

Everyday life in rural Belarus. In the shadow of the last kolkhozes

**A Taste for
Oppression
— A Political
Ethnography
of Everyday
Life in
Belarus**

Ronan
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How can a system that imposes several broad constraints produce acceptable or even desirable ways of life, and loyalty to the authoritarian regime? Ronan Hervouet is trying to find an answer to this conundrum in his book on everyday life in Belarus and he seems to succeed. He studies the countryside governed by collective farms, the *kolkhozes*. Earlier, between 1999 and 2013, he collected data that he published in his earlier book, *Dacha Blues*, on summer cottages – life in Belarusian countryside. Ten years later, he returns to the theme, taking a wider perspective on everyday life and livelihoods in Belarusian villages. The motto for this new publication comes from Alexis de Tocqueville’s book *Democracy in America* (1835–40): “The love of order is cofounded with a taste for oppression”. Hervouet came to think about this maxim when listening to a Catholic priest in the village of Mosar in 2005: “Many people talk about democracy and other similar things. Yes, democracy is good, I do not dispute that, but who said that democracy should mean a lack of discipline?” (p. 211)

In his research, the farming system and agricultural policy are seen “from below”. The author wants to show that the authoritarian regime relies not only on police violence and redistribution politics. There are also other forces to preserve the political and social order. Hervouet suggests that even if the system requires citizens to be loyal to those in power, it also offers them a way of life that they can accept. First and foremost, it promises them certain liberties, which are controlled not by the elite but by local moral codes.

The researcher distances himself from the totalitarianism paradigm, preferring to watch history from the level of everyday life. He accepts Alf Lüdtke’s² point of view on communist societies that stability in such a society is maintained “by violence, by ‘guns and tanks’ or by successful indoctrination.” (p. 4) He also rejects the alternative explanation of a social contract between rulers and those ruled. According to this explanation, the leaders of a country obtain social order by giving material benefits to the citizens, who accept not participating in politics. This is too simple, thinks Hervouet, and turns the focus onto feelings of solidarity and communality.

Hervouet lived in Belarus for five years, enabling him to build relationships with locals and to interview people more than once. He made qualitative interviews in different parts of Belarus; the visits to these localities were not long, because of restrictions set by the authorities. He succeeded in collecting a fine set of qualitative interviews with brief stories, describing the features and dilemmas of everyday life in rural Belarus, and informing among other things about how law and order are entwined with local manners and norms.

THE BOOK BEGINS WITH a short but interesting introduction to the economic system of Belarus (pp. 11–12). President Alexander Lukashenko calls it “market socialism”. Polish economist Oskar Lange already developed the idea of such a system in the 1930s.³ He tried to link Marxist economic analysis to the neoclassical economy and combine socialism with market mechanisms. Similar thinking has inspired reforms in various communist countries, such as China in 1970s, Vietnam in 1980s, and more recently Cuba. According to Roj Medvedev,⁴ Lukashenko has drawn his inspiration from the Chinese model. The dilemma of post-socialist economic policy is to ensure that opening markets guarantees both the effectivization of economy and the just distribution of the prosperity produced. Perhaps it is strange to think that a dictator like Lukashenko would care about justice. However, justice is needed to legitimize the system. What is more, a strong state is also needed to be able to guarantee that the system functions. Lukashenko’s ideal is a strong, authoritative state with a hierarchic system of power. The president himself, at the top of the system, is personally the final guarantor of the system. The countryside and its kolkhozes is a key part of the system, being in fact the president’s favorite area. Just before taking up the presidency in 1994, he was the director of a state farm in Gorodets for seven years.

Belarus preserved collective agriculture at a time when its northern neighbors, Latvia and Lithuania, dissolved and privatized their collective farms. In 1990, one fifth of the working population was still employed in agriculture. The crash of agriculture in early 1990s was similar in Belarus to that in other post-Soviet countries: Production fell by 23% in four years. Belarus succeeded, however, in recovering faster than other post-Soviet countries. It exported increasing amounts of butter, cheese, milk, and flax, above all to Russia. Livelihoods in the countryside started to improve, even if problems were still great enough: in spite of heavy investment, the level of salaries in agriculture was low; production costs stayed high in comparison to Western Europe; machines broke down; work discipline was weak; and finding new markets in countries other than in Russia did not succeed. Russian markets have been the lifebelt for Belarus, even if they are a shackle as well. While Russia has succeeded in intensifying its agriculture in recent decades, export prospects have turned doubtful for Belarus. This was one of the reasons



BELARUS IN IMAGES

The photojournalist Dean C.K. Cox has worked for several years on a long-term project documenting the daily life in Belarus: here a selection of photos from the project, exhibited in Sweden, the UK and Hong Kong.

Dean C.K. Cox has been working in more than 50 countries for more than 25 years, primarily covering the former Soviet Union, Europe and East Asia.

Note: The photos are not from the reviewed book.

Continued. Everyday life in rural Belarus

why Belarus has become more and more dependent on Russian political decisions – the process that has been tragically proved by the collaboration of Belarus with Russia in its war against Ukraine.

IN BELARUS, THE AVERAGE farm size has been increased by fusions and modern life has been advanced in rural areas by building “agri-towns”, concentrating flats and services in the central villages of the kolkhozes. Many such reforms are simply a continuation of Soviet politics; for example, agri-towns were already a part of Nikita Khrushchev’s reforms in the 1960s. Also, the tradition of Soviet *subbotniks* (a day of voluntary work) and rural folk festivals were revived in Belarus.

Hervouet is told that many people in the villages support Lukashenko and the system he represents. He works with the enigma: What makes people and workers with hard work and small incomes support the president? Part of the explanation lies in their background: their experiences of very poor lives, often coming from places that suffered from war. Simply having food and basic safety fulfills their core wishes. Furthermore, the system today allows them opportunities to earn some extra money. They have the right to own a farming plot, which makes them partly self-sufficient and gives them the opportunity to sell products. Occasional incomes are received by working for pensioners and others who need help to plow land and to cut firewood. In addition, distilling and selling alcohol, even if formally illegal, provides an additional income for many. Also, the collective property supplies an employee with material benefits and services. An employee may rent agricultural land or a tractor, or buy seed grain, at advantageous rates. Furthermore, it is often acceptable to steal something from public property. Hervouet got evidence on this from a local carpenter: “On the kolkhoz everyone steals. Anyone can also control anyone else. People steal fuel, but they also steal seeds.” (p. 72)

This interview supports Alina Ledanova’s⁵ theory on *blat* in Soviet economy, the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures. A theft may be based on a wordless contract, a common understanding between workers and employers. Using a tractor on a private plot can take place before the formal working hours if the employer turns his head away. During harvest time, workers may take (without permission) one sack of potatoes for their household. This is forbidden by law but can be accepted according to local morality. I met a similar case in Russian Karelia in 2004, where a (privatized) sovkhos leader told us that a tractor driver “naturally” takes fuel for his own use, because his salary is so low.⁶ Fifteen years after the system change, this Karelian farm still continued to work like a Soviet collective farm. And in Belarus the practice still continues ten more years later!

The book gives a many-sided picture of everyday life: it analy-

ses the resources in a kolkhoz; it describes impacts of alcohol consumption and the presence of prostitution in village communities; it gives examples of people on the margins of society; and it discusses interrelationships and values in the village community. It also discusses the question of how the Stalin era affects life today. All this is useful for any reader who wants to get a fresh picture of a rural community in Belarus. The picture is deepened by introducing types of people who do not adjust to the lifestyle of a collective farm, and do not want to contribute their own effort to support the model. The author names three such types: profiteers, idlers, and moralists (pp. 179–192).

ACCORDING TO THIS scheme, a profiteer is a person who uses his or her position to get rich. For clarity: you are not a profiteer if you steal a little from kolkhoz property, as long as other people do not suffer for it. But you are a profiteer if you steal without thinking about the common interest and if your theft threatens the solidarity in a community. Even some of the kolkhoz directors are thieves. The leader of country has been ready to set limits to the corruption of these leaders. Some of them have been prosecuted and condemned.

An idler is described as person that lacks the willingness to work. Some idlers are beneficiaries of charitable practices. Alcoholics are the largest and most problematic group of idlers. They fail to work satisfactorily in a kolkhoz; they are perhaps dismissed but rehired a few weeks later due to the shortage of labor in the countryside. A dismissed worker can always find a job when his head is clear again. He can move to another kolkhoz or help a pensioner to chop firewood. But normally he returns to his old work because no alternative workers exist in the neighborhood. This is one reason for using violence as a punishment. Simply, violence may seem to be the only effective punishment, it is argued.

Profiteers and idlers are seen as lacking morals, but there are also moralists whose morality differs from the local one. Hervouet presents two sorts of moralists. The materialist morality of urban people characterizes *dacha* owners. Another type of morality is adopted by representatives of the political opposition and

human rights activists. According to a local point of view, both of those types are dangerous because they are questioning the foundation of livelihoods in the villages.

These three types embody the challenges that kolkhoz workers face in Belarus. By taking a position on such persons, local inhabitants construct their own judgement on what is acceptable and what is not, what is a good life and what kind of morality it requires. Hervouet (p. 201) ends by considering Edward P. Thompson and James C. Scott's theory of moral economy. Moral economy is above all interested in two things: in the principles of a good life, and in the relationship between leaders and led. The principles of a good life are first and foremost justice, dignity, and respect. In one way or another the countryfolk are able to follow these principles in spite of the poverty of their lives. These moral codes, however, are endangered both from inside and outside, and they need support to defend their righteous world – they expect the authorities to convert, or possibly punish, the figures who jeopardize this social order.

THIS IS AN INTERESTING passage. The above-mentioned opportunities for additional incomes are important not only for livelihood but also for dignity. To steal from the property of the common farm leads from time to time to overreactions and endangers moderate equality. Leaders have to accept it, in order to allow the led to keep their dignity. On the other hand, local morality is jeopardized by people who do not care about local norms and violate them. The resulting disorder needs corrective measures and punishments from both the local leaders and the leaders' leaders.

Hervouet interprets the prevailing patience in the Belarusian countryside as a choice for which there are sensible reasons. It is not the "atavistic conservatism of countryfolk, nor the mechanical efficiency of the regime's ideological discourse". The best choice for rural people is often to maintain the world unchanged, if they are only able to do so. At least it guarantees basic safety, and some freedoms, and in addition a form of justice that the local morality has adopted. This patience is also observed in the Russian context, analyzed by Coenen-Huther.⁸ Hervouet concludes his thoughts about moral economy with a quotation from Didier Fassin: "Moral economy provides an understanding of how a system of exploitation can survive even when local principles of justice prevail."⁹

Let us return to the village of Mosar, where a Catholic priest spent his later years. He worked against alcoholism, to improve the environment and to revive religious life. He did a lot and encouraged the villagers to do voluntary work to renovate and build new things in the village: a graveyard, paths, and sport fields, among other things. In a neighboring village called Paris – thus named by French soldiers in Napoleon's army escaping from Russia – he organized the building of a 30 meter-high "Eiffel Tower" with a cross on top. In addition, he established an ethnographic

museum to give information about peasant life. In a word, the priest contributed greatly to life in the village and to its touristic value in Belarus as well. He became known as a benefactor all over the country. Studying this priest is a key to understanding how a certain order in everyday life is reached, and how it is linked to the representation of the past (p. 219). Authoritarian power cannot only be supported with material benefits supplied to citizens. The system also needs a moral justification, which the priest helped to generate.

AS A WHOLE, Hervouet's work gives valuable information on life in kolkhozes, on the attitudes of villagers and their possibilities for action. It informs the reader not only about Belarus in present times but opens a way to understand better how collective farming could work in Soviet times in Belarus and also in other places. The data was collected some years before the huge demonstrations in Belarus following the presidential election in 2020. We do not know how the situation changed during those processes. In any case, the analysis in the book helps to understand why the demonstrations did not spread much into the countryside. Hervouet is continuing his work, and we can hope to hear more about his results later. While we are waiting for the time when anybody can travel freely to Belarus, it is worth reading Hervouet's work. If you are not interested in theoretical issues, you will certainly find interesting sections containing interviews that give an insight into local thinking. For scientists, the book offers an interesting contribution to research on the post-socialist transition, also bringing the theory of moral economy to a post-Soviet context.

Ronan Hervouet works at the University of Bordeaux as a member of the Centre Émile Durkheim. Durkheim worked there in the faculty of social philosophy for 15 years, at a time when sociology was not yet an independent science in France. Durkheim's heritage can be seen in Ronan Hervouet's research. ✕

Leo Granberg

Professor Emeritus at the University of Helsinki
and Uppsala University