

achieved in consolidating their power and their system, there were always challenges. Gel'man demonstrates the centrality of Vladimir Putin to this system, and he notes no one besides Putin has been able to manage that system. As Gel'man reveals, the experience of one-time-president Dmitri Medvedev is telling, as are the realities of the complicated manoeuvrings and rivalries of the elements comprising the Putin team. Given the thrust of the arguments set out by Gel'man, the reader struggles to understand the continuing power of the Putin system and team minus its hegemonic leader.

There is a large cottage industry of observers offering thoughts about the current state of the Russian polity and its future, but relatively few of them provide creative insights. Vladimir Gel'man, in contrast, does, and this intellectually satisfying volume can serve as a sort of lodestone as one attempts to understand an evolving Russia that continues to be too prone to simplistic analysis and judgment.

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Sannikov, Andrei. *My Story: Belarusian Amerikanka or Elections under Dictatorship*. Translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick. East View Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2015. 347 pp. Illustrations. Index. \$32.95.

BELARUS has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, generally concentrated on the political authoritarianism that has existed there since 1994. Brian Bennett wrote entirely and Andrew Wilson partially on the Leader in their groundbreaking books (*SEER*, 2012, 90, 4, pp. 782–84), and there have also been several books about political imprisonment, including the harrowing prisoner's diary by anarchist Ihar Alinievič, *Jedu Ź Mahadan* (On the Way to Magadan, 2014). The book under review, however, is worthy of notice as the first in English to describe vividly and in detail the reality of imprisonment by the Belarusian KGB, including physical and mental torture as well as threats to family and friends.

Andrei Sannikov (in Belarusian Andrej Sannikaŭ) was already part of the government, as Deputy Foreign Minister, when Aliksandr Lukašenka came to power in 1994, but left his post two years later to join the opposition after a disastrous 'referendum' which abolished the nascent parliamentary democracy, making the presidency renewable and potentially permanent, as well as effectively reducing the status of the already beleaguered Belarusian language. Protests against electoral fraud had taken place in 2001, 2006 and 2008, but the events that unfolded on 19 December 2010, widely known in Belarus simply

as 'Plošča' (The Square), exceeded in numbers and height of expectation, or at least hope, that change might finally come. On the contrary, however, it was met by the most vicious crackdown of all, with not only brutality but also cynical attempts to create the impression that this peaceful process was in fact violent and destructive. The celebrated poet Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ who had presented himself as one of the presidential candidates, was severely beaten and hospitalized, almost before the demonstration had begun. Andrej Sannikaŭ was certainly the most politically astute and widely supported of the candidates, and his outspokenness before election day and his refusal to make a 'confession' while under extreme pressure in jail is the main focus of this book.

At the centre of *My Life* is a detailed account of the life of Belarusian political prisoners and the cunning and ruthless behaviour of those into whose hands they were delivered by the police. At that level this book should open many eyes, especially of those who see cruel dictatorship with its torture and Stalin-style kangaroo courts as a distant abstraction rather than an existential nightmare experienced by people like us. Sannikaŭ's account of the notorious Amierikanka and Valadarka prisons in Miensk are at the centre of his post-trial experiences which included two other jails and three labour colonies as well as eight transports in so-called Stolypin cars. Each had its own particular brand of capricious viciousness, but Viciebsk, Babruisk and Mahilioŭ excelled in tormenting their captives without, in Sannikaŭ's case at least, actually killing them and attracting unwanted publicity. It may be mentioned that a very talented member of his campaign team, Alieh Biabienin, died in mysterious circumstances on 3 September 2010, over three months before election day, and several of those who were released after 'confessing' were obliged to flee the country for their lives.

Sannikaŭ's account of these appalling events is interspersed with other documentary materials, including the accounts of other prisoners, letters, texts of speeches and interviews. It may be mentioned that the author's dream of a free Belarus includes a land where the language would be Belarusian, and this review uses Belarusian rather than Russian spelling for all names, including the author's, which probably originated from the translator. Occasional misprints may be silently corrected.

This engrossing book, endorsed by Tom Stoppard and Svetlana Aleksievich, is more than a record of one person's harrowing experiences, but should be of interest to all who are concerned about electoral fraud, the viciously devious behaviour of a dictator's security forces and, perhaps most important, the necessity of great moral strength in the face of ruthless persecution.