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BELARUS, MECHANICS OF A DICTATORSHIP

Lallemand, J.-C., Symaniec, V. (2007). Biélorussie, mécanique d'une dictature. Les petits matins, Paris, 255 pages.

"Belarus represents a typical case, a successful example of the suppression of democratic counter-governmental forces in a society; this is exactly what numerous rulers and not only ordinary dictators dream about"
— Lallemand et Symaniec (2007)

Jean-Charles Lallemand, b. 1973, is a Doctor of Political Sciences at Paris Institute of Political Studies, a researcher of Russia and Belarus, a co-editor of Perspectives biélorusses bulletin (together with Virginie Symaniec), an author of many articles on Belarus and Russia and a rare researcher from the French-speaking world who explores Belarusian elections as well as local and national authorities.

Virginie Symaniec, b. 1968, is a writer, a publicist, an artist, a theatre expert and a Doctor of Theatre Studies (Sorbonne, Paris), specializing in Belarusian culture, language and theatre. An author and a co-author of books on Belarus (Symaniec, 2003a; Symaniec, 2003b; Goujon et Symaniec, 1997), she is running a department of the *l'Harmattan publishing* house, which produces books about Belarus.

BELARUS, MECHANICS OF A DICTATORSHIP, written by a political scientist Jean-Charles Lallemand and a theatre researcher Virginie Symaniec, came to life as early as in 2007 almost unnoticed in Belarus. The bold name is probably the major reason, as it is unusual for Belarus to name books, especially political ones, like this. The lack of translation comes as another reason, as well as a popular opinion of Belarusian political researchers that the French view on politics in Belarus cannot suggest anything new or relevant. Quite the contrary, in France the book drew attention of the Eastern Europe and post-Soviet culture experts, as it was a first book targeting the political system of Belarus both in an analytical and publicist way.

Previously, the Belarusian topic had been predominantly covered by books on history, country, language or cultural studies (Goujon et Symaniec, 1997; Du Castel, 1997; Richard, 2002; Dépelteau et Lacassagne, 2003; Symaniec, 2003; Grandazzi et al, 2006; Drweski, 2002; Lapatniova, 2001; Goujon et al., 2001) or by general articles.

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Noteworthy, *l'Harmattan* publishing house and its special series on Belarus is the focal point for the Belarusian studies in today's France, including political studies. This series is publishing both books of Belarusian scientists working in France (many of them are former students of the French-Belarusian Department of the European Humanities University) and profound French researchers, e.g. Bruno Drweski, Virginie Symaniec, Alexandra Goujon, Jean-Charles Lallemand etc. Since the opening of the series in the late 1990s, about ten books on Belarus have been published.

Taking a consistent interest in Belarus, both Virginie Symaniec and Jean-Charles Lallemand visit the country on a regular basis to carry out surveys. Moreover, the young researchers have been engaged in editing the *Perspectives biélorusses* bulletin since 1996, a unique French-language project to cover politics and culture of today's Belarus. The authors' historical and anthropological expertise provided a solid foundation to support their analytical and critical approach.

One should also keep in mind that Virginie Symaniec is an expert in the history of the Belarusian culture and theatre, a particularly effective prism to understand the mentality and the political culture of Belarusians. Jean-Charles Lallemand has his own experience with Belarus too as an author of a publication (Lallemand, 2006) on the 2006 elections and the pre-electoral situation as well as mechanisms of the acting president's political survival. We believe this article deserves some special attention and a translation to Belarusian. Therefore, having different angles of expertise, both of the authors, however, had been well-equipped to write the book with their clear vision of the issue, the Cartesian rationality and the knowledge accumulated during their efforts with *Perspectives biélorusses*.

The authors' choice to name their work as "an essay" makes it easy to oppose the criticism from the point of "hard" classical political science, the ideal of which would be a bone-dry analysis, free of any publicist trends. By virtue of the genre, the book should not be subject to strict rules applicable for academic monographs. The French essay tradition (also in political field) is based on a rather liberal and, sometimes, very subjective interpretation of events as well as the style synthesis of science and journalism. This is exactly the case with the book by V.Symaniec and J.-C.Lalleman.

The essay is composed chronologically. The first chapter describes the attainment of independence and a period of fragile democracy when Belarusians, as the authors believe, actually touched democratic freedoms and had probably the first chance in the 20th century to take part in free and democratic elections in 1994. Then a chapter on the emerging Belarusian authoritarian model and Mr. Lukashenka's antiparliamentarianism follows. The authors focus mostly on analysis of the roots of the fact, rather than its description, and come up with a number of explanations of the events (p. 14–15, 21).

Both domestic (lack of civil society and, correspondingly, the weakness of parties and the opposition as a whole) and external reasons are mentioned: the Russian factor constantly appears as a permanent background of the paper.

In line with the Western democratic tradition, the human rights violations and the slow development of the local civil society constitute another focus of the paper. The French researchers are skeptical about the Belarusian government's declarations about their respect of human rights. No real human rights protection is possible without independent trade unions, movements and parties. The abovementioned institutions failed to emerge under Lukašenka's rule, something that makes statements on democracy obviously declarative. Asked by a French journalist during an interview "*How is the human rights situation developing for Belarusian citizens after 2007?*", Virginie Symaniec responded: "*What kind of citizens?*" to stress that it is premature to talk about Belarusian *citizens* as long as basic civil rights are not secured (Symaniec, 2010).

Particularly interesting and offbeat looks the chapter on the presidential despotism and the state system of Belarus which is seemingly social and socialistic, but in essence is capitalism in its vicious version. In this chapter, Lallemand is taking a critical line on the presidential rule and highlighting threats of this model for fragile and inexperienced new democracies. Given the weakness of vital institutions, checks and balances, the fragile democracies usually degrade to authoritarianism if opt for the presidential model. The chapter "*The non-existing social state*" is backing the thesis about the illusiveness of socialism here, apparently replaced by a capitalistic model under the pressure of neighbouring Russia quite a few years ago (p. 16, 113–115).

The treatment of Lukašenka's regime as a dictatorship by the authors is also symptomatic (p. 13–16). Though unlike in classical cases, the President took the office through popular voting rather than putsch or coup, however, a classical monarchy with a strong vertical subordination came gradually to stay. Violence and suppression of the opposition along with intimidation of media, movements and parties, single courageous leaders, systematic arrests of oppositionists and electoral fraud all together constitute another feature of the dictatorship. Just as Latin American dictatorships of the 20th century, today's Belarus has experienced disappearances and abductions of people linked to opposition. Noteworthy, common references to "dictatorship" are quite conventional for the French political tradition; the situation is different in Belarus, as here the term of "dictatorship" has historical connotations and is used very cautiously, overwhelmingly in the oppositional discourse.

Besides, the essay is characterized by a relevant and interesting comparative perspective. The Belarusian realities are always put into a more general global, European or regional context. The despotic and conservative Belarus is not always an exception. The authors suggest taking a more critical and

open-minded glance on other states, first of all Russia, where a trend is noticeable towards a peculiar power usurpation in the hands of the president, the prime-minister and “Yedinaya Rossiya”, a block created by them (p. 21). As Symaniec and Lallemand are stating in the preface, “Belarus is not a Nazi Germany, or Stalin’s USSR, or Pinochet’s Chile, or military regime in Argentina, not even Miloševic’s Serbia. The president of Belarus is not responsible for so many deaths as Putin’s Russia implicated in Chechen war, however it is a dictatorship of one man who states independent of all parties” (p. 13–14).

Even within the EU, some member states indicate features of a political culture similar to that of Belarus. For example, some members of Polish elites take a much more conservative stance on issues like sexuality, Christian values in politics etc. than Belarusians. The prime-minister of the democratic European Italy also controls almost all the media, and the state controls Internet-cafés, effectively limiting the access to the web. Therefore, the authors take a broad look on processes in Belarus and underline that to some degree they fit the pattern of international logics and certain trends on the world arena (p. 21–22).

For example, after 2001, numerous Western countries reinforced security policies, sometimes at the expense of democracy. This broad approach and the analysis of the Belarusian regime in the global context are new and very efficient, since they demonstrate dynamics and smartness of the regime, a “long-termed” or “sustainable” dictatorship, according to authors’ definition. In addition, this approach testifies that, by Symaniec’s apt remark, rather than being just a repeat or a reflection of the Soviet model, Lukašenka’s regime represents a reactualization of this model and its application to the 21st century. The authors state that “*though having kept all Lenin’s monuments, Lukašenka’s regime is not just a self-repeating history [...]. The regime is effective in juggling with the internet, cell phones and other technologies that promote the information flows within the society, and yet resorts to repressions against political actors and trade unions, businessmen and independent journalists on regular basis*” (p. 16, 229).

Here is where the regime and its ideologists are in the winning position, regardless of certain archaism of the economy and technologies: contrary to Russia and the EU, the official Minsk is not thinking in old colonial terms (the clash of the West and the East), the government is not treating Belarus as a periphery, quite the contrary, they are doing their best to argue that this is the centre of civilization and Europe. Lukašenka’s regime does not need a national pro-European ideology as a base (he would not be capable of using it anyway because of his mental loyalty to the Soviet nation-free ideology). This is why authors find Lukašenka’s policy consistent, since it has certain logics and ground under it, given geopolitical and, importantly, economic factors of life. Even the well-known diplomatic crisis of the 1990s should be viewed as

a skillful instrumentalization of the diplomatic crisis for his own good rather than a simple mistake of a young and inexperienced dictator. Later on, the regime will demonstrate the same skill of making use of a crisis during the oil row with Russia (p. 167–168).

In such a manner, all chapters of the essay are covering different mechanisms of a rather sustainable real dictatorship, pretty well-integrated into the society and the state despite criticism. The political, economic and ideological mechanics constitute an organic well-functioning whole, like a mill, since Belarusians are not familiar with other kinds of mechanics, including democratic ones, so far.

In this regard, authors tend to be pessimistic in their scenarios, something they are not trying to conceal in the last chapter called “The enduring dictatorship”. The enduring, or long-term dictatorship is working, because the whole system is on, all the mechanisms are functioning, since the state and the regime of Lukashenka do not understand any other model including democracy, so they operate for the good of their own authoritarian one. Rather than just an odd set of circumstances, the dictatorship is a purposeful project. The current strengths of this project are simultaneously its tomorrow’s weaknesses.

In addition to the domestic situation (the lack of the civil society and, as a result, the lack of a democratic political culture), the international conjuncture is also contributing to the sustainability of the dictatorship: the economic crisis and the security boom are downplaying the image and the value of democracy, serving an excuse for a number of police-run measures. In the light of a certain antidemocratic sentiment arising from the economic downturn and stringent security policy, the future of the Belarusian dictatorship appears to be rather bright. The authors cannot identify or suggest any alternative to the current dictatorship so far.

The chapter on the Belarusian culture under authoritarianism also deserves attention. The general political trend of mobbing people, including the creative intellectuals, is made very visible by the example of the cultural situation (p. 221). As stated above, this trend fits the pattern of country’s tough security measures, viewing many (primarily oppositionists) as potential enemies of the system. There is a point in a comparison of the official culture and language policy to that of General Pétain (p.226): just like the French dictator during the World War II, his contemporary Belarusian “counterpart” is suggesting a one-sided and an exceptionally traditionalistic vision of the culture and the language by means of moving the cultural policy to the channel of folklore and idolizing the notions of “race” and “people” (the French one for Pétain, the Belarusian and the Soviet one for us). Distorted and ideologized more than any other sciences, humanities end up totally exterminated before they manage to outgrow the Soviet clichés.

Yet, unlike some Frenchmen, the authors of the paper deserve applauds for exercising an approach of decolonization in regard to e.g. the Belarusian proper names. The authors can feel the language situation in Belarus, not least because Symaniec is fluent in Belarusian. In quite a risky attempt, they decided to ignore the Russian-centered tradition of Belarusian names in official French. The authors noted in the preface that the proper names, e.g. that of the President, are spelled according to the Belarusian (Loukachenka) rather than Russian (Loukachenko) transcription (p. 12). The researchers also used a non-academic form of the adjective “Belarusian” (*biélorusse* instead of *biélorusse*). According to the authors, the latter was created in the 40s as a Russian-inspired neologism (p. 12); however, the researchers recognize Belarus as a full-fledged successor of Ruthenia (Rus), thus they insist on the option of *biélorussien*.

Interpreted exceptionally through French glasses, the paper suggests the best introduction to the Belarusian world possible for a French-speaking reader, as noted by “Le Monde diplomatique” (Biélorussie, 2007). Making every effort to address the lack of expertise on Belarus in the French audience, the authors provided a range of detailed explanations and biographical remarks, pictures and variety of comments, to make the text as understandable as possible. For that reason, the essay can seem too correct or sometimes too simple to a Belarusian reader and even more so to a Belarusian political scientist. I nevertheless find it is just as useful to experience the freshness of a glance from outside for the sake of new perspectives and unexpected remarks or dimensions of politics. A better understanding of mechanics of dictatorship today might help us out of it tomorrow.

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