

NEWS IN BRIEF

NEGOTIATING BELARUSIANNES: POLITICAL FOLKLORE BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

On December 16, 2015, Anastasiya Astapova defended her PhD thesis at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu.

Anastasiya Astapova's dissertation is spread out on 215 pages, with an introduction, followed by a well-informed and up-to-date reference section on 9 pages, and 5 chapters comprised of separate research articles, one of them published and four of them in press. The journals she has chosen for publishing – HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research, Journal of American Folklore, Western Folklore, and others – are all high-impact international academic publications, which is a remarkable achievement for a young scholar in itself and a sign of Astapova's undeniable talent, devotion to the field, and hard work.

Relying on the concept of vernacularity and Leonard Primiano's suggestion to study what people say, feel, and experience, the author of the thesis presents unique material based mostly on her fieldwork about Belarusian contemporary political folklore in the forms of rumour, humour, and similar formats, without laying strong genre borders and relying a great deal on emic categories. She outlines some of the more important and recurring topics in the process of Belarusian ongoing identity building (and folklore around the biography of Lukashenko, surveillance rumours, and political jokes as stories that support or subvert it). The reader finishes the thesis being much better versed in Belarusian past and present, in beliefs that shape people's opinions and behaviour, and problems that the nation faces. But not only that: the thesis also adds valuable insight to existing polemics and discussions in the field of folkloristics in general. As such, it goes beyond just reporting on the evidence, and becomes a set of articles worth coming back to, re-reading, and citing.

The introduction is convincing and coherent. The parts about the historical background of Belarus stay within the focus of the current work, yet remain sufficient for understanding the content of the articles. Folkloristics-related chapters and an introduction to studies on political folklore in the targeted region follow the chapter on socialist dichotomies as a way of polemising with the latter and as such form an excellent reading material for students of folklore. The introduction also gives a full, compact overview of the problems addressed in the individual articles. Particularly the way in which the thesis tackles the question of truth in folklore is noteworthy. It is an example of a clever choice of previous (abundant) research combined with the author's own observations in a balanced and insightful way.

The methodology the author has used in most of the articles has provided interesting results. The fact that her sample is slanted towards male respondents interested in politics and aged between 25 and 45 is not unexpected, considering the sampling methods she used. Hopefully, in the next studies, she will find a way to compile a more balanced sample and can compare political folklore across the groups.

There is a clear development throughout the thesis in her approach to her main topic, Belarusian political folklore. It starts with the first article searching for categories and structures in her material, and ends with the last article that discards dichotomous categorisations as a too rigid way to look at folk processes. Mirroring this development, the introductory chapter presenting socialist dichotomies (3.1. and subchapters) grows into a discussion of the usefulness of opposite categories (in politics, but also in genre divisions and elsewhere). She concludes that these are not entirely applicable “on the field”, as real life often escapes straight lines and easy classifications, being fuzzy and blended.

The first article, *Why All Dictators Have Moustaches: Political Jokes in Contemporary Belarus* (HUMOR 2015, 28(1), 71–91), tackles the question of reappearing jokes about dictators told in present-day Belarus. She collected the material in oral interviews and also used the comments of the interviewees to analyse the jokes. She found that although many of the jokes told in Belarus in the 2000s were also known in, say, the Soviet Union, the overlap is not as big as could be expected. 18 plots of the entire 46 that she collected were told by earlier Soviet leaders. At the same time, she has proved interestingly that there are some flexible plots that are very productive and easily adaptable for various situations and countries, and indeed not only for targeting dictators but all sorts of ‘heroes’: public figures, doctors, university staff, students, etc. She also points out that the emic definition of political jokes appears to be much broader than the etic one, embracing different kinds of text (e.g. citations of Lukashenko’s words).

The second article is titled *Political Biography: Incoherence, Contestation, and the Hero Pattern Element in the Belarusian Case* (Journal of Folklore Research, forthcoming). In this article the author describes and contrasts the official and alternative biographies of Alexander Lukashenko, concentrating in particular on his birth story. Concerning biographical patterns and backed up by Ruth Benedict’s observation that finding two traits in different cultures does not mean that they do the same job, Astapova argues that stories about Lukashenko’s assumed virility are a good example of folkloric text that may be interpreted as positive or negative, depending on the disposition of the communicator. She concludes that the broader the gap between the official biography and its contested versions becomes, the more manifold the meanings of the elements (p. 52).

The article concerning the practices of window-dressing, *When the President Comes: Potemkin Order as an Alternative to Democracy in Belarus* (Ethnologia Europaea, forthcoming), describes the narratives around such displays and the attitudes they convey. She claims that, in fact, the displays produce and preserve the entrenched Belarusian order in return for social guarantees. At the same time, however, this does not mean that the order itself and the Potemkin villages it creates are outside the limits of humour: on the contrary, the window-dressing practices are often subject to parody and ridicule, bringing a perfect example of how multi-layered people’s attitudes and beliefs are.

The fourth article, *In Search for Truth: Surveillance Rumors and Vernacular Panopticon in Belarus* (Journal of American Folklore, forthcoming) insightfully suggests that rumour is the best term to study stories about surveillance. Parallel terms used in previous works by other theorists, e.g. (contemporary) legend, conspiracy theory, myth, etc., are not as inclusive, and also embrace not only the belief systems they allude to but also the stories themselves. Astapova analyses rumours of surveillance that seem to be sparked off by the low level of democratisation, but also the history of national trauma.

mas and current state politics. The fears of lack of security, e.g. in telecommunication, accompany the vernacular beliefs about persecuting those who think differently, and advances in media technology only make the fears grow. She states (p. 55) that it is not the high level of surveillance but rather the fact that the object of surveillance cannot see back, which makes the panopticon experiences of people (and their acquaintances or strangers known through hearsay only) as profound as it is in Belarus.

In the final article, *In Quest of the Lost Masterpieces, Ethnic Identity and Democracy: The Belarusian Case* (in Marion Bowman & Ülo Valk (eds.) *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. London: Equinox, forthcoming), Astapova ponders on the tangible tokens of identity and liberalisation that are said to have been lost. The legends surrounding the lost masterpieces give structure to the striving for ethnic consolidation and changes towards the formation of a democratic state.

Anastasiya Astapova is a strong emerging scholar and the publications collected in her thesis prove it. Her background knowledge in folkloristics and adjacent fields is backed up with references from Anglo-Saxon and Slavic scientific space, is up to date and carefully chosen. Being active in talking about her subject, she has been accepted to the international network of folklorists and is a frequent participant of known research forums like SIEF or AFS conferences. The personal references to her motivation or research experience in the introduction and articles are well integrated into the text, bringing the journey of the author closer to the audience. But it is not only folkloristics that she has contributed to: the focus and results of her research have a wider appeal also outside of folkloristics, e.g. surveillance studies (article IV), humour studies (article I), etc.

All in all, Anastasiya Astapova has written a very good thesis. The author describes the practices that explain and make sense of living in “the last dictatorship of Europe”, and does it in an engaging, thought-provoking, and intelligent way. The thesis is a pleasure to read and hopefully will be read – whether as single articles or an entire collection – by future students and scholars alike.

Liisi Laineste
Estonian Literary Museum