

INTRODUCTION



THE LAST DICTATORSHIP IN EUROPE

Belarus has emerged from communism in a unique manner in Europe. Today, it is described by many analysts as the “last dictatorship in Europe” (Benett 2011; Wilson 2011). Its recent history can be condensed into several key dates. On 25 August 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Belarus voted for independence. This was a major turning point. Indeed, the territory currently occupied by Belarus was incorporated into Russia at the end of the eighteenth century and the USSR in the twentieth century, with part of the country absorbed by Poland under its Second Republic (Snyder 2003). In fact, until 1991, Belarus had enjoyed only a very short period of independence. Proclaimed under German occupation on 25 March 1918, the Belarussian National Republic was very short-lived (Wilson 2011: 94), ending on 1 January 1919. It was replaced by the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia (SSRB), which was incorporated into the USSR three years later. The dissolution of the USSR was declared on 8 December 1991. After a period in which the political elite sought to make quite a radical break with the Soviet past, Alexander Lukashenko embarked on a “conservative revolution” in the country. After becoming the democratically elected president of the country in 1994, he established an authoritarian regime (Linz 2000) in 1996, proudly asserting the Soviet legacy and reviving certain ideological precepts and some of the interventionist administrative and policing practices of the defunct empire (Lallemand and Symaniec 2007). “Everything [occurred] almost as if Sovietism had survived without the Communist Party” (Marcou and Pankovski 2003: 18). First, Lukashenko promoted a “socially oriented market economy” (Lallemand 2006: 203) that was largely collectivized. Second, he established strong continuity with the Soviet past. In May 1995, for example, he secured approval, by referendum, to abandon the red and white

national flag and reintroduce the red and green Soviet banner, but this time without the hammer and sickle. The authorities reintroduced emblems similar to those in force during the Soviet era. The Bolshevik Revolution continued to be commemorated on 7 November, and the KGB kept its name. Felix Dzerzhinsky (cf. pp. 60, 87), founder of the Cheka, was personally respected and glorified to the point that a bust of the secret police chief still stands in the city center. In 2004, a new museum dedicated to his memory was inaugurated on Belarusian soil. Last, the elections that have punctuated the country's history since the start of Lukashenko's presidency have been marked by repeated challenges from civil society and international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), but also by systematic repression.

The workings of this regime are traditionally described, by scholars and the media, as being based on a "vertical power structure," whose implementation is based on a strictly controlled administration and a powerful police system that represses opponents. Consequently, the academic literature analyzes the authoritarian functioning of the regime (McMahon 1997; Eke and Kuzio 2000; Goujon 2002; Karbalévitch 2012; Hervouet 2013c) and the characteristics of the "state ideology" (Lallemand 2006; Leshchenko 2008), as well as the forms of opposition (Shukan 2008; Goujon 2009) and dissidence (Symaniec 2006; Perchoc 2006; Bigday 2017; Kryzhanouski 2017). The regime is also thought to remain in power thanks to its populist social policy, based on subsidizing often-inefficient economic sectors with the aim of securing the loyalty of a large proportion of the population, and in this way, to a certain extent, "buying" its submission (Wilson 2011).

Without underestimating these essential characteristics of the political machinery in present-day Belarus, my research focuses on practices "seen from below" in order to show, based on the analysis of a singular case, how an authoritarian regime relies on forces other than police violence and redistribution, and permits a form of permeability in its ideology that is capable of absorbing different types of messages in order to perpetuate the political and social order. If we consider, in accordance with Max Weber (2019: 109), that order remains unstable if it is based solely on fear or on "purposively rational motives," we can seek to identify other forms and degrees of legitimation employed by the regime in order to remain in power since 1996. The focus of my research is encapsulated by the following question: how can a system, while broadly imposing severe constraints, produce—sometimes simultaneously but indirectly and unintentionally—acceptable or even desirable forms of life and resulting modes of attachment to the authoritarian regime? It entails approaching "politics from below" (Bayart 1985: 345) based on an ethnographic approach. The aim is therefore to contribute to renewing the approach to analyzing the reasons for the perpetuation of an

authoritarian regime (Hibou 2017) by shifting the focus from its institutional and policing operations toward everyday practices.

OPEN INTERPRETATIONS OF CLOSED SOCIETIES

This investigation is consistent with certain trends that have developed since the 1970s in the historiography of communist regimes in Europe. These reflections examine and criticize the “totalitarian paradigm” (Studer 2004: 40) that formerly prevailed, with a view to understanding how societies function. This approach, initially inspired by political philosophy (Arendt 1951) and political science (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1961), is advocated by certain historians who place the emphasis on the “ideocratic” dimension of these regimes and who set out to “reassert the primacy of ideology and politics over social and economic forces in understanding the Soviet phenomenon” (Malia 1994: 8, 16). This approach to totalitarian regimes considers the forces behind their perpetuation by focusing on how the power is disseminated downward from the top to the bottom like a machine activating its “cogs” (Heller 1988). It examines the omnipotence of the one-party state, its institutions, and its ideologies, while assuming them to have performative power. It also investigates the propaganda and indoctrination employed to make the population docile, in addition to the omnipresence of policing organizations, violence, and terror on an everyday basis (Werth 1999b: 85).

Two historiographical schools of thought challenge this approach by putting into perspective the heuristic scope of the notion of totalitarianism (Traverso 2001), perceived as an “obsolete model” (Rowell 1999: 150) or a “masking concept” (Pudal 2009: 164). On the one hand, the American school, described as “revisionist,” advocates a social history “seen from below,” which is partially exempt from political and ideological determinisms (Werth 2001a), with a particular focus on “everyday Stalinism” (Fitzpatrick 1999). On the other hand, certain German historians of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), operating from the perspective of *Alltagsgeschichte*, have set out to “put the people, the ‘ordinary’ individuals, the ‘little guys’ (*die kleinen Leute*), back at the heart of history; i.e., to represent or study them as players in their own right and not just consider them as the silent victims of major changes or structures” (Kott 2002: 226). In this way, both these streams of research examine “everyday life under communism” (Zakharova 2013) and “everyday life in dictatorships” (Lüdtke 2000). In France, these approaches resonate particularly strongly in the research on “a social history of power in communist Europe” (Kott 2002a). They focus in particular on “the social history of the Soviet dictatorship” (Depretto 2001), and on “day-to-day” communism (Kott 2014) or “concrete manifestations of

totalitarianism” (Rowell 2006) in the GDR. This historiographic sensitivity, which places the emphasis on “minuscule lives” (Lagrave 2011: 12) and ordinary personal experiences in communist societies, has informed a diverse range of works on the links between daily life and power in the communist societies of Europe (Bertaux, Thompson, and Rotkirch 2005; Neculau 2008; Koleva 2012). They sometimes explore specific spheres of activity such as consumption (Ragaru and Capelle-Pogăcean 2010), cultural practices (Yurchak 2006) such as rock music (Zaytseva 2008), education (Droit 2009), inhabited areas (Crowley and Reid 2002), the relationship with time (Krakovský 2018), and recreational activities (Giustino, Plum, and Vari 2013). In this manner, they implicitly examine the idea of the blurring of the distinction between the public and private spheres in this type of regime (Field 2007; Christian and Kott 2009). These approaches to the social and political dynamics of Eastern European societies are echoed in the “anthropology of socialism” (Sampson 1991) documented in areas situated behind the Iron Curtain, as in Hungary (Hann 1980; Lampland 1991; Burawoy and Lukács 1992), Poland (Hann 1985; Wedel 1986), Romania (Kideckel 1993; Verdery 1996), Bulgaria (Creed 1998), and the USSR (Humphrey 2001; Ries 1997). These anthropological works offer “a valuable contribution in undermining common assumptions about passive, cowed, inert populations at the whim of communist powerholders” (Hann 1994: 235).

Extending the Weberian tradition that distinguishes between power (*Macht*) and domination (*Herrschaft*) (Kott 2014: 261), these historical and anthropological studies show that although the government’s power and influence in the communist societies of Europe permeate into the heart of everyday life, it neither determines nor controls it totally. “The authorities are omnipresent but not necessarily effective” (Kott 2002a: 11). In order to analyze the relationships of individuals with the authorities, these perspectives first invite researchers to move beyond the “use of binary categories” (Yurchak 2006: 5) and the “problematic dichotomy” (Lüdtke 1990: 13) contrasting oppression with resistance, and the guilty with the victims. Second, they encourage a departure from “Manichean antitheses” that consider the stability of these regimes to be maintained either by violence, “by guns and tanks,” or by successful indoctrination manifested by “forms of collaboration and acceptance, or even of acknowledged support for the regime” (Lüdtke 1998: 7–8). These historical and anthropological studies show that in the communist societies of Europe, there is an extended array of attitudes that reveal “the complex entanglement of consent and dissatisfaction, adherence and refusal, compromise and passive resistance” (Werth 1999b: 90), “behaviors of inertia, avoidance and nonconformity” (Werth 2001a: 128), the joint existence “of situations of hope and despair, uncertainty and relaxation” (Lüdtke 1998: 8), and “multiple types of reactions, [ranging] from deliberate

cooperation and unquestioning identification to resistance and opposition, including opportunistic adaptation, apathy and withdrawal into the private sphere” (Kocka 1995: 84).

These studies propose an “open interpretation of closed societies” (Lagrange 2011: 13). They place the emphasis on the “‘privatization’ of the instruments of coercion” via denunciations, negotiations within enterprises, local arrangements concerning the implementation of directives imposed “from above,” and the detachment of individuals from discourses legitimizing the regime (Verdery 1991: 426–428). They insist on the arrangements, the room for maneuvering, the permeable aspects of the system, and the ambivalences in the different types of actions, without evading the forms of supervision, control, and regression that are characteristic of these regimes. Therefore, as in the East German context analyzed by Konrad Jarausch, the common pattern for these studies is to “criticize, in uncompromising terms, the very real inhumanity of the regime while *simultaneously* formulating a differentiated analysis of the partly ‘normal’ ordinary existence that was possible” in these societies. “This is the condition under which the individual experiences and structural explanations can be unified in one common general interpretation” (Jarausch 2003: 94).

My research is consistent with this movement. Although these different works focus on the communist era, they are also enlightening when investigating a postcommunist context presenting significant forms of analogies and continuities with the Soviet past. More broadly, my thinking on the forces behind the perpetuation of the authoritarian regime in Belarus builds on the questions recently raised by the “political anatomy of domination” that is attentive to the “subtleties of the mechanisms of legitimation.”

The legitimacy granted is never complete and obviously has to compromise with discontent, worry, partial rejections and recriminations; it is less synonymous with adhesion, support and active participation than with accommodation; it primarily reflects a relative and intermittent judgement because individuals do not constantly ask themselves whether the state or the government are legitimate and because the rules by which they assess normality can be plural and refer to different (even contradictory) hierarchies of values. (Hibou 2017: 3)

A POLITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF RURAL BELARUS

What sphere would lend itself to reflection on everyday life under the authoritarian Belarusian regime? My previous research on dachas led me to contemplate the different ways in which ordinary citizens create relatively acceptable or even desirable worlds in an economic, political, and cultural environment characterized by very strong constraints (Hervouet 2009a).

In it, I showed how ordinary city dwellers, by putting their energies into the tending of vegetable gardens, put their “desire for happiness” (*volonté de bonheur*; Castel 1968: 21) into practice by loosening the shackles of the system without actually breaking them. I then turned my attentions toward a more paradigmatic sphere than the vegetable gardens tended by city dwellers. Indeed, the kolkhozes and rural communities in general are particularly relevant to an analysis of everyday life under the authoritarian Belarusian regime. Even though they differ from the French situation in many respects, rural Belarusian worlds can also be characterized by the superimposition of professional and domestic scenes, closer mutual-acquaintance relationships than in towns and cities, and domination based on personal relationships (Mischi and Renahy 2008: 17–18). In Belarus, rural areas have remained collectivized and are governed by systematic policies of control. Viewed from outside, the collectivist system can be defined by political constraint, social discipline, and economic control. The Soviet-type collectivist model was abandoned throughout the European postcommunist area, except in Belarus. Indeed, after 1989, the collectivist Eastern European and then Soviet agricultural systems were reformed in different ways (Dufy and Hervouet 2017). The maintenance of this model in Belarus is a little-known aspect of European societies, as illustrated in the following statement by Jean-Louis Chaléard (2010: 31), a geographer specializing in rural communities, who declares that “the collectivist system has disappeared almost everywhere,” except “in Cuba, despite recent measures, and in North Korea.” This vestige of the past, which is perceived as destined to disappear, has not been the subject of detailed political and sociological analyses. There is practically no mention of rural areas in publications devoted to Belarus, especially in economic analyses. In this academic context, I considered Belarus to be a living laboratory for the analysis of everyday life under dictatorship in the collectivized rural world.

Kolkhozians and countryfolk in general are subject to a hierarchy in the economic and social world, which is also a political and cultural hierarchy. At first sight, they appear to have absolutely no room to maneuver or influence their own destiny. From a “*misérabiliste*” perspective (Grignon and Passeron 1989), kolkhozians could be seen as the paradigmatic product of domination. Scorned by the city dwellers and controlled by the authorities, they are characterized by their humble social standing, their meager economic resources, and their silent and passive acceptance of their situation. In addition to being economically exploited, they could also be considered culturally alienated due to their defense of their own oppressor. Indeed, the countryfolk are often perceived as the propagators of a conservative culture (Goujon 2009: 178) and the president’s natural supporters. From this perspective, countryfolk would be characterized only in a negative manner, due to their lack of eco-

conomic resources, pride, self-sufficiency, practical know-how, and dignity. In this way, my ideas run counter to this top-down approach while avoiding the pitfalls of “populism” (Grignon and Passeron 1989). I am seeking to understand the forms of life that occur in rural areas, from the inside, without assuming my contacts to be motivated solely by the power of a hegemonic domination. I therefore focused on practices aiming toward “self-ownership” (*propriété de soi*; Castel and Haroche 2001) employed by people who, because they are never encountered and because their worlds remain unobserved, are denied any power to define their own projects or appropriate their own existences. These means of self-reappropriation are always fragile, however, and we should not remain silent about the social structure that shapes them. Indeed, they form part of social configurations that are objectively marked by forms of material, statutory, cultural, political, and symbolic domination.

This approach requires an examination of the authoritarian regime at the “grass-roots” level (*au ras du sol*; Revel 1989), and the development of a “political anatomy of detail” (Hibou 2017: 2). It justifies the adoption of an ethnographic approach. This direct survey method is based on traditional observational, interview, and case-study methods, but differs by placing the researcher in long-term, mutual-acquaintance contexts “in which the investigator can develop personal relationships with the interviewees who have also forged personal relationships with each other” (F. Weber 2009b: 5). I spent five years living in Belarus, between 1999 and 2013. This long presence in the country enabled me to build friendships with people who subsequently became strategic allies in my search for interviewees living in rural areas. These allies therefore put me in contact with their family members living in rural communities or in small towns surrounded by kolkhozes. The fact that I was introduced to them by known people allowed me to gain the trust of my interviewees and operate in different regions of Belarus. The interviews were occasionally conducted in a structured manner, using a tape recorder, but were usually carried out informally. I initiated discussions about kolkhozes and rural communities, not only in formal face-to-face settings with interviewees chatting to the sociologist about a subject that had been clearly defined in advance, but also in numerous everyday situations (family meals, discussions about someone’s working day, comments about the neighborhood, chats over a shared bottle of homemade wine or vodka, while relaxing in a *bania*—a Russian sauna—etc.), when I latched onto discourses about everyday life in rural areas as they arose, and sought to steer these discussions, to the best of my ability, in the direction I wanted. Between 2006 and 2013, I conducted around forty interviews in different parts of Belarus, with younger and older people, working and retired people, kolkhozians, self-employed people, and teachers in agricultural high schools. The robustness and depth of the material collected enabled me to describe kolkhozes

and rural areas as viewed from within. I set out to understand how people in these places constructed worlds that they considered acceptable, without these actions and desires being merely a reflection of the power structure.

It is first a question of an economic ethnography. Considering that “concrete economic practices play an active part in power struggles and power relations” (Hibou 2017: xiv), there was a need to understand “how the most banal economic dispositifs and economic functioning of everyday life simultaneously involve mechanisms of domination” (Hibou 2017: xii). To this end, the survey needed to be painstakingly based on material aspects (budgets, domestic chores, job requirements, timetables, family schedules, etc.) and then related to other spheres of activity (family and neighborhood relationships, organizational hierarchies, relationships with the government), while placing them, via a biographical approach, in a broader temporal context. Examining the rural condition in terms of “interconnected worlds” (*mondes imbriqués*; Dufy and Weber 2007: 19), my approach is therefore situated at the confluence of an economic sociology, a sociology of work, a rural sociology, a sociology of the family and kinship, a sociology of the lower classes and even a sociology of the collective memory. But the aim is also to understand, from this microscopic perspective, the ordinary attitudes to politics and the potential forms of attachment to the authoritarian regime. This ethnography is therefore also a political ethnography (Katz 2009). The thoughts and representations of my contacts are rooted in the daily practices that are an integral part of domestic, professional, and village life. As in the analysis of northern French workers’ attitudes to politics by Olivier Schwarz (1991: 79), my approach sets out to obtain “a very indirect ‘knowledge,’ revealed by traces, which focuses less on positions and attitudes than on underlying forms of *rapport* with politics, as can be inferred from materials which are all-too-often abstruse and incomplete.” I perceived the influence of politics in behaviors and discourses that, in isolation, bear no relation to it, but that, when combined and interconnected, may reveal coherent conceptions of what is fair and unfair and of the power struggles within society. I collected concrete accounts of life situations, life stories, complaints, criticisms, and judgments on social organization. I needed to find ways to bring out indigenous and uncensored comments about life in the kolkhoz, to consider them as “symptoms” (Schwartz 1991: 79), and then to infer—from fragments, contextualized, and sometimes very down-to-earth descriptions—representations of the world which are seldom verbalized and rarely systematized in reflexive discourses. To address political issues, I reflected on the nature and meaning of practices at grass-roots level, considering that the political horizon of these practices could be glimpsed through everyday utterances and acts that, at first sight, are far-removed from politics: the cultivation of vegetable gardens, shady dealings at work, family discussions, neighborhood

tensions, working conditions, etc. I raised the subject of politics (almost) without talking about politics.

This book revolves around the following reasoning. First, I address rural communities “viewed from above” by analyzing the methods of governing the collectivized countryside in contemporary Belarus (chapter 1). Then, by adopting the methodology of multisite ethnographic sociology (chapter 2), I turn my attention toward practices “viewed from below.” I describe the different types of available resources (chapters 3 and 4), followed by exchanges and interdependencies (chapter 5) that enable these worlds to be envisaged as systems. I then analyze how these configurations produce acceptable or even desirable forms of life, based on the satisfaction of material needs (chapter 6), membership of supportive groups (chapter 7) and the defense of dignified ways of living (chapter 8). These forms of life, indirectly produced by the economic and political constraints imposed by the authorities, ultimately echo the expectations and practices of the regime itself. They generate a specific moral economy and expectations of the authorities, which must protect—by violent means if necessary—the fragile rural worlds from certain threats embodied by the figures of the profiteers, idlers, and moralists (chapter 9). In this way, the local aspiration for order converges with the governing power’s desire to perpetuate the system (chapter 10).