Lukashenko has forbidden the workers in the forest sector from resigning, because of the huge state investments made in this sector (Preiherman 2012).

I therefore think that we can speak of the “etatization of space” in the socialist city by taking the socialist city of Minsk in the 1990s as an example. The everyday life in the town is frequently characterized by long distances to reach the workplace or the shops and markets, especially for those who have no car (Hervouet 2009: 28-30). (This has probably diminished somewhat over the last ten years due to the increasing number of cars and the increasing number of supermarkets offering a large range of products, as in western consumer societies.)

At last, we can speak of the “etatization of time” – partly linked to the “etatization of space.” The authoritarian regime limits the autonomy of market economy and indirectly imposes constraints on the way people organize their everyday life. For example, it is sometimes relatively easy to find one product or another one in the town and it sometimes requires time to get what you need. The everyday life is also made of different actions towards the administration and the bureaucracy, to get a document for one’s job, or for one’s apartment (Hervouet 2009: 29-44).

These details (the rules at work, the negotiations with bureaucrats and the distances in the town) reveal the presence of the state in the everyday life, not just as a police organization, but as an ensemble of devices regulating the common world. This ensemble of devices partly prevents people from appropriating their self and the close environment around them. The self, intimacy, and the personal environment are very dependent of the state rules. The universe of dachas, on the contrary, offers multiple possibilities to restore the self. The people I met very

often used stereotyped expressions to voice their feelings and interiority: “It is quiet,” “I feel better here,” “the fresh air is good for health,” and “I sleep better when I live at the dacha”... The dacha is a place which can be totally organized and controlled by people, far away from the different constraints of the urban life.

More generally, the kitchen garden may be considered as a tool kit of symbols, gestures, stories, and representations: individuals draw from it disparate elements, adjust them in different ways according to the configuration of their social and personal trajectory, and thus can resolve or soothe tensions which weigh on them. In 2002 and beyond, I met several times with Pavel Ivanovitch, an old retired worker living in a small town and regularly speaking to me about the tragedy of the collectivization and the misfortunes of the Soviet Twentieth Century. I was introduced by Anton, his grandson and a friend of mine. According to Anton, his grandfather was literally obsessed with the garden surrounding his house. Everything had to be ordered according to his views and he often criticized severely his son-in-law or his grandsons if any wild grass had appeared in the garden, or if the earth had not been carefully raked. For Pavel Ivanovitch the kitchen garden was not only an economic and domestic resource but also a symbolic territory on which he projected the moral greatness of his family. The beauty of the garden is perceived as the manifestation of the family’s *ethos* that is courage and honesty (Hervouet 2007). Indeed, the garden is an index in which the individuals select some components, organize them in various geometries, in order to constantly negotiate their identity.

In particular, for the people who endure difficulties at work in the factory due to the economic crisis, gardening appears as a symbolic conquest because it restores meaning to an environment that arouses anguish and even restores a model of fairness in a trajectory whose breakdown is lived as unfair and depersonalized. In 2000, I spent some days in Babrouysk, the seventh largest city in Belarus, population 228,000. I met Maria and Piotr, who were both around forty years old and were working at the Belshina Tire Factory. Piotr was a skilled metal work whereas Maria was accountant. For them, the 1990s were synonymous with disillusion and anxiety because the factory was experiencing important difficulties. Piotr said:

Every day we go to work but we never know if we are going to turn around and go back home, work two thirds of a day, if we are going to be paid for two hours of work.

Gardening is equivalent to order a piece of universe. In this context of economic crisis, this activity helps to restore the sense of dignity. In the garden, work was reappropriated and this activity helped to restore a positive image of oneself (Hervouet 2003). Gardening is not just a way to make ends meet. In a context of deep economic, social, and symbolic changes, the garden finally makes a certain reality desirable and concentrates the meaning of life when everything in the environment is blurred and uncertain. The garden opens up a space allowing an elaboration of lines of action, and simultaneously closes or reduces the necessity to resort to other spaces implying other strategies, such as protests.

The ordinary participation to a common ritual

In successive fieldwork, I studied the contemporary Belarusian “*subbotniki*.” I worked on this theme from 2006 to 2008 with a Belarusian colleague, Alexandre Kurilo. Our work is based on interviews and observations. We analyzed how ordinary people made this political ritual theirs (Hervouet and Kurilo 2010). Instituted from the outset in the USSR by Lenin, the *subbotniki*, or “communist Saturdays,” are days on which the workforce is mobilized free of charge on a supposedly volunteer basis – generally on Saturday (*subbota* in Russian).

According to Lenin, the people work with enthusiasm because the work is not a means to achieve a personal goal but the work has got a collective meaning. As a consequence, the participation to the *subbotnik* is the manifestation that the “new man” appears. Lenin (1919) writes:

A tremendous significance attaches to the ‘Communist Saturdays’, which were instituted by the workers themselves. Although only a beginning, it is a beginning of extraordinary importance. It is the commencement of a revolution which is more difficult, more fundamental, and more real than the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, because it means victory over petty bourgeois egoism, and over the evil customs which the doomed system of capitalism has left as a heritage to the workers and peasants. Only when this victory is completed will Socialist discipline be established, and only then will Communism be, in very truth, invincible.

In the USSR there was one national *subbotnik* per year. From the 1970s, it was organized around the 22th of April, the day Lenin was born. A great part of Soviet citizens participated in these *subbotniki*. For example in 1970, according to the sociologist Christel Lane, 140 million people took part in the “Communist Saturday” (Lane 1981: 110). The rare analysts of these practices considered that people participated in *subbotniki* either because they believed in the discourse from the top (Chase 1989), or because they were constrained by the power from the top (Kaplan 1965). After the collapse of the USSR, the *subbotniki* disappeared.

In Belarus, Lukashenko reinvented the *subbotniki* tradition (Hobsbawn 2012). Every year the day is dedicated to a national cause: the orphans, the national library, the monuments commemorating the war, etc. Like in Soviet times this political ritual has to express national solidarity around a common cause. The existence of *subbotniki* today in Belarus allows the researcher to question the former interpretations formulated in terms of constraint or enthusiasm: is the attitude of people under dictatorship mechanically dictated from the top, in terms of adhesion or opposition? Or can we qualify in a different way the attitude of ordinary people under the authoritarian rule? Concerning *subbotniki*, Alexandre Kurilo and I (2010) showed that ordinary citizens we met participated for reasons other than those promoted by the authorities (e.g. selflessness, national solidarity).

In fact, they express critics towards the *subbotniki* – and the different types of critics have a long history in Soviet society. People are conscious that the participation is not genuinely voluntary: some informal sanctions can be imposed, especially at work. People are conscious that the participation is not genuinely unselfish: you can obtain some goods or services in return of your participation to this day. During my fieldwork these testimonies were significant. For example Irina, a 50 year-old primary school teacher, smiled when she evoked her last participation to a *subbotnik* in a kolkhoz, because she had come back home with forty kilograms of carrots. Moreover people often think that the collective effort does not serve a national cause (the orphans, the culture, etc.) but that this event is a way for the state to extort money from the workers. Irina’s son, Dimitri, worked in a little private enterprise. The enterprise had to pay the amount of wages for this worked day, not to the employees, but to the authorities. According to him, *subbotniki* were just a means for the government to withdraw a new tax on citizens. Nevertheless, in spite of these critics, the people I met very often expressed some attachment to the *subbotniki* and could hardly imagine suppressing them – even if they thought that it could be desirable to organize them in different forms. Anyway some studies show that the nostalgia of *subbotniki* is obvious in areas where they were abolished, like in Russia (Shevchenko 2009: 41).

Here is the way we explained this apparent paradox. People cope with the constraints imposed from the top by developing forms of solidarity at a local level: my director has to mobilize employees, otherwise he could have sanctions; I participate to the *subbotnik* to support my chief; in return, I won't have any sanctions, I could even earn something in return (some goods, some services, some arrangements with my hierarchy). But these exchanges are not formulated as exchanges, but as a system of gifts and counter-gifts. As in Marcel Mauss' approach, this can build the feeling of solidarity (Mauss 1993). The participation in the *subbotnik* appears as one element in a chain of gifts (of goods, of services) relating people at a local level, and as the product of this interdependence. It is what we called "practical solidarity," to distinguish this effective form of solidarity from the abstract one, which the authorities aim to develop through their ritual. The participation in the *subbotniki* is described as an expression of solidarity, not because of the performativity of the political discourse, but because of the actions adopted from below to cope with the orders from above.

This solidarity is expressed in social rituals organized at the local level, which echo the political ritual but which are not the mechanical consequence of it: after having worked for the *subbotnik*, people often gather and have a drink and share a meal, going on a picnic. Very often in interviews the *subbotniki* are linked to these good moments when people feel concretely that they belong to a group. These meetings are a way to celebrate their collective, the feeling to belong to "us."

But this alternative form of experiencing the *subbotnik* is not in opposition to the political regime, nor in opposition to the people from above. These *subbotniki* belong to the forms of life characterized as "being *vnye*" by the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak:

these styles of living generated multiple new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated and controlled by the state, although they were fully made possible by it (2006: 128).

Yet, although the solidarity experienced during the *subbotniki* is not the consequence of the discourse of the authorities, it nevertheless echoes it, thereby even helping to legitimize the dictatorial regime. As a matter of fact, there seems to be an association with discourses between the type of the political regime and the feeling of solidarity among people. People consider that under Soviet rule and Lukashenko's rule there is solidarity, whereas under post-Soviet Russian rule people feel isolated.

As a consequence we can see how the Soviet-type authoritarian regime generates ambivalent feelings and emotions. People don't trust politics in the sense that they don't believe literally in the political discourse, but the way they negotiate with constraints from the top produces some emotions which are experienced as important and legitimate. The arbitrary and partly cynical rule from the top is transformed into a meaningful practice for the individual from below.

The condition of the kolkhoz worker

In my research on dachas and *subbotniki*, I met people who live in big or small cities of Belarus. But the rural life was out of my focus. Thus, finally, I am now exploring the condition of kolkhoz workers. The situation of Belarus is specific in post-Soviet countries because here the collapse of the USSR didn't provoke rupture in the countryside. Lukashenko has maintained the system of kolkhoz and there was no liberalization and privatization like in Russia. The status of kolkhoz workers is ambivalent. Lukashenko very often makes announcements where he openly supports kolkhoz workers, their efforts, and their successes (Karbalevitch 2012: 264). But at the same time kolkhoz workers appear as the more

economically, socially, and culturally dominated group in Belarus: urban people often express their disdain towards the people from the countryside and the students just do not want to go to work in the kolkhoz after university. Moreover, the directors of kolkhoz are nominated by the authorities and have two goals: to develop agriculture and also to ensure political docility and social order. I conducted fieldwork in the Belarusian countryside in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2012 – about two weeks per year. My aim is to describe the “arts of resistance” and the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 2008) adopted by the kolkhoz workers.³

The fieldwork was not easy. People did not dare speak with a foreigner. They probably felt socially dominated in the interaction. Like the French peasants studied by Bourdieu in the 1960s, they had incorporated the representation of their social inferiority and felt some shame when speaking of them (Bourdieu 2002: 117). But they were also sometimes obviously careful or even frightened because they did not know what they had the right to say, as if they thought that expressing criticism towards the hierarchy or authorities could provoke problems. Actually, people described some aspects of the everyday life in the kolkhoz but did not dare speak precisely of the conflicts within the kolkhoz and more broadly about politics. In this context, people who live in the margins of the kolkhoz can be precious allies. Among different people, I met Volodia, a 40 year-old carpenter living in a village, 50 kilometers far from Minsk. It was in November 2012. He was not a typical kolkhoz worker. He was working in a private enterprise; he was raised in a town named Babrouysk, he didn't drink any alcohol because he was a former alcoholic. But he knew very deeply the world of the kolkhoz: he was working with the administration of the neighboring kolkhoz; he met people of the village every day. He said that he shared their sensibility and their representations of the politics and of the society: for example, he openly supported Lukashenko, knowing that as a foreigner I probably did not share his point of view. We had conversations during several hours and even in the Russian *bania* with some of his friends. One of them was working as a technician in the kolkhoz. Volodia's discourse was developed because this person expressed a deep reflexivity on his own experience. I crossed his remarks to observations and interviews made elsewhere and I can formulate some first propositions.

The authoritarian regime of the post-Soviet type produces constraints and at the same time produces ways to overcome difficulties. What are these constraints? Even if the group is still heterogeneous, we can characterize the condition of the kolkhoz worker by its very low wages, by its low social status which often arouses disdain in the society, by the low level of material comfort in habitations compared to the level reached in the towns, and by the very difficult conditions of work. The social control in the countryside is bigger than in the towns and the kolkhoz workers are under the dependence and the domination of their kolkhoz director, named by the political power. How do these individuals cope with these constraints?

People often have some material resources. The state dispossesses people from the capacity of being autonomous; in return, the individual commits some pilferage (some wood, some gas, and some food). There is an informal economy which is structurally necessary for the people to live decently in the kolkhoz. Everyone is implicated in such practices and exchanges and everyone, even the director of the kolkhoz, knows how it happens. Moreover, sometimes people have some social resources. The mobilization of social capital, often among the kinship, offers different ways of improving social status. It is hard to live without mobilizing these resources. At the same time, these practices often imply adopting illegal activities. The state may do it on purpose. This idea appears in discourses: the state controls everybody because everybody potentially can be punished. People play with the system but still are very weak. They are conscious that the feeling of emancipation from politics is an illusion. Nevertheless, they often consider that they can build a good life if they work a lot. More precisely, they think that it would be worse if the system were different. Indeed, they never really evoke the fact that the rules could be changed. In fact, at first they often consider

that it is not as hard in Belarus as it is in other countries. They consider that the system prevents them to become “rural proletarians” (Allina-Pisano 2008: 189) with a precarious existence without any protection neither any possibility to build projects, as it happened in Russia or Ukraine.

Then they consider that it is not as hard in Belarus today as it was in the past. As a consequence, there is today no real reason to complain. The social trajectories are composed of periods of difficulties, of amelioration, of deterioration. The people I interviewed very often referred to the long past when almost nothing was possible. The current constraints are numerous compared to the western world existing at the frontier, but these constraints are very small compared to the difficulties of the past. In the past, the kolkhoz worker had no passport, no wage, even sometimes no food. The country belongs to what the historian Timothy Snyder calls “the Bloodlands,” which experienced the yoke of Stalin and of Hitler (Snyder 2010). The stories about collectivization and the Nazi occupation are recurrent. The old people, who were the witness of these days, but even their children and grand-children, refer to the violence and trauma in the past. In contrast, today he has little freedom, but he has a passport, a small wage, food, and for the children the possibility to go to school or even to university.

When they complain, they criticize the low wages, the *blat*,⁴ and the privileges, but they don't judge the whole system. They just seem to regret that they are not themselves at the place where they could benefit from the system. The authoritarian regime is judged as the guarantee of the stability of the rules. The people I met want the world to be different for them, but not necessarily for all. In such a closed world, they sometimes feel some pride when they succeed in their lives. The rules and constraints are so strong that the sense of dignity sometimes seems to be proportional to the capacity to overcome these constraints. Without strong constraints it is impossible to overcome strong constraints and, as a consequence, impossible to consider oneself as a real person. There is no compassion for the people who drink too much, or the unanchored people who are not able to build their own world within this hostile environment. Besides these analyses try to define the way that integrated kolkhoz workers evaluate the world and do not take into account the point of view of these alcoholics living in the kolkhoz, and sometimes working for it. I crossed paths with these people in my fieldwork, but it was always impossible to have an interview or even a discussion with them, except some trivial words.

Moreover, the discourses and attitudes seem to have gendered forms. For some workers who have a status in the collective and some reputation, the authoritarianism does not prevent you from becoming a man: it allows it. In contrast, democracy does not allow you to become a real man--a genuine man--because the life is too easy and no effective hardship can discriminate the real men and the others. As proof, my informant Volodia referred to the rights of gays in western democracies as what is considered the feminization of the masculine world. The scandal is not that some opponents were put in jail and tortured in Belarus; the scandal is that the gay people will be able to get married in France. In the discourse, the ultimate explanation is rooted in cultural differences, the Russian soul, as a destiny of suffering and a form of grace and salvation within this condition. In brief, the authoritarian rule is a source of constraints, but also the source of the stability, which enables the people to build their life and to find a meaning in it. The arbitrary violence exerted by the state towards some citizens have no importance as far as these citizens do not belong to the “us,” as far as these measures do not threaten the close world of the kolkhoz.

Conclusion: Propositions to characterize the Belarusian authoritarianism from below

The authoritarian system produces harsh constraints: the scarcity of goods, the bureaucratic complications, and the huge social control. The people have to cope with these

constraints, and they sometimes succeed in it. At the dacha, they transform deprivation and drops in social standing into the expression of a social status based on work ethics and technical competences. In *subbotniki*, they transform a political ritual into a social ritual celebrating the “us.” In the kolkhoz they defend some ethics governing their lives and finds means to fight against what Bourdieu calls the “symbolic death,” that means an “existence without necessity” (Bourdieu 2003: 342, 344), an absence of status, of identity in the eyes of others. Fieldwork in Belarus shows that the world of everyday life under an authoritarian regime may make sense for “ordinary people.” This sense is not the simple reproduction of ideology. Instead, this sense composed by the people themselves through situations and routines in which they sometimes borrow from official political discourse but do not mechanically model their thoughts and actions on them. Even if they complain of the low wages and of the bureaucratic complications, they know these rules and they often do not want to change these rules radically.

They think that they live far from politics because they don’t trust politics and because they don’t openly support the regime. They are not activists, but they are not opponents, even if they don’t always live in conformity with the norms and the expectations of the regime. They even often judge negatively the political opponents. The regime is built on violence but it diffuses in the social body the belief that it is possible to build its own life far away from violence. As a consequence, the opponents who are the victims of the state violence are perceived not as victims but as cynical people who do not want to act as the rest of the population, and as people who wait for rewards in counterpart of their actions, eventually from abroad. They knew that they will be repressed so they don't have to complain of being repressed. I very rarely heard any sympathy or any compassion towards the political opponents. On the contrary, they are often judged as responsible for their own destiny.

Therefore living far from politics is also a way to live within the politics. “Ordinary people” may interpret their small victories in everyday life as sources of dignity. By overcoming difficulties thanks to their own competencies and their networks, they feel capable of navigating in their environment, which gives them a sense of dignity. But these moral emotions are limited into a small world composed by the kinship and rare friends. These small victories open the possibility of action within its own individual life but they close the possibility of action in the collective and public space. This ambiguity of opening/closing is constitutive of everyday life in contemporary Belarus. They seem to believe that if the rules change for all, it won’t be possible to change their own life. But if the general environment does not change, some opportunities exist to build its own life, its own world. "Ordinary people" I met don't often say that the authoritarian regime formally prevents them from being happy. Their everyday is founded on the will of the individual change, but on the refusal of the global change.

¹ My terms are the same as these used by the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak who refers to “activists,” “dissidents,” and “normal people” to describe the composition of the Soviet society (Yurchak, 2007: 103-104).

² I use the category of analysis defined in France by Grignon and Passeron (1989) when they classify the discourses on the dominated cultures, especially the culture of the working class.

³ This research is financed by the Conseil régional d’Aquitaine (France). It is a work in progress - so I propose some descriptions, some propositions, but I don’t have definitive conclusions.

⁴ “*Blat* is the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures” (Ledeneva 1998: 1).

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