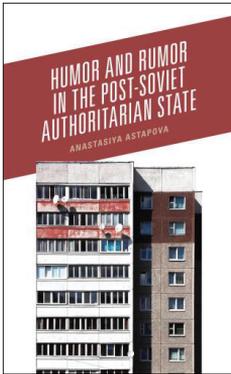


# BOOK REVIEW

## JOKING ABOUT THE FEAR OF JOKING



Anastasiya Astapova. *Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. 184 pp.

Anastasiya Astapova is a Belarusian scholar with a specialisation in humour and folklore studies. The reviewed book titled *Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State* (2021) is based on her doctoral dissertation, “Negotiating Belarussianness: Political Folklore betwixt and between”, which she defended at the University of Tartu in 2015. Although the data was collected over five years ago, in her book the author manages to actualise the discussion of classic Belarusian political jokes in the current situation by adding a preface addressing

the political changes and making connections to the recent events in conclusion. These slight edits transform the book from a mere thesis adaptation into a reconsideration of the topic timely published during the wake of protests and repressions in Belarus. The political framing is present even on the book’s cover – white background with a crimson stripe on it resembles the Belarusian national white-red-white flag used by the opposition. The same colour combination can be seen on the facade of the socialist building also depicted on the cover. This iconic architecture creates a visual connection to the post-Soviet everyday reality, expanding the context of the discussion to all post-Soviet countries. However, the main focus of the book remains on Belarus.

The 184-page book consists of six chapters that can be perceived as interconnected but independent parts. Additionally, there is a preface, acknowledgements, notes on transliteration and translation, conclusion, references, index, and the section about the author. It is an easy-to-read book that does not lose its scholarly depth for the sake of understandable writing. The book is based on the materials collected during ethnographic fieldwork of seven years with Belarusian diasporas and people inside the country. It offers quite an exhaustive overview of informal negotiation of political life in an authoritarian country. It raises and partly answers a whole set of questions: “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 non-democratic regimes? What is their attitude toward the authoritarian leader, and why do they conform to his rule?” (p. 2).

The author starts the introduction with a quote of a Soviet joke from a book by a Nobel Prize-winning Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich. From the very beginning, it links

the Soviet legacy and the Belarusian regime, emphasising their similarity. This creates a good intro, as in this book Belarusian post-Soviet political humour and rumour are not analysed in isolation but are put in a temporal and local continuum – as they are compared to other examples of similar folklore of different times and countries. It is very important and convenient that Astapova provides a short but descriptive excursion into Belarusian history and political context in the introduction. It helps the reader to get acquainted with the country's background to understand, at least partly, prehistory and conditions for the emergence of political folklore described in the book. On page 4, she even provides a table of the main dates in Belarusian history starting from the ninth century and until 2020. Of course, it is a skim list, but it helps a foreign reader place Belarus and its folk on the axis of European history. Two types of political folklore are discussed in this book: rumours and jokes. Negotiation of both genres in one book helps to demonstrate how “their plots and functions intertwine up to the point of being indiscernible” (p. 11), presenting them as manifestations of one socio-political phenomenon. Despite putting them together, Astapova discusses them separately, in different chapters that can be perceived and understood independently. Some of the chapters were previously published as separate scholarly articles (Astapova 2016; 2017a; 2017b).

Although the first chapter's heading, “Why Does the Jelly Tremble? Surveillance Rumors and the Vernacular Panopticon”, refers to a joke, it is primarily dedicated to exploring surveillance and persecution rumours. In this chapter, Astapova discusses the contextualisation peculiarities of international rumour plots to the Belarusian reality. Jokes are not a mere coping with stress, but they also serve as a constant reminder of the constant surveillance. She claims that recognising surveillance rumours is necessary for understanding the context in which political jokes appear and explaining the fear of joking and people's hesitance to share some information even with a researcher. Discussing the special services' never-ending surveillance helps to understand on what principles this regime is based and connects the panel of jokes with the Foucauldian idea of the panopticon (Foucault 2007). Another interesting point is that she also discusses mixing rumours of general surveillance with traditional prejudice and beliefs. Her analysis of jokes is fascinating. She does not study them in isolation as a unique phenomenon, but maps them temporarily by making connections to the Soviet culture of political anecdotes. She also creates a horizontal understanding of transitions, plot exchanges and archetypes of jokes and rumours between different undemocratic regimes around the globe.

This interconnectivity is explored in the second chapter, “Why Do All Dictators Have Moustaches? Political Jokes in the Authoritarian State”. In this chapter, Astapova analyses 140 joke texts she collected from Belarusians during her field research. She illustrates how these jokes are related to socialist and Soviet humour and reveals that the majority of modern Belarusian jokes focus on the presidential figure and how they resemble many other jokes about dictators.

The third chapter, “Joking about the Fear (of Joking)” discusses the jokes about political persecution in everyday communication, as well as narrative and conversational *metajoking*. Metajoking is “referencing other political jokes while joking or joking about the fear of joking” (p. 16). Understanding this phenomenon helps to understand how and why people in authoritarian regimes continue making political jokes despite the threat of persecution. Moreover, this chapter sheds light on the reasons behind the political passivity of Belarusians, which already became notorious. For an outsider, it might be unclear why people remain passive and silent when their rights are violated. However, with careful study of fear expressions in the form of jokes and rumours, Astapova opens up people’s motifs for absenteeism and sedentary citizen behaviour.

Chapter 4, “The Making of the President: Lukashenko’s Official Image and Vernacular Ridicule”, examines the construction of the biography and paternalist image of Alexander Lukashenko. To present a bilateral picture of his image, Astapova discusses widespread reactions and the rich folklore created in response to this presidential image. She explains how certain biographical elements become significant both for the official promotion and folk criticism of the president. Astapova also addresses how dictatorships survive and adapt to people’s new demands by deconstructing Lukashenko’s image. This analysis helps to understand better what type of public needs he fulfils. For instance, she connects jokes about his inability to speak any language with people’s demand to have a president who would bridge national language with the Russian-speaking world. But this is just one of the examples. In particular, she deconstructs the rumours about Lukashenko being a firm leader and a powerful, sexually active masculine figure. Finally, she discusses how these rumours are created and what functions they serve.

Chapter 5, “When the President Comes: Potemkin Villages”, addresses the rumours about the special preparations that occur when Lukashenko visits a town or a village in Belarus. The author employs the Potemkin facades’ concept to describe how Lukashenko’s regime functions. Showing people’s vernacular attitudes to this order of things and rules of behaviour, she suggests that “these flawless performances do not only target Lukashenko but also other observers. More than that, the drive to achieve flawlessness, so essential in the interaction between Lukashenko and his people, spreads beyond the political performances and becomes the foundation of Belarusian everyday life” (p. 115). This chapter describes well the reality in which hundreds of thousands of workers in state-owned enterprises lived. This part of the book helps to understand why the strike of the state factories’ workers was so important for the protests in 2020, both for economic and symbolic reasons. In 2020, the viral video of Lukashenko talking to a crowd of factory workers that chant “Go away!” marked the end of the Potemkinist reality in Belarus; eventually, he had to face real people that were not preselected for the meeting.

The closing chapter 6, “There is a High Probability of the Mustachioed Dude’s Victory: Election without Choice”, addresses the online and offline rumours about the falsification of elections in Belarus. It is an excellent choice to put this discussion at the end of the

book, as it draws a line, demonstrating the interconnection of humour and rumour – how they can blend so closely that sometimes it is impossible to distinguish them. Anastasiya Astapova says this in the book, and it is important to reiterate in this review that the functions of political folklore can sometimes be contradictory; for instance, Scott's (2008) claims that jokes create a counter-narrative to the official culture. Behind any ideological hegemony, a 'public transcript', there is a hidden transcript that consists of various forms of disagreement and anti-hegemonic thinking and behaviour. But it is important to understand that apart from being a form of political resistance that undermines and erodes the authoritarian regime, its other function is to normalise the regime and help people adapt to the challenges. This allows the regime to hold on for a more extended period of time. And this is what Astapova profoundly negotiates in her book.

This book is an excellent introduction to Belarusian reality. It allows to understand how the regime and the Belarusian people existed before the wave of protests in 2020. For an external reader, it may explain the absurd and strange traits of Belarusian contemporary political culture. For the internal reader, not exclusively Belarusian but also a post-Soviet, this is an opportunity to have an estranged look at the familiar reality and understand how the constituent parts of political folklore are interconnected, that they are not just jokes, but essential elements of the system with their own functions. The book can undoubtedly be recommended for reading to those who know very little about Belarus and those who are already immersed in the context. Due to the fact that the discussion of jokes about politics touches various topics, this book can serve as a kind of sightseeing tour of modern Belarus.

However, the focus in this book, as well as in the Belarusian political folklore, is shifted to the figure of the dictator Lukashenko. Astapova writes (p. 16):

*As I demonstrate starting from the very first chapter, most jokes and rumours concentrate around the authoritarian figure of the Belarusian president, and most of the following chapters will evolve around his image. Rather than repressing victims, most authoritarian regimes nowadays rely on making their key figures look competent via a repertoire of propaganda techniques to manipulate citizens' beliefs.*

Thus, the socio-political reality of the whole country in this optics is reduced to Lukashenko and the popular reactions to his figure. This describes only a part of reality – how people adapt to the official culture. But this is certainly not everything worthy of discussion in today's Belarus. A significant layer of social and political life is excluded from the picture, and in this concern, the book represents the authoritarian regime rather than the country itself. This is a drawback if the goal is to immerse into the Belarusian reality. But for the aims set in the book, Astapova has done a brilliant job. The study finished in 2015 was published in the form of a manuscript after the protests of 2020, which attracted the attention of the world community to Belarus. This connection, as

it can be supposed, can draw additional attention to this book, and it is deserved since this book, through the study of political folklore, talks about the political structure of the country until 2020. The regime's peculiarities that were discussed in rumours and joked about led to such massive protests and an unprecedented level of political repression, violence, and torture. The understanding of what terror was hidden behind all these hilarious jokes provokes intense emotions and provides additional aspects to consider while reading.

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