**The political economy of autocratization: the case of Belarus, 1994-2006**

Aris Trantidis

University of Lincoln, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

**Abstract**

In competitive authoritarian systems, aspiring autocrats must win elections and marginalize the political opposition. In Belarus, Lukashenka’s strategy for political hegemony heavily relied on socioeconomic co-optation, offering privileges to supporters and imposing sanctions on dissenters. In an economy dominated by the state, co-optation had a coercive effect on behavior. Without sizeable areas of activity autonomous from the government, citizens could not defy or mitigate the cost of reprisals to openly support the political opposition. Through co-optation, Lukashenka weakened the opposition and built an authoritarian regime without resorting to extensive political violence, which could have undermined his claim of public legitimacy.

**Keywords:** electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, Belarus, post-communist transition, democratic theory

Competitive authoritarian regimes can move in two opposite directions – towards a higher level of political competition and possibly a democratization path, or towards lower levels of political competition and further autocratization (Howard and Roessler 2006). Autocratization can go as far as the establishment of a political hegemony, a type of regime that offers a formal structure of political participation but exhibits low levels of political contestation (Dahl, 1971, pp. 4, 8 and 34). Electoral vulnerability distinguishes a competitive authoritarian regime from a hegemonic authoritarian one (Donno, 2013). In a hegemonic regime, citizens have the typical rights to vote, get elected and join or establish political parties or civil society organisations but, as political participants, they have few actual chances to effectively challenge the governing elite and replace it with another political group. The political opposition is too weak to launch an effective campaign and win an election. The incumbent has also contained factionalism and defections from the ranks of the government party or coalition (Bogaards and Boucek, 2010).

This article revisits the story of Belarus as a transition from a competitive authoritarian regime to a hegemonic regime under President Alexander Lukashenka, in the period between his election as president in 1994 – when Lukashenka had its first confrontation with the political opposition and deployed a plan to increase his presidential power by reforming the constitution – and the 2006 presidential election which, after two consecutive tenures in office, indicated that his regime had been well consolidated. However, like any other authoritarian regime, Lukashenka never ceased his effort to embed and defend his hegemonic rule. Throughout this period, typical repression tactics such as arrests and police violence were deployed against political opponents (White, 2011, 800; Bedford, 2017). However, the Lukashenka regime avoided the escalation of political violence and the kind of public backlash that broke up in the so-called color revolutions during the 2000s (Padhol and Marples, 2011, 3). For over twenty-five years, Lukashenka succeeded in pre-empting the formation of sizeable public support for the opposition (Silitski, 2005; 2010b) and currently survives a year of public protests.

Several factors were said to have contributed to Lukashenka’s political success and longevity, some of which were present in other post-communist countries where competitive authoritarian systems did not, however, evolve into hegemonic regimes.[[1]](#footnote-1) Lukashenka is an astute a demagogue (Lindner 2002, 81; Marples, 1999a, 103-104) who exploited public anxieties over the collapse of the economy in 1991 and acted against a relatively weak civil society and a fragmented political elite (Törnquist-Plewa, 2004; Cf. Eke and Kuzio, 2000). He forged the country’s nascent national identity against other competing narratives (Eke and Kuzio, 2000; Marples, 2006, Mihalisko, 1997, Zaprudnik, 2003). He gained the support of the state *nomenklatura* (Korosteleva 2003b) and appealed to an electorate that, for the most part, remained apathetic and distrustful of rapid political and economic change (Korosteleva, 2000; Silitski, 2003; Belova-Gille, 2003; Rotman and Danilov, 2003; Korosteleva, 2003b).

This article focuses on another important component of his autocratization strategy: socioeconomic co-optation. Co-optation plays a key role in that process through the distribution of resources and socioeconomic opportunities by the regime to loyal political supporters and allies (Cf. Gerschewski, 2013). Previous studies of Belarus mentioned a connection between the lack of economic reforms and several practices classified as clientelist (Belova-Gille, 2003, 65; Korosteleva, 2003b, p. 79; Balmaceda, 2002; 2014a). However, co-optation has not been explicitly examined in terms of how it worked together with typical repressive tactics as part of an explanatory framework, in particular, the synergies that developed between the co-optation strategy and Lukashenka’s ideology, his political conduct, his institutional record and the external support he received from Russia. The purpose here is not to isolate the effect of co-optation against other pertinent variables but to explore how this practice intersects with other components of an autocratization strategy and the broader structural context (Cf. Ragin 1987, 20). Of particular interest is the flip side of co-optation, namely exclusion from socioeconomic rewards and resource distributions, which could act as a form of retaliatory discrimination against political dissenters and opponents.

The following argument is presented. Lukashenka exploited the powerful role of the state in Belarus’ society and economy to build an extensive system of co-optation which, in the absence of considerable areas of activity outside the reach of government discrimination, affected the vast majority of the population. In such an environment, very few citizens could mitigate the effects of retaliation that came in the form of exclusion from government-allocated resources and administrative penalties. The majority of workers in Belarus were vulnerable to threats of redundancy on political grounds, while owners or managers of private companies were vulnerable to administrative sanctions and forms of financial reprisal for demonstrating political behavior the regime would disapprove. In that sense, co-optation served as a method of political coercion, which was effective in forcing self-restrictions in the citizens’ choices of political behavior. Working together with typical authoritarian tactics, co-optation helped the regime discourage any scalable expressions of political support for the opposition. Without sufficient active supporters and with few campaign resources, the opposition forces could not project a visible alternative for government. Lukashenka built a political communication monopoly, presenting himself as the only credible option for the country’s economic prosperity and social stability.

**The challenge of autocratization**

How co-optation facilitates the closure of political competition in a competitive authoritarian regime is a theoretically important topic of inquiry in the broader study of autocratization and de-democratization. A transition from competitive authoritarianism to a hegemony is a particularly challenging task for aspiring autocrats. Competitive authoritarian systems are not closed autocracies. Incumbents must legitimize their rule through electoral victories which would signal their popularity and ideological dominance (Magaloni, 2006; Schedler, 2006). The outcome of these elections is, however, uncertain despite the presence of a political ‘uneven playing field’ (Levitsky and Way, 2012, p. 30). Multiparty elections open a turf for the political opposition to challenge the incumbent despite any irregularities (Lindberg, 2006; 2009; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Brownlee, 2007; 2009; Tucker, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2009; Teorell and Hadenius, 2009; Kaya and Bernhard, 2013; Miller, 2015; Edgell et al., 2017; Bernhard et al., 2020). The opposition parties can exploit existing social divisions and the accumulated public dissatisfaction with the government.

While typical autocracies survive by using a combination of political repression, legitimation and socio-economic co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013), in a competitive authoritarian system, the option of political repression is far more limited due to rule-of-law institutions and the presence of registered political parties and relatively autonomous media and civil organizations (Lindberg, 2007). At the onset of an autocratization strategy, the governing party cannot use the type and scale of repression employed by typical authoritarian regimes such as the banning of opposition parties and candidates, the censorship of all expressions of political dissent, the imprisonment and torture of political opponents and the abolition of elections altogether. Instead, the system of political participation allows the political activities of opposition forces and the mobilization of public protest, which raises the risk of electoral defeat for the incumbent (Howard & Roessler, 2006; Beissinger, 2007; Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Lindberg, 2009; Bernhard et al., 2020). If the government chooses to violently suppress political protest, particularly on a mass scale, it risks triggering a spiral of public uprisings and, potentially, a level of turmoil that could undermine their claim of political legitimacy and jeopardize its political future (Haiduk, 2009: 22).

In each setting, of course, strategies for autocratization will play out against distinct structural conditions (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). In several post-communist countries, for example, political organizations gave rise to a relatively pluralist multi-party system thanks to adequate campaign resources (Olson, 1998, p. 434; Golosov, 1998). Economic reforms, constitutional norms and autonomous societal organizations contributed to the democratization process and protected these societies from an authoritarian backlash (Fish 1999, p. 800). Moreover, the wave of color revolutions in several post-Soviet republics indicates that, even in situations in which conditions had previously favored aspiring autocrats, when they chose to resort to blatant political violence, they faced a backlash from the political opposition and civil society organizations who mobilized large public crowds and demonstrated their strength (Cf. Schedler, 2002; Bunce and Wolchik, 2006). Rather than reducing their exposure to political competition, violent responses to public discontent boomeranged by becoming a critical juncture for the regime, for instance in neighboring Ukraine with the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Maidan Square protests in 2014.

Against this backdrop, aspiring autocrats must find a way to reduce their exposure to political contestation and must do so by sustaining a public claim of legitimacy, meaning that they should avoid reaching a situation in which violent repressive tactics would seem to be the only option effective in preventing the collapse of their government against intense public protests and an increasingly popular political opposition. The problem aspiring autocrats face is how to pre-empt the escalation of public protest or at least withstand such events once they occur. Public protestations have a self-reinforcing dynamic when public perceptions of risk from taking part in them are relaxed due to network effects. As Lindberg notes, political actors are self-reflexive individuals and their political calculations, choices and expectations are conditioned by signals from their social environment (2009, pp. 317-318). When citizens believe that others, including parts of the elite, would turn against the incumbent and would defend democratic institutions, even the risk-averse ones may feel more comfortable openly expressing their political views, joining public rallies and supporting the activities of the opposition (Lindberg, 2007; 2009, pp. 317-318).

A possible way for aspiring autocrats to pre-empt the public expression of dissent is by gaining the loyalty of political and socioeconomic elites and, at the same time, the support of large segments of the electorate through socioeconomic co-optation (Giliomee and Simkins, 1999, p. 2; Greene, 2007; Lust-Okar, 2009; Silitski, 2009; Göbel, 2011; Ambrosio, 2014). Co-optation is usually achieved through the distribution of financial resources and socioeconomic opportunities by a political agent to its supporters in exchange for their loyalty (Cf. Van de Walle, 2006; Lust-Okar, 2009). However, several types of clientelist rewards that could be used for co-opting larger segments of the population, such as payouts, jobs and career promotions, are costly and work more effectively in relatively poor societies (Magaloni, 2006).Moreover, in several authoritarian systems, clientelist policies tend to fuel rather than mitigate competition over their distribution (Lust, 2009). At the same time, co-optation works in a retaliatory way by punishing dissenters and defectors with exclusion from the same range of benefits offered to supporters. The flip side of clientelism involves discriminatory measures targeting actual and prospective dissenters, such as dismissals from state employment, unfavorable job placements within the public sector, refusal to grant a license to businesses, delay in the delivery of government services, refusal to provide credit from state-controlled banks, discriminatory tax controls etc. Actual cases of political reprisal have a wider effect across the population, acting as signals about the kind of costs one would expect for making similar political choices.

For co-optation to be successful, it must prevent the opposition from gathering a significant number of organized supporters and enough resources to build a credible political campaign. This prospect is more likely to occur in an economy dominated by the state, where the potential structure of co-optation is so extensive that socioeconomic actors could not easily evade or mitigate the cost of sanctions imposed by the government (Trantidis, 2015). When rule-of-law protections from government discrimination are not available to citizens, a governing elite can manipulate the distribution of resources and the regulatory functions of the government for the purpose of restricting political freedom. When citizens find themselves vulnerable to the prospect of discrimination and exclusion for their political choices, co-optation has a coercive effect on their behavior, working similarly to how typical threats of violence restrict free choice, because unmitigated socioeconomic sanctions would force vulnerable citizens to restrict their political expression against their own will. An all-encompassing structure of co-optation, in such a coercive form, will prevent the consolidation of public support for the political opposition, simultaneously helping the regime avoiding a recourse to mass-scale acts or threats of violence. On these grounds, a political regime that heavily relies on this coercive form of co-optation should be classified as authoritarian even if it wins elections and claims that it enjoys public approval (Trantidis, 2015: 126).

**Building up a repressive regime in Belarus**

Lukashenka was elected President of Belarus in 1994 and won consecutive elections, consolidating an authoritarian regime without facing a considerable political challenge from the opposition forces (Bennet 2011; Wilson 2011). This is puzzling because Belarus is a country with high levels of socioeconomic development, which tend to facilitate the development of a vibrant and stable democracy (Cf. Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh, 2003, 4 and 6; Dowley and Silver, 2002). In opinion polls, the Belarusian public featured as the second most pro-democracy electorate after Estonia amongst the countries of the former Soviet Union (Haerpfer, 2003; Cf. Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh, 2003, p. 8). Socioeconomic cleavages in the Belarusian society could have given rise to a pluralistic political landscape (Korosteleva, 2003b, pp. 61-62). In the final years of the Soviet Union, civil society organizations were formed during Gorbachev’s political initiative, *Glasnost*. After the failure of the August 1991 coup in Moscow, Stanislau Shushkevich took the office of the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and proclaimed the independence of Belarus. Prime Minister Kebich, who had resigned from the Communist Party a day before its dissolution, challenged Shushkevich for the post of the Chairman of the Supreme Council. In September 1991, Kebich dropped out of the race and failed to oust Shushkevich in a motion of no-confidence in 1993 (Bugajski, 2002, p. 7). By the mid-1990s, several competing political parties and movements had been formed: the Communist party, which would later split into supporters and opponents of Lukashenka, the Agrarian Party, the United Civic Party, the Peoples’ Accord Party (later, the Social Democratic Party of Public Accord), the Belarusian People’s Front or Belarusian Popular Front (BFP), the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People’s Assembly), the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement, and the Belarusian Green Party. Like in other post-communist countries, these nascent political organizations were expressing various socioeconomic and political divisions in Belarusian society; there were liberals, conservatives, nationalists, social democrats and trade unionists representing farmers and industrial workers (Lewis, 2000, pp. 56, 58). During the same period, private media started broadcasting their programs (Marples and Padhol, 2002).

The political landscape of the period between 1988 and 1994 stands in sharp contrast to the ensuing years during which the Lukashenka regime effectively marginalized any political opposition (Silitski, 2006, 139). In 1994, Lukashenka run for President without a party organization to back him but launched an assertive campaign against corruption and promised to protect Belarus from the painful economic transition which other post-communist societies were experiencing in that period (Marples, 1999b, p. 575; 2004, p. 40). Soon after he gained power, Lukashenka clashed with the parliament and the constitutional court over the extent to which he could use presidential decrees to legislate. While his presidential powers were already strong, he took action to further limit the powers of the parliament. Taking advantage of his popularity, he called a series of constitutional referendums with a proposal for a centralized system of governance which the public approved. Using the new powers bestowed by the constitution, Lukashenka took steps to control the judiciary and the media (Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh, 2003, pp. 7 and 19). While these actions cost him some of his early allies, Lukashenka eventually succeeded in gaining the support of most of the members of parliament (Rontoyanni and Korosteleva 2005, p. 211; Silitski 2010a, pp. 282-283).

The opposition parties were unable to prevent the institutional changes that made the post of the president very powerful (Korosteleva, 2003b, pp. 63-65), and they did not pose a threat to Lukashenka’s regime in any of the ensuing elections (Korosteleva, 2000; 2003b; Rotman and Danilov, 2003; Brzozovska, 2004, p. 74).[[2]](#footnote-2) They had to operate in an increasingly hostile environment, facing bureaucratic obstacles as well as several prosecutions of politicians, activists and journalists sympathetic to the opposition (Amnesty International, 1999; HHRW, 1999). When confronted with domestic and international criticism for his authoritarian conduct, Lukashenka dubbed these voices an attack on Belarusian sovereignty (Leshchenko, 2008). Alarmed by these events, several opposition parties joined forces in the presidential elections of 2001 and 2006 but failed to unseat Lukashenka, who won 75 % of the votes in 2010, and 82.6 % in 2006. Foreign observers described the 2006 election in Belarus as unfair, referring to episodes in which the government harassed the opposition’s activities (OSCE, 2006). Some opposition candidates and parties were denied electoral registration while some members of the opposition were arrested (Freedom House 2007). When public protests broke up in 2006, the opposition was too weak to take a lead against the government’s counter-mobilization of political support (Korosteleva, 2009a, p. 328).

**Building a dominant ideology and an authoritarian ‘social contract**

A central component of Lukashenka’s autocratization strategy was to accommodate predominant public preferences on the issues of national identity and economic policy. Described as ‘egalitarian nationalism’, his ideological message defined the Belarusian nation in an ethnically inclusive way and promoted a collectivist ethos in the economy and society (Leshchenko, 2008). On the question of national identity, Lukashenka endorsed the country’s political independence but recognized Belarus’ cultural affinity with Russia (Mihalisko, 1997; Zaprudnik, 2003; Brzozovska, 2004, p. 105; Allison, White and Light, 2005; Ioffe, 2007, p. 49).[[3]](#footnote-3) He rejected the ethno-Belarusian national identity which the nationalist forces were advocating and, instead, he exploited historical memories from World War II to discredit the nationalist agenda. Lukashenka’s economic rhetoric resonated with widespread public nostalgia for aspects of life during the Soviet Union (Lindner, 2002, p. 81, Marples, 1999a, pp. 103-104) when Belarus was considered a relatively successful case of post-war industrialization (Bakanova et al., 2001, pp. 4-13; Bakanova and de Suza, 2002, pp. 3-5; Lubachko, 1972, pp. 6, 76-79). He supported a protectionist role for the state in the economy and proposed a gradual pace of economic reforms (Ioffe, 2007, p. 45), addressing a population fearful of economic decline (Cf. Rose and Haerpfer, 1998, p. 36; Marples, 1999a, p. 93), particularly the older generation, farmers, state employees, industrial workers and the military (Zlotnikov, 2002a, p. 131; Marples, 2004, 9; Yarashevic, 2014). By pledging to protect Belarusians from external and internal economic and political threats (Bennett, 2011, p. 289), Lukashenka offered citizens what has been described as an ‘authoritarian bargain’ or a type of ‘social contract’ in which citizens are asked to surrender their political freedoms in exchange for a degree of social protection and welfare provided by the state (Haiduk, Rakova and Silitski, 2009; Praneviciute-Neliupšiene Z. Maksimiuk, 2012).

What is particularly interesting, however, is that the opposition forces adopted popular aspects of Lukashenka’s political and economic ideology. In the 2001 presidential elections, several parties supported Uladzimir Hančaryk (Vladimir Goncharik), a former chairman of the Free Trade Union of Belarus as a candidate for president who chose not to antagonize Lukashenka’s message for social protection and economic stability. His electoral manifesto pledged to increase the budget for social policies, raise the minimal wage, increase pensions and pay them in time. Hančaryk promised the war veterans and the victims of the Chernobyl accident that he would restore their financial privileges Lukashenka had taken away. At the same time, his campaign sought to expose the regime’s policy failures and rhetorical inconsistencies on issues such as corruption and poverty, the multiple administrative and regulatory hindrances which small and medium enterprises were facing, the country’s isolation from the West, Lukashenka’s haphazard relations with Russia and his abuses of human rights and civil liberties. While this discourse appeared to be a strategically sensible decision for the opposition, Hančaryk gathered no more than 15 % of the votes. With few active supporters, limited campaign resources and almost no favorable media coverage to help him run a visible campaign, he was not seen as a credible contestant for power. The presidential election of 2001 revealed the opposition’s organizational disadvantage against Lukashenka’s political infrastructure.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Socio-economic co-optation**

How was co-optation helpful for Lukashenka’s autocratization strategy? In Belarus, the economy was largely unreformed (Zaprudnik, 1993, pp. 193-194; Zlotnikov, 2002b, pp. 125, 129; Lawson, 2003; Lisovskaia and Korosteleva, 2003, p. 146) and the Lukashenka government had retained extensive distributive and regulatory powers, which it used them to exert political pressure on businesses and state employees (Feduta, 2005, p. 109; Way, 2010, p. 250).

Large segments of the Belarusian population were dependent on state employment and finance (Glambotskaya, 2009: p. 96). Most of the working population was employed by the government. In the decade between 1997 and 2007, 55% to 60% of the employed personnel worked for state-owned firms while part of what was registered as private employment in official statistics was in enterprises under partial state ownership (EBRD 1995, 27). In 2007, only 0.4% of the employed worked in foreign owned companies, while 1,4% in mixed ones with foreign share. Privatization in Belarus was limited and tightly controlled by the government. By 2001, 3,474 enterprises, which were employing 21% of the total workforce, had been reformed as joint-stock companies with the state as the main shareholder. In 2004, 82% of industrial output and 74% of industrial employment remained under government control (World Bank 2005, 35-36). State factories and farms operated under direct presidential rule (Mihalisko, 1997, p. 269). High taxation, excessive regulation, the inadequate protection of property rights and discretionary government interference created an institutional setting hostile to private business (Bakanova, Estrin, Pelipas and Pukovich, 2006; Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2006). As a result, small and medium-sized businesses represented a small share of GDP. State support to parochial state factories crowded out private investment and raised the cost for private companies to obtain credit from banks. The private sector remained dependent on the discretion of state authorities for subsidies or loans from state-managed banks. The government renationalized several financial institutions, beginning in 1995 with the forced merger of the Belarusbank stock company, the Savings Bank, and the Interbank Currency Exchange (ICE) (Mihalisko, 1997, pp. 268-269).

Belarus’ economic structure offered the regime the opportunity to deploy a mass-scale system of checks on political behavior (Cf. Belova-Gille, 2003; Way, 2010, p. 249; Greene, 2009, p. 813). Lack of transparency and favoritism governed the allocation of economic opportunities and fiscal resources (Glambotskaya, 2009: 96). With deficient rule-of-law norms, large segments of the population were vulnerable to politicized rewards and sanctions and had good reasons to comply with the regime’s request for political conformity. The so-called ‘nomenklatura entrepreneurs’ received privileged treatment in return for their political loyalty (Zlotnikov 2002b, p. 136; Matsuzato, 2004; Yarashevic, 2014). In state-owned factories and the public administration, the regime could hire and fire state employees on political grounds (Silitski, 2005, p. 92; Rakova and Lisovskaya, 2009, p. 135; Frear, 2012, p. 23; Yarashevic, 2014, p. 1718). Private enterprises were vulnerable to unfair and arbitrary treatment, facing the spectrum of confiscation, asset freezing and forced re-nationalization (World Bank, 2005, pp. 174, 176; Glambotskaya, 2009, p. 106). The menu of sanctions involved fines, the denial of registration and the imprisonment of entrepreneurs on several bureaucratic grounds (World Bank, 2005, pp. 174, 176). For entrepreneurs who might have wanted to contest government policies, public protest was a costly and uncertain option compared to what they could achieve in private deals with government officials (Glambotskaya, 2009, p. 107). When a number of small-business entrepreneurs organized a strike against the newly introduced value-added tax (VAT) and a public rally in Minsk in 2005, their protest did not assume an anti-government character. Representatives from this group refused to engage with the political opposition and directly negotiated with the government. Likewise, in September 2007, a public rally of entrepreneurs in Banhalor Square in Minsk but did develop into a political protest act against the government.

The Lukashenka regime also targeted civil society organizations and the media. Their activities were subjected to systematic surveillance and harassment (OSCE et al,. 2001; Marples, 2006, p. 358; Forbrig et al., 2006, 11). State companies took over the publication and the distribution of newspapers and, on several occasions, refused to publish and distribute the pro-opposition press (UNHRC, 1997; Garnett and Legvold, 1999, p. 4, Marples 1999a, pp. 80,81 and 100; Freedom House, 2006). All TV channels remained under state control and their political programs were censored by the government. In 2005, Reporters Without Borders’ ranked Belarus 152nd out of 167 countries in their press freedom index. The government shut down institutions with a Western and liberal-democratic ideological orientation, such as the European Humanities University, the Yakub Kolas National Humanities Lyceum, and the Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI). NGOs were banned from raising independent revenue through business activities. Their operation was monitored by the government. These organizations could be liquidated by an administrative act. In 1995, the new Law on Public Associations in Belarus required the re-registration of all NGOs. As a result, 400 of the 700 previously associations were excluded from the official registry. Civil society organizations critical of the government could not easily find financial sponsors from the private sector whose entrepreneurs and managers were understandably fearful of the consequences from upsetting the government. To curtail the financing of NGOs from outside Belarus, foreign contributions had to be officially registered and could be prohibited if the government claimed that they would support ‘subversive activities’ and the ‘meddling into the internal affairs of Belarus’ (Freedom House, 2006). At the same time, the government sponsored the creation of ‘puppet’ organizations controlled by the regime itself (Marin, 2012, 20) or receiving donations from government allies (Freedom House, 2006; Marples, 1999a, pp. 100-101).

In this environment, the political opposition could not secure enough funding, get favorable media coverage for its activities and programmatic agenda and recruit a larger number of active supporters in order to run an effective electoral campaign. Without adequate resources, the opposition forces were not able to send a visible political message and capitalize on public discontent. Subsequently, most of the public did not see the opposition as a reliable alternative for government. Lukashenka gained a monopoly in political organization and communication and succeeded in heavily distorting the conditions in which the electorate formed political opinions and voting preferences.

**Russia and the sustainability of Belarus’ autocratization model**

Lukashenka justified the nature of the control he exercised over society and the economy with a conservative vision of economic policy skeptical of market liberalization. This discourse was not countered by an alternative narrative from the side of the opposition. Lukashenka’s economic message remained popular, in large part, thanks to the relative economic stability Belarus enjoyed. In the first years of Lukashenka in power, industrial output and exports rose and the country registered relatively low levels of unemployment. With a good record of growth and poverty reduction, Belarus escaped the economic malaise that plagued most post-communist economies during the early years of their transition (World Bank, 2005, p. 8). The improvement in economic performance was particularly noticeable in the period between 1995 and 2004 in sharp contrast to the deteriorating economic circumstances of the previous years.[[5]](#footnote-5) Poverty rates fell from 46,7% in 1999 to 17,8% in 2004, largely due to the growth of labor-intensive sectors supported by government wages and income policies (World Bank 2005, p. 3).[[6]](#footnote-6) Inflation rates dropped significantly while budget deficits and debt remained moderate (World Bank 2005, p. 5). Thanks to relative economic success, the government periodically increased the basic wage and the maternity pay. Real wages grew higher than the GDP (World Bank, 2005, pp. 22-23).

By the beginning of the 2000s, the government could boast that the economy had been growing at a pace higher than all other former Soviet Union republics. Between 1996 and 2004 overall GDP growth averaged 6.6% per annum or 77.4% cumulatively (World Bank 2005, p. 1). Belarus grew faster than the Baltic countries and Russia. By 2004, Belarus and Uzbekistan were the only countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to exceed their GDP levels in the year 1989.[[7]](#footnote-7) By the same year, Belarus had surpassed its real gross industrial output in 1989 by 41.2 % against the average performance of the CIS of -24.6% (UNECE, 2005, p. 72). Employment grew from 58.4% in 2000 to 60.6% in 2003 (UNDP, 2005, p. 31). A World Bank Report confirmed that economic growth was genuine and robust (2005, pp. 22-33).

Belarus’ relatively good economic performance heavily relied on the economic assistance from Russia mainly in the form of cheaper energy prices and preferential access to its internal market (Balmaceda, 2002; Brukoff, 2002, 111; Sahm and Wetsphal, 2002; Word Bank, 2005, p. 138).[[8]](#footnote-8) In return, Belarus offered Russia a transit route for the supply of oil and gas to Europe, granted preferential access to its own market and favored Russian companies in government purchases.[[9]](#footnote-9) Revenues produced by the energy sector gave the regime the resources necessary to secure the support of the political and economic elite (Balmaceda, 2014a: p. 526; 2014b). Yet the relationship between the two countries was on several occasions tense over disputes about energy prices. Lukashenka considered the Russian pipelines on the territory of Belarus as a source of bargaining strength in his negotiations with Putin (Hancock, 2006, p. 119) and exploited the fact that Belarus was strategically important for Russia as a bulwark against the NATO’s eastwards enlargement (Nikonov, 1999, p. 112).

While Lukashenka benefited from the special economic privileges Russia was offering to Belarus, he did not want to undermine the country’s political autonomy and, consequently, his unrivalled grip on Belarusian politics. The political relationship between Belarus and Russia was cumbersome (Deyermond, 2004). In the mid-1990s, the two governments started an inconclusive dialogue on the prospect of unification, with the signing of a series of treaties, such as a pact on the Russia and Belarus Community (1996), a treaty on the Russia-Belarus Union, the Union Charter (1997), a treaty on equal rights for Russian and Belarusian citizens (1998), on the Union State (1999), and a treaty towards the creation of a customs union (1999). Talks were held about the creation of a currency union but the final agreement was postponed several times. In April 2005, Belarus and Russia signed a foreign policy action program for their prospective union. Belarus also joined the Collective Security Treaty under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and entered negotiations to join a Single Economic Space with Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus, granting free movement for goods, capitals, services and workers. But Lukashenka rejected Putin’s idea of a fully integrated political union with Russia (Marples, 2004a, p. 17). For Lukashenka, this prospect could have offered him a share in power much beyond the limits of Belarusian politics (See Marples, 2004a, p. 16; Törnquist-Plewa, 2004, p. 24) but, with Russia under the iron rule of Putin, this became an unrealistic ambition. Moreover, as the Russian government was increasingly more aggressive towards several of its neighboring countries, Lukashenka grew anxious with the prospect of political subordination to Moscow, especially when Russia clashed with Georgia in 2009 and Putin called Belarus to recognize the autonomy of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and a few years later, when Putin supported a secessionist rebellion in Ukraine and forced the annexation of Crimea.

Despite tensions in the relationship between Lukashenka and Putin, Belarus’ economic dependence on Russia was vital for the sustainability of Lukashenka’s model of autocratization. A close political relationship with Russia required that Belarus kept a distance from the West, rejecting any association with NATO and the prospect of membership in the European Union. Although Lukashenka initially expressed his sympathy with the prospect of accession to the European Union during a visit to Brussels a few months after becoming president (Lindner, 2002, 87), he soon adopted an anti-western rhetoric that was congruent with the country’s dependence on economic assistance from Russia. Belarus was originally excluded from a closer association with the EU under the European Neighborhood Policy (Korosteleva, 2009b) but, few years later, it became a member of the EU Eastern Partnership in 2009, a political forum promoting closer trade relationships between post-Soviet states and the European Union. However, further institutional association, such as obtaining the status of a candidate state for EU membership, was conditional on the implementation of economic and political reforms. This trajectory would have undermined the foundations of Lukashenka’s autocratization strategy, including his political relationship with Moscow. It would have ended the Russian subsidies and privileges that sustained both Belarus’ unreformed economy and the regime’s practice of socioeconomic co-optation.

**Conclusion**

This article’s analysis of the Belarusian case makes a contribution to addressing the following question: what sustains a transition from competitive authoritarianism to a hegemonic regime? Aspiring autocrats must win elections in order to support a claim of popular legitimacy. They can use repression tactics to attack the opposition and stifle expressions of political dissent but, in the presence of electoral competition, repression alone does not guarantee success. Violent and blatant acts of repression, such as bans on political activity, mass-scale electoral fraud and incarcerations, can actually backfire by triggering protests and steering public sympathy with, and support for the opposition, ultimately undermining the government’s stability, popularity and image of public legitimacy Aspiring autocrats must find a way to reduce their exposure to political competition in an environment in which the political opposition could exploit social cleavages, ideological divisions and policy failures as favorable conditions for its electoral campaign. A successful strategy of autocratization requires subtler tactics that would deprive the political opposition of resources necessary for launching a viable campaign without undermining the regime’s image as legitimate and popular.

The case of Belarus demonstrates how co-optation works as a key strategic tool for propelling a process of autocratization and, in particular, how the dominant role of the state in an economy and society facilitates the use of co-optation in a coercive fashion. The dependency of the majority of the Belarusian population on government distributions and regulations enabled Lukashenka to manufacture a political system of low contestability. In an economy dominated by the state, the vast majority of Belarusians could not evade government discrimination or mitigate the cost of exclusion from socioeconomic resources and opportunities. Few citizens would openly express their support for the opposition or make a contribution to its campaign. Against a weak opposition, Lukashenka was able to pass institutional reforms with public approval, further undermining rule-of-law protections and entrenching an illiberal mode of governance.

This analysis also helps us understand why, as of June 2021, the Lukashenka regime has endured several months of sizeable protests amidst an economic crisis and despite his careless handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like in the events of the Arab Spring, social media platforms were less susceptible to state censorship and facilitated networked interactions leading to mass public protests after a long period of relative political stagnation (Cf. Howard and Hussain 2013). We also discern key factors of authoritarian resilience at play, as identified by the literature: the mobilization of the state apparatus against the protesters (Cf. Slater and Fenner, 2011; Andersen et al., 2014), an aggressively conspiratorial rhetoric against the opposition, aiming to defend the government’s legitimacy claim (Cf. Gerschewski, 2013) and the intervention of Russia as an external factor providing guidance and support to the Lukashenka regime (Cf. Burnell and Schlumberger, 2019; Jamal, 2012). It is plausible to suggest that a key reason why the regime still secures the cohesion and loyalty of the state apparatus is because Russia keeps offering the kind of political reassurance that helps Lukashenka claim that his system of socioeconomic co-optation would remain in place.

From a theoretical point of view, Belarus demonstrates that socioeconomic co-optation is a key component in the political economy of autocratization. A social and economic structure prone to discretionary allocations of resources by the government, if sustained financially, will allow aspiring autocrats to skew the terms in which political competition takes place heavily in their favor. By offering socioeconomic rewards to supporters and imposing sanctions on dissenters, they signal to the rest of the population the type of benefits and costs they should expect depending on their political behavior. In the absence of sizeable spheres of socioeconomic activity autonomous from government, co-optation practices and signals have a coercive effect on political behavior, forcing citizens to demonstrate complacency with the regime and abstain from openly supporting the political opposition. This way, aspiring autocrats can reduce their exposure to political and electoral competition without resorting to systematic and large-scale violence, which could undermine their claim of public legitimacy.

**Acknowledgments**

The author wants to thank the reviewers, the editor, and the participants of the ECPR workshop on personalistic politics at the Joint Sessions in Mons, Belgium in April 2019 for the valuable comments offered for prior versions of this paper. Special thanks to Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleś Łahviniec for reviewing parts of this paper.

Corresponding author’s email: Atrantidis@lincoln.ac.uk

**References**

Allison, R., White, S. & Light, Margot (2005) “Belarus Between East and West.” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics.* 21 (4), 487–511.

Ambrosio, T. (2014) “Beyond the Transition Paradigm: A Research Agenda for Authoritarian Consolidation.” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization.*

22 (3), 471–495.

Amnesty International (1999) Concerns in Europe, July - December 1998, EUR 01/01/99 at https://www.amnesty.org/fr/documents/EUR01/001/1999/es/ [Accessed 10 March 2020].

Andersen, D., Møller, J., Rørbæk, L. L. & Skaaning, S.-E. (2014) “State Capacity and Political Regime Stability.” *Democratization* 21 (7), 1305–1325.

Clem, J. I., Balmaceda, M. M. & Tarlow, L. L. (eds) (2002) *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Balmaceda, M. (2002) “Belarus as a Transit Route: Domestic and Foreign Policy Implications.” In *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, edited by Margarita Balmaceda et al., 162–196. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Balmaceda, M. (2014a) “Energy Policy in Belarus: Authoritarian Resilience, Social Contracts, and Patronage in a Post-Soviet Environment.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics.* 55 (5), 514–536.

Balmaceda, M. (2014b) *Living the High Life in Minsk: Russian Energy Rents, Domestic Populism and Belarus' Impending Crisis*. Budapest: Central European University Press.

Bakanova, M., de Souza, L. V., Kolesnikova, I. & Abramov, I. (2001) “Explaining Growth in Belarus.” Paper presented for the Global Development Network (GDN) and Economic Education and Research Consortium (EERC) project “Explaining Growth in CIS. Rio de Janeiro.

Bakanova, M. & de Souza, L. V. (2002) “Trade and Growth under Limited Liberalization: The Case of Belarus.” Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper 2002-053/2. Available from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=316339> [Accessed 24 March 2020].

Bakanova, M., Estrin, S., Pelipas, I. & Pukovich, S. (2006) ‘Enterprise Restructuring in Belarus’ William Davidson Institute Working Paper No. 823 Available from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=918081> [Accessed 10 March 2021].

Bernhard, M., Edgellm A. B. & Lindberg, S. I. 2020. “Institutionalising Electoral Uncertainty and Authoritarian Regime Survival.” *European Journal of Political Research*. 59 (2), 465–487.

Bedford, S. (2012) “The Election Game:” Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus.” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization.* 25 (4), 381–405.

Belova-Gille, O. (2003) “Difficulties in Elite Formation in Belarus after 1991.” In *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. & Marsh, R. J. 53–67. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Beichelt, T. (2004) “Autocracy and Democracy in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.” *Democratization*. 11 (5), 113–132.

Bennet, B. (2011) *The Last Dictatorship in Europe: Belarus under Lukashenko*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Brownlee, J. (2007). *Authoritarianism in the Age of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brownlee, J. (2009) “Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions.” *American Journal of Political Science.* 53 (3), 515–532.

Brukoff, P. (2002) “The Belarusian Economy: Is It Sustainable?” In *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, edited by Margarita Balmaceda et al., 109–121. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Brzozovska, A. (2004) “Discourses of Empowerment: Understanding Belarus” International Orientation.” In *Contemporary Change in Belarus*, edited by Egle Rindzeviciute, 73–108. Baltic and East European Studies.

Bugajski, J. (2002) Political Parties of Eastern Europe: A Guide to Politics in the Post-Communist Era. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Bunce, V. J. & Wolchik, S. L. (2006) “International Diffusion and Post-communist Electoral Revolutions.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies.* 39 (3), 1–22.

Burnell, P. & Schlumberger, O. (2010) “Promoting Democracy - Promoting Autocracy? International Politics and National Political Regimes.” *Contemporary Politics.* 16 (1), 1–15.

Dahl, R. (1971) *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.

Deyermond, R. (2004) “The State of the Union: Military Success, Economic and Political failure in the Russia-Belarus Union.” *Europe-Asia Studies.* 56 (8), 1191–1205.

Donno, D. (2013) “Elections and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes.” *American Journal of Political Science.* 57 (3), 703–716.

Dowley, K. M. & Silver, B. D. (2002) “Social Capital, Ethnicity and Support for Democracy in the Post-Communist States.” *Europe-Asia Studies.* 54 (4), 505–527.

Eke, S. M. & Kuzio, T. (2000) “Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus.” *Europe-Asia Studies.* 52 (3), 523–547.

EBRD (1995) *Transition Report 1995: Fixed Investment and Enterprise Development*. London, European Bank of Reconstruction and Development.

Edgell, A. B., Mechkova, V., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., & Lindberg, S. I. (2017) “When and Where Do Elections Matter? A Global Test of the Democratization by Elections Hypothesis, 1900–2010.” *Democratization.* 25 (3), 422–444.

Fish, S. M. (1999) “Postcommunist Subversion: Social Science and Democratization in East Europe and Eurasia.” *Slavic Review.* 58 (4), 794–823.

Frear, M. (2012) “Opposition Strategies for the 2012 Elections in Belarus.” *Baltic Rim Economies.* 19 (6), 23.

Freedom House (2006) “Nations in Transit: Belarus.” Available from [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org), [Accessed 1 September 2017].

Freedom House. (2007) “Freedom in the World- Belarus.” Available from: <http://www.freedomhouse.org.inc> [Accessed 1 September 2018].

Forbrig, J., Marples, D., & Demes, P. (2006) “Introduction.” In Prospects for Democracy in Belarus. (2nd ed.), edited by Forbrig, J., Marples, D. & Demes, P., 11–19. Washington, D.C.: The German Marshall Fund.

Jennider, G. & Ellen Lust-Okar, E. (2009) “Elections Under Authoritarianism.” *Annual Review of Political Science*. 12 (1), 403–422.

Garnett, S. W., and Legvold, R. (eds). (1999) *Belarus At the Crossroads*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Gerschewski, J. (2013) “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Oppression and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes.” *Democratization.* 20 (1), 13–38.

Glambotskaya, A. (2009) “Social Contract: Business.” In *Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus* edited by Haiduk, K., Rakova, E., Silitski, V., 94–114. Vilnius: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Giliomee, H. & Simkins, C. (1999) *The Awkward Embrace: One-Party Domination and Democracy*. Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Göbel. C. (2011) “Authoritarian Consolidation.” *European Political Science.* 10 (2), 176–190

Golosov, G. V. (1998) “Who Survives? Party Origins, Organizational Development, and Electoral Performance in Post-communist Russia.” *Political Studies.* 46 (3), 511–543.

Greene, K. F. (2007) *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico”s Democratization in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Greene, K. F. (2009) “The Political Economy of Authoritarian Single-Party Dominance.” *Comparative Political Studies.* 43 (7), 807–834.

Haerpler, C. W. (2003) “Electoral Politics of Belarus Compared.” In *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. & Marsh, R. J., 85–99. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Haiduk, K. (2009) “Social Contract: A Conceptual Framework.: In *Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus* edited by Haiduk, K., Rakova, E., Silitski, V., 8–25. Vilnius: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Hancock, K. J. (2006) “The Semi-Sovereign State: Belarus and the Russian Neo-Empire”, *Foreign Policy Analysis.* 6 (2), 117–136.

Hawser, A. (2007) “Newsmakers: Belarus Outlines Privatization Plans’, Global Finance, Sunday 18 July 2007. Available from: https://www.gfmag.com/magazine/march-2007/newsmakers-belarus-outlines-privatization-plans [Accessed 1 April 2020].

Helsinki Human Rights Watch (HHRW) (1999) Human Rights Developments: Republic of Belarus. Available from: http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/europe/belarus.html [Accessed 11 December 2007].

Howard, P. N., and Hussain, M. M. (2013) *Democracy’s Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Howard, M. M., and Roessler, P. G. (2006) “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes.” *American Journal of Political Science.* 50 (2), 365–381.

Independent Institute of Socio-Economic Studies (IISEPS) (2001), IISEPS News: *Belarus: Prospects in the XXI Century*, Results of a National Opinion Poll in October 2001. 4 (22), December 2001. Available from http://www.iiseps.org/?p=2277&lang=en [Accessed 10 June 2020].

International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2006) *World Economic Outlook Database 2006*. April 2006. Washington DC.

Ioffe, G. (2004) “Understanding Belarus: Economy and Political Landscape.” *Europe-Asia Studies*. 56 (1), 85–118.

Ioffe, G. (2007) “Unfinished Nation-Building in Belarus and the 2006 Presidential Elections.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics.* 48 (1), 37–58.

Kaya, R. & Bernhard, M. (2013) Are Elections Mechanisms of Authoritarian Stability or Democratization? Evidence from Postcommunist Eurasia. *Perspectives on Politics.* 11 (3), 734–752.

Korosteleva, E. A. (2000) “Electoral Volatility in Postcommunist Belarus: Explaining the Paradox.” *Party Politics.* 6 (3), 343–358.

Korosteleva, E. A. (2003a) “Is Belarus a Demagogical Democracy?.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs.* 16 (3), 525–533.

Korosteleva, E. A. (2003b) “Party System Development in Post-communist Belarus”. In *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson and Rosalind J. Marsh, 68–84. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Korosteleva, E. A. (2004) “The Quality of Democracy in Belarus and Ukraine”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*. 20 (1),122–142.

Korosteleva, E. (2009a) “Was There a Quiet Revolution? Belarus after the 2006 Presidential Election. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*. 25 (2-3), 324–346.

Korosteleva. E. (2009b) “The Limits Of EU Governance: Belarus's Response to the European Neighbourhood Policy.” *Contemporary Politics*. 15 (2), 229–245.

Korosteleva, E. (2012) “Questioning Democracy Promotion: Belarus” Response to the “Colour Revolutions.” *Democratization.* 19 (1), 37–59.

Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. & Marsh, R. J. (2003) *Contemporary Belarus. Between Democracy and Dictatorship*. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Jamal, A. A. (2012) *Of Empires and Citizens*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lawson, C. W. (2003) “Path-dependence and the Economy of Belarus: The Consequences of the Late Reforms.” In *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. & Marsh, R. J., 125–136. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Leshchenko, N. (2008) The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus. *Europe-Asia Studies.* 60 (8), 1419–1433.

Levitsky, S. and Way, L. A. (2002) “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy.* 13 (2), 51–65.

Lindberg, S. I. (2006) *Democracy and Elections in Africa*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lindberg, S. I. (2007) “Democratization by Elections in Africa Revisited.” Paper presented at American Political Association’s 103rd Annual Meeting, August 30 –September 2, 2007.

Lindberg, S. (2009) *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lindner, R. (2002) “The Lukashenka Phenomenon.” In *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, edited by Balmaceda et al, 77-108. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lisovskaia, N. & Korosteleva, J. (2003) “Economic Policy in Belarus from official and Oppositional Perspectives.” In *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. and Marsh, R. J., 137–151. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Lubachko, I. (1972) *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule*. Lexington, Kentucky: Kentucky University Press.

Lust, E. (2009) “Democratization by Elections? Competitive Clientelism in the Middle East”. *Journal of Democracy.* 20 (3), 122–135.

Lust‐Okar, E. (2009) Legislative Elections in Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes: Competitive Clientelism and Resistance to Democratization. In *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition*, edited by Lindberg, S. I., 226–245. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Marin, A. (2012) “Sociological Study on the Composition of the Belarusian Society. Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union.” European Parliament Working Paper.

Magaloni, B. (2006) *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Marples, D. (1999) *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*. Amsterdam: Hanwood Academic.

Marples, D. (1999b) “National Awakening and National Consciousness in Belarus.” *Nationalities Papers*. 27 (4), 565-578.

Marples, D. (2004a) “The Lukashenka Presidency and the Future of Belarus”. In *Contemporary Change in Belarus*, edited by Rindzeviciute, E., 7–20. Huddinge: Baltic and East European Studies.

Marples, D. (2004b) “The Prospects for Democracy in Belarus.” *Problems of Post-Communism.* 51 (1), 31–42.

Marples, D. (2006) “Color Revolutions: The Case of Belarus.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies.* 39 (3), 351–364.

Marples, D. and Padhol, U. (2002) “The Opposition in Belarus: History, Potential, and Perspectives.” In *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, edited by Balmaceda, M., et al., 55–76. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Matsuzato, K. (2004) “A Populist Island in an Ocean of Clan Politics: The Lukashenka Regime as an Exception among CIS Countries.” *Europe-Asia Studies*. 56 (2), 235-261.

Mihalisko, K. J. (1997) “Retreat to Authoritarianism.” In *The Consolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe*, edited by Dawisha, K., and Parrott, B., pp 223–281. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, Michael K. (2015) “Democratic Pieces: Autocratic Elections and Democratic Development Since 1815.” *British Journal of Political Science*. 45 (3), 501–530.

Nikonov, V. (1999) “The Place of Belarus on Russia”s Foreign Policy Agenda.” In *Belarus at the Crossroads*, edited by Garnett, S. W. & Legvold, R., 131–173. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Organization for Social and Economic Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, European Union, and International Limited Election Observation Mission (2001) *Presidential Election in the Republic of Belarus: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, Minsk 10 September 2001.

OSCE - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2006) *Republic of Belarus. Presidential Election 19 March 2006, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report*, Warsaw 7 June 2006.

Padhol, U., and Marples, D. (2011) “The 2010 Presidential Election in Belarus,” *Problems of Post-Communism*. 58 (1), 3–16.

Rakova, E. and Lisovskaya, T. (2009) “Social Contract: Civil Servants.” In *Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus* edited by Haiduk, K., Rakova, E., Silitski, V., 115–145. Vilnius: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Rose, R., and Haerpfer, C. (1998) *New Democracies Barometer V: A 12-Nation Survey, Center for the Study of Public Policy*. Glasgow Scotland: University of Strathclyde, no. 306.

Rotman, D. G. & Danilov, A. N. (2003) “President and Opposition: Specific Features of the Belarusian Political Scene”, *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. & Marsh, R. J., 100–111. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Sahm, A. & Westphal, K. (2002) “Power and the Yamal Pipeline.” In *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, edited by Margarita Balmaceda et al., 270–301. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sebastián, S. (2005) “The Belarusian Challenge: Context for a Democratic Strategy in Europe”s: Last Dictatorship.” *International Affairs Review.* 14 (1), 77–98.

Schedler, A. (2002) “The Nested Game of Democratization by Elections.” *International Political Science Review.* 23 (1), 103–122.

Schedler A. (ed.) (2006) *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Silitksi, V. (2005) “Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus.” *Journal of Democracy*. 16 (4), 83–97.

Silitski, V. (2006) “Belarus: Learning from Defeat.” *Journal of Democracy*. 17 (4), 138–152.

Silitski, V. (2007) “Belarus and Russia: Comradeship-in-arms in Preempting Democracy.” In *Political Trends in the New Eastern Europe*, edited by Moshes, A. and Silitski, V. Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College.

Silitski, V. (2009a) “Reading Russia: Tools of Autocracy.” *Journal of Democracy.* 20 (2), 42–46.

Silitski, V. (2009b) “What Are We Trying to Explain?” *Journal of Democracy.* 20 (1), 86–89.

Silitski, V. (2010a) “Contagion Deterred: Preemptive Authoritarianism in the Former Soviet Union (the Case of Belarus).” In *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, edited by Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, 274–299. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silitski V. (2010b) “Survival of the Fittest: Domestic and International Dimensions of the Authoritarian Reaction in the Formal Soviet Union Following the Colored Revolutions.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies.* 43 (4), 339–350.

Slater, D. and Fenner, S. (2011) “State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability.” *Journal of International Affairs.* 65 (1), 15–29.

Praneviciute-Neliupšiene, J. and Maksimiuk, Z. (2012) “Authoritarian Bargain in Belarus: The System of Social Benefits as a Factor of Regime Stability.” *Politologija.* 4 (68), 106–140.

Ragin, C. C. (1987) *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rontoyanni, C. and Korosteleva, E. A. (2005) “Belarus: An Authoritarian Exception from the Model of Post-Communist Democratic Transitions?.” In *Socialising Democratic Norms: The Role of International Organisations for the Construction of Europe,* edited byTrine Flockhart, 209–231. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Teorell, J. and Hadenius, A. (2009) “Elections as Levers of Democratization: A Global Inquiry.” In *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transitio*n, edited by Lindberg, S. I., 77–100. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Törnquist-Plewa, B. (2004) “The Union between Belarus and Russia in the Context of Belarusian Nation-Building.” In *Contemporary Change in Belarus*, edited by Rindzeviciute, E., 21–39. Stockholm: Södertörns Högskola

Trantidis, A. (2015) “Clientelism and the Classification of Dominant Party Systems.” *Democratization*. 22 (1), 113–133.

Tucker, J. A. (2007) “Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems and Post‐Communist Colored Revolutions.” *Perspectives on Politics.* 5 (3), 537–553.

UN Commission on Human Rights (2005) *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus*, 18 March 2005. E/CN.4/2005/35.

UN Commission on Human Rights (2006) *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus*, 16 January 2006. E/CN.4/2006/36.

UN Development Program (UNDP) (1997) *Belarus: A State for People*. National Human Development Report, Minsk.

UN Development Program (UNDP) (2005) *Belarus: Addressing Imbalances in the Economy and Society.* National Human Development Report 2004–2005, Minsk: UND. Available from: <http://un.by/pdf/1321_eng.pdf> [Accessed on 12 May 2019].

UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2005) *Economic Survey of Europe., No 2.* United Nations: New York and Geneva.

Van de Walle, N. (2006) “Tipping Games? When Do Opposition Parties Coalesce?.” In *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, edited by Schedler, A., 99–92. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Way, L. A. (2010) “Resistance to Contagion: Sources of Authoritarian Stability in the Former Soviet Union.” In *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, edited by Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, 229–252. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

White, S. (2011) “Debating Belarus: A Framing Content.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics.* 52 (6), 799–808.

Evans, G. and Whitefield, S. (1993) “Identifying the Bases of Party Competition in Eastern Europe.” *British Journal of Political Science*. 23 (4), 521–548.

Wilson, A. (2011) *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

World Bank (2005) “Belarus: Window of Opportunity to Enhance Competitiveness and Sustain Economic Growth, A Country Economic Memorandum for the Republic of Belarus.” Report No. 32346-BY, November 8, 2005, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Europe and Central Asia Region. Washington D.C.: World Bank.

Yarashevich, V. (2014) “Political Economy of Modern Belarus: Going Against Mainstream?.” *Europe-Asia Studies.* 66 (10), 1703–1734.

Zaprudnik, J. (1993) *Belarus: at a Crossroads in History*. Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press.

Zaprudnic, J. (2003) “Belarus. In Search of National Identity Between 1986 and 2000.” In *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, edited by Korosteleva, E. A., Lawson, C. W. and Marsh, R. J., 112–124. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Zlotnikov L. (2002a) “In the Noose of Populism: Eleven Years of the Belarusian Economic Model. 1991–2001).” In *The EU and Belarus. Between Moscow and Brussels*, edited by Lewis, A., 127–154. London: Federal Trust.

Zlotnikov, L. 2002b. “Possibilities for the Development of a Private Economic Sector and a Middle Class as a Source of Political Change in Belarus.” In *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, edited by Margarita Balmaceda et al., 122–161. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

1. Evans and Whitefield expected that Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia would experience a decline in terms of their normative commitment to democracy (Evans and Whitefield 1993:545-546). Among these countries, only Belarus and Russia later developed stable hegemonic regimes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Despite electoral irregularities (OSCE 2006), Lukashenka retained relatively high levels of popularity. For instance, in 2001, an independent poll gave Lukashenka a popularity of around 45% (See IISEPS, 2001, p. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Belarus was drifted to independence rather unwillingly (Cf. Garnett and Legvold 1999, 2). In the Union plebiscite of March 1991, 83% of Belarusians voted in favour of upholding the USSR (Mihalisko 1997, 242; Marples 1999a, 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hančaryk later noticed: ‘I was promised support from the leaders of a number of large enterprises, material support, campaigning among people… However, I admit, this did not work as expected’, Interview with Vítal' Tsygankoŭ for Tabula Rasa, available from: <https://zautra.by/news/news-5978>, 19 March 2010 [Last accessed 10 July 2021]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Real per capita income in 1995 was 56% of the 1990 income level (UNDP, 1997, p. 15). The real wage in 1995 fell into a 55.3% of what was in 1990 (UNDP, 1997, p. 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. However, poverty was unevenly distributed with the lowest concentration in Minsk (10.4% in 2003) and the urban centres, and the highest in rural areas (UNDP 2005, 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By 13.4%, with Uzbekistan 19.5%, while the total GDP growth in the CIS was -19.8% (UNECE, 2005 p. 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Belarus large-scale businessmen did not have access to sources of income independently of the president, which meant much more limited freedom of action than in the Ukrainian case.’ (Balmaceda 2014, 527). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The degree of dependence was illustrated by several studies published by the Institute for Privatisation and Management (IPM) available from <http://eng.research.by/publications/dp/> [Last accessed 1 July 2021]. A hike in gas prices would have caused substantial losses in the Belarusian economy and could have forced the Belarusian government to draw revenue through extensive privatisation (Cf. Hawser 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)