An Eastern Slavic Brotherhood: The Determinative Factors Affecting Democratic Development in Ukraine and Belarus

Thesis

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Abstract

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, fifteen successor states emerged as independent nations that began transitions toward democratic governance and a market economy. These efforts have met with various levels of success. Three of these countries have since experienced “color revolutions,” which have been characterized by initial public demonstrations against the old order and a subsequent revision of the rules of the political game. In 2004-2005, these “color revolutions” were greeted by many international observers with optimism for these countries’ progress toward democracy. In hindsight, however, the term itself needs to be assessed for its accuracy, as the political developments that followed seemed to regress away from democratic goals. In one of these countries, Ukraine, the Orange Revolution has brought about renewed hope in democracy, yet important obstacles remain. Belarus, Ukraine’s northern neighbor, shares many structural similarities yet has not experienced a “color revolution.” Anti-governmental demonstrations in Minsk in 2006 were met with brutal force that spoiled the opposition’s hopes of reenacting a similar political outcome to that which Ukraine’s Orange Coalition was able to achieve in 2004. Through a comparative analysis of these two countries, it is found that the significant factors that prevented a “color revolution” in Belarus are a cohesive national identity that aligns with an authoritarian value system, a lack of engagement with U.S. and European institutions, and the Belarusian regime’s continued economic and political support from Russian leaders.
Acknowledgements

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I. Introduction: Colorful Perspectives

For students of transitology, the phenomena of the “color revolutions” in three former republics of the Soviet Union present challenging and intellectually fruitful possibilities for analysis within the framework of these countries’ development of liberal political institutions and competitive markets. In all of these cases, mass demonstrations ended with a revision of “politics as usual” and brought about hope amongst citizens of these countries as well as amongst international observers who advocated democracy and free markets as the best solutions to the problems faced by post-communist states. By the time the first “color revolution” occurred in Ukraine at the end of 2004, many former communist countries had been accepted into the club of European democracies. The enlargement of the European Union to include many members of the former Eastern bloc gave other states hope that one day they too could reach a point of development that would allow them to gain access to this club. Thus, Ukrainians’ rejection of falsified and corrupt election results appeared to signal that they were ready to join the democratic fold. These were heady days indeed, not just in Ukraine, but also for observers in the European Union and the United States, where spreading democracy was a priority in the Bush administration.
Hindsight and temporal distance, however, have provided a deeper understanding of the political significance of the “color revolutions” of 2004-2005. Indeed, one could ask whether \textit{revolution} accurately describes these political events, as each partially contradicts the meaning of the term. If we take \textit{revolution} to mean a complete transformation of the previous political order, then these cases cannot be described as such. In each case, the coalitions that emerged victorious later faced serious challenges to democratic consolidation in their respective countries. In Ukraine, the Orange Coalition has fragmented and regrouped multiple times, allowing the loser and symbol of the old guard in the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yanukovych, to reenter the political scene. More importantly, Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, leaders of two of the Orange parties and two of the country’s most visible politicians, have since revealed that they are just as capable of petty political maneuvering and power grabs as the “antidemocratic” forces they claimed to have bested in 2004.

Similarly, the Georgian government of Mikheil Saakashvili cracked down on protesters and free media in November 2007, actions which made many European observers reconsider Georgia’s readiness to join Western political and military institutions. In Kyrgyzstan, the new government that replaced the corrupt regime of Askar Akayev fell into popular disfavor within a few months of being elected for its inability to crack down on corruption. These developments might prompt observers to dismiss these “color revolutions” as insignificant changes of the guard that merely substituted one corrupt regime with another. Other analysts, particularly those who wish to spread democratic and liberal economic values to the countries of the former Soviet
Union, might view these political developments as replicable techniques and tactics which could apply to other cases, such as Belarus, Azerbaijan, or Uzbekistan.

Clearly, if even basic terminology is problematic, the task of classifying the political developments in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan can appear daunting. While revolution is perhaps not an entirely accurate description, it is the popularly used term when referring to these three events and will be used throughout the following analysis. These “color revolutions” are best understood as a series of interconnected political events that occurred at unique moments along their countries’ paths of development. In particular, both Georgian and Kyrgyz opposition members looked to the Ukrainian experience in preparation for their own political actions. These were not moments of “arrival” at a liberal democratic end, but rather signs of progression into the category of “partial democracies,” alternatively titled “fragile” or “unconsolidated democracies.”

Some scholars of transition, such as Thomas Carothers, even take issue with these terms, arguing that they imply a teleological and ideological framework. Thus, one should not dismiss the importance of the “color revolutions,” as they constituted significant political events that changed many things about their countries’ political systems, but should critically assess their classification in order to avoid some of the teleological assumptions of which many transitologists seem so enamored.

Ukraine was the first former Soviet republic to experience such a political event, but there was a limited window of opportunity following the Orange Revolution for other countries to follow in Kiev’s example. Leaders in other countries, such as Vladimir Putin

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in Russia and Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus, quickly realized the potential threat to their power and adopted harsh measures to prevent similar developments in their own countries. For Belarus, the period in which it was at all possible to replicate a “color revolution” ended in Minsk on March 25, 2006, when the authorities used brutal methods to put down anti-governmental demonstrations.

It would appear fitting, therefore, to examine the failure of Belarus’ “Blue Revolution” within the context of that country’s trajectory following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term “Blue Revolution” was conceived for this analysis in order to conveniently refer to the events of March 2006 in Minsk, and takes its name from the symbols used by the opposition. It will be surrounded by quotation marks because, compared to the other “color revolutions,” it was an outright failure. The reasons for this failure will be examined below in the context of Belarus’ development as an independent nation.

Similarly, in order to understand the phenomenon of the Orange Revolution, one must place it into the wider context of Ukraine’s path since independence. Ultimately, Ukraine and Belarus have had quite different experiences since becoming independent states in 1991, both in their relations with the European Union and the Russian Federation. By looking at the different ways in which they have developed, it is clear that the Lukashenka regime in Belarus has followed a consistent policy of “meeting the needs of the time,” while Ukraine has followed a determined, albeit rocky, course toward European integration.

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Because these two countries share so many similarities, a comparative analysis emerges as the best method of determining why Ukraine has developed into a fledgling democracy, while Belarus has languished in a state of authoritarianism. Essentially, why did the Orange Revolution in Ukraine produce a successful revision of allegedly false election results and a democratic transfer of power, while the “Blue Revolution” in Belarus brought about tighter repression? Finally, what do the answers to these questions say about the future of these countries both domestically and internationally?
II. Why Belarus and Ukraine? Establishing a Basis for Comparison

These two countries might not appear to be the best suited for comparison due to various structural differences (Ukraine’s population is about five times that of Belarus, its industry is much more diverse, and its population more heterogeneous), but there are several reasons favoring such an analysis. First, of all of the former Soviet republics, Belarus and Ukraine are the most culturally related to Russia. Eastern Orthodoxy, along with its political, social, and cultural norms, has long been the dominant religion in all three of these countries. Such shared religious beliefs would lead one to conclude that these countries share similar political and social values. Second, Moscow had the most success in importing Soviet ideology into Ukraine and Belarus, as compared with the other republics. Eastern Ukraine in particular and almost the entirety of Belarus were viewed as strong loci of support for the communist project within the Soviet Union, and many people in these areas continue to express such sympathies.4

Finally, because these two countries have so many cultural similarities, their divergent paths since independence should appear striking. It is undeniable that Belarus and Ukraine have followed quite different courses since 1991. The former has chosen to maintain a political and economic system closely resembling that of the Soviet Union, while the latter has attempted to introduce political and economic liberalization. Ukraine

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has followed a path toward further integration with the European Union and NATO, and has made a point to voice solidarity with countries that have conflicts with Russia, such as Georgia. Belarus, on the other hand, has become a pariah state amongst Western institutions, maintaining strong economic and political ties to Russia, as well as associations with other “outcasts” of the world such as Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba.

A look at the Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties of Ukraine and Belarus (see Figure 1 below) reveals the sharp divergence between these two countries. The chart below shows these scores since independence in 1991. Freedom House’s rankings, while they are not absolute indicators of democracy, are generally accepted as amongst the best and most comprehensive, taking into account such aspects as citizens’ access to the political system, their ability to form civil society institutions, strong legal institutions, economic freedoms, and the strength of independent media organizations. A score of 1 indicates the most democratic government, while a score of 7 indicates the most authoritarian. According to Freedom House’s rankings, while Belarus and Ukraine appeared to be developing similarly in the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they began to diverge sharply, finally reaching almost opposite ends of the spectrum by 2008. While Ukraine has not received a higher score than 2.5, it has reached the classification of “free,” as opposed to Belarus, which is classified as “not free.”

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While Ukraine and Belarus rank quite differently in terms of democratic freedoms, their economic performance to date has not been as disparate. Following the unraveling of the Soviet Union, both countries underwent steep declines in economic growth. Belarus, on the other hand, recovered quickly, and resumed positive growth numbers in 1996, as opposed to Ukraine which did not resume positive growth until 2001.\textsuperscript{6} In the period 2003-2007, both of these countries experienced relatively high growth rates in GDP (over 7% in Ukraine and over 9% in Belarus). Thus, while Ukraine’s economic slump was longer than Belarus’, they both experienced similar growth patterns in the aftermath of the Russian financial crisis of 1998.\textsuperscript{7} If these numbers

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Freedom House Scores for Belarus and Ukraine}
\end{figure}

are not radically different, however, a glance at many of the structural characteristics of Ukraine and Belarus (see Table 1) provide a little more insight into the major differences between these two countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Factors</th>
<th>Ukraine</th>
<th>Belarus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political system post-communism</td>
<td>Strongly Presidential pre-2004 election, Currently Split Presidential/Parliamentary</td>
<td>Strongly Presidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic conditions during and post-communism</td>
<td>Heavily Industrialized</td>
<td>Heavily Industrialized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of distinct national history</td>
<td>Yes (Western Ukraine)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political polarization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credible opposition party(s)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant ethnic identity cleavages</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy reliance on resource transit in economy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Eastern Orthodoxy or Western Christianity</td>
<td>Orthodoxy</td>
<td>Orthodoxy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical domination by Russia/Soviet Union</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties dominated by personalities rather than policies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Structural Characteristics of Ukraine and Belarus

In this comparative analysis, the most interesting and useful structural differences are the presence of a distinct national history, political polarization, credible opposition, and significant ethnic identity cleavages. As discussed below, these four variables differ sharply between the two cases and provide a useful starting point. We can go further, however, and look at significant economic and political decisions each country’s leadership has made since independence (see Table 2). In these cases, the differences are even more apparent between Ukraine and Belarus, as the former has attempted more
comprehensive economic and political reform, while the latter has consistently refused to make any meaningful progress toward political liberalization or market reforms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Choices</th>
<th>Ukraine</th>
<th>Belarus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Choices</td>
<td>Period of resistance to reform, followed by marketization and gradual liberalization</td>
<td>After brief and incomplete price liberalization, no significant economic reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shifted to market economy and opened to foreign investment in mid- to late-1990s</td>
<td>Reversion to and maintenance of command economy, system of price and wage decrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Choices</td>
<td>Political system dominated by holdovers from Communist government until 2004, when opposition parties gained access to government</td>
<td>Only one free and fair election since independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambiguous power relationship between president and prime minister</td>
<td>Rubber stamp legislature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large amount of political polarization</td>
<td>All power concentrated in hands of president, who may run for unlimited terms in office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Policy Choices of Leadership in Ukraine and Belarus

What follows are descriptions of political and economic developments in Ukraine and Belarus, in which the above aspects will be discussed in much greater detail. Ultimately, the crucial factors that have affected Ukrainian and Belarusian trajectories since independence are their different political systems, the presence or absence of a distinct national history, the degree of ethnic cleavages, and political polarization between at least two credible opposition parties. Finally, implications for future development will be discussed in the context of the broader geopolitical issues that will possibly affect these structural and policy issues.
III. Setting the Color Standard in Ukraine

Because the first “color revolution” occurred in Ukraine, it is helpful to examine some of the economic, political, and social factors that made that event possible. While many scholars still debate exactly when the Soviet Union ceased to exist, one can make a strong argument that it ended on December 8, 1991, when the leaders of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republics met at Belavezha and signed an accord establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States. Since that famous (or infamous) meeting took place, these three countries have pursued quite different methods of economic development and placed themselves in distinct contrast with each other within the realm of European politics.

Among political economists, especially those studying the politics and economics of the former Soviet Union, the great economic debate of the early 1990s involved the concepts of gradualism and “shock therapy” for countries transitioning from socialism to capitalism. The former posited that in order for market mechanisms to have a chance at success, the government needed to implement institutional reforms and create the necessary legal and financial framework for private enterprise. The latter argued that the most important aspects of such a transition were price liberalization, macroeconomic stabilization, and rapid privatization.\(^8\) The logic behind “shock therapy” in Eastern

Europe and the former Soviet Union insisted that speed was of the essence when transitioning to a market economy in order to prevent the old Communist elites from regaining control over economic and political institutions. This neoliberal approach placed market forces over the creation of institutions, which “shock therapists” believed would emerge naturally.

Following independence in Ukraine, the country muddled through almost a decade of severe economic decline due to its reliance on Cold War military production and its connections with the other Soviet republics. By 1999, Ukraine’s GDP had declined by sixty percent of its 1991 level. Ukraine’s development proceeded along this path for a few reasons. First, the first governments of Ukraine under Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma did not attempt either path of economic reform until 1996, five years after independence, but rather tried to maintain the status quo of the Soviet period. Ukraine also held large foreign debts with short-term maturity which placed heavy strain on the government’s financial resources. In 1998, even though structural economic reforms began two years earlier, the Asian financial crisis that wiped out the Russian economy also wreaked havoc in Ukraine. Inflation increased, currency reserves plummeted, and foreign debts remained unpaid. Clearly, by 1999, most Ukrainians were convinced that something needed to change.

In 1999, the reformist government of Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko enacted economic reforms that continued Ukraine’s path toward a market economy and a stable foreign investment climate. In the period of 2000 to late 2008, the Ukrainian economy saw increasing expansion and improvement. While there were areas that still needed

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10 Ibid., 95-97.
attention, the trend was definitely upward. Ukrainian politics, on the other hand, faced significant challenges and setbacks that grew more apparent by the 2002 parliamentary elections.

Although the pro-European Yushchenko had been appointed prime minister and had enacted several political reforms, the 1999 reelection of Kuchma in the presidential election was widely criticized by European observers. Perhaps signifying the muddled positions of many Ukrainian politicians, Yushchenko was the darling of Western Europe and the United States at the time, but earlier government actions had laid the groundwork for Ukraine’s movement toward the European Union. Specifically, in 1996, Kuchma’s government announced its intention to one day join the Union.\(^{11}\) Along these lines Yushchenko announced in 2000 that “50 per cent of the [reasons for] criticism made by the EU” had been successfully addressed.\(^{12}\)

Despite (or perhaps because of) his success in radically improving the economy and politically bringing Ukraine more in line with EU membership criteria, Yushchenko was dismissed in 2001. This action, along with Kuchma’s reelection, was viewed by European leaders as a step backward for the aspiring country.\(^{13}\) Indeed, while Ukraine was improving economically in terms of increased GDP and foreign investment, its political situation was declining. Much as the economic sphere had become dominated by oligarchs, the political arena underwent an “oligarchisation” that severely obscured the intentions and motives of most political parties.\(^{14}\) Essentially, this process created a class

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13 Wolczuk, 177.
of political elites who viewed the political realm as a place where personal fortunes could be made and loyalty always carried a price tag. Finally, the disappearance and supposed murder of the opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze cast a dark pall over the political situation in Ukraine, as the ensuing scandal embroiled Kuchma and many of his closest advisors.\(^\text{15}\)

Kuchma’s corrupt and draconian policies toward oppositionists and independent media created widespread resentment among many citizens of Ukraine, who subsequently voted for Yushchenko and his Our Ukraine party in the 2002 parliamentary elections. Their victory in procuring the most votes was short lived, however, as pro-presidential parties quickly formed a ruling coalition. Many Ukrainians also resented Russia’s interference in their country’s politics and in 2002 marched against an economic treaty between the two nations. Despite Ukrainians’ abilities to hold public demonstrations and democratically elect the party of their choice in the parliamentary elections, they still had to endure two more years of Kuchma and his administration.

During this period, Ukraine was best characterized as a “feckless pluralist” state, which as Carothers argues presents an alternative to democratic transition. This alternative consists of “significant amounts of political freedom, regular elections, and alternation of power between genuinely different political groupings” but democratic transition remains “shallow and troubled.” Moreover, most of the population only participates politically during national elections and most of the country’s politicians appear corrupt and incompetent.\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{16}\) Carothers, 10.
Yushchenko continued to gain popularity throughout 2003 and 2004, and ran against Kuchma’s chosen successor, Viktor Yanukovych in the 2004 presidential election. On December 26, 2004, Yushchenko defeated Yanukovych in a free and fair election. This victory, however, followed several months of uncertainty as Yanukovych and his allies used intimidation, bribery, and voter fraud to try and cement their power. Yushchenko suffered from dioxin poisoning during the election, and it is highly likely that the state security services attempted to assassinate him.17 Following the first and highly suspect election in November in which Yanukovych won a dubious majority, the Supreme Court struck down the results. At the same time, the parliament approved legislation that improved the climate for political and civil liberties and shifted more power to the Rada, Ukraine’s legislature, and to the prime minister. Yushchenko won the new election handily amid massive public demonstrations in his support and in opposition to the fraudulent election results of the previous ballot.18 This series of events was termed the Orange Revolution after the color of the opposition coalition that came to power in an environment of immense good will and renewed faith in the future of democracy in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, optimism lasted for only a few months, as the president and his prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, as well as the other members of the Orange Coalition, fell to bickering over the country’s industrial and natural resources. The political infighting convinced many Ukrainians that the new government was not so different from the Kuchma administration. Many of the coalition’s members viewed

financial and political power as their due for supporting Yushchenko, showing that corruption still persisted in the government. Yushchenko also received blame for the lagging economy. In September 2005, Yushchenko dismissed his government. In the following year’s parliamentary elections, Yanukovych’s Party of Regions managed to form a coalition, and in August 2006, the Rada appointed him to the post of prime minister.19 Thus, less than two years after the Orange Revolution, the two presidential rivals occupied positions that in many ways competed for power within the government.

Since Yanukovych’s return to a position of power, Ukraine has seen the Orange Coalition reform, disband, and reform once again.20 Clearly, the Orange Revolution did not have the happy ending that many observers envisioned, and it is hard to point to significant political progress since those elections. Rather, the events of December 2004 were a major step in the direction of democracy, similar to the political liberalization that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As with that earlier transformation, however, the country has regressed and progressed in lurching fashion in subsequent years.

While the current government of Ukraine favors continuing the country’s progression into the European fold, Ukrainian society remains heavily divided over the best course for the future. As is the case in Belarus, national identity plays a large role in determining in which direction Ukrainians believe they should orient themselves.21 As is to be expected, those who see themselves as Ethnic Ukrainian seem to favor closer ties

with European institutions, while those who see themselves as Eastern Slavic tend to believe that Ukraine should seek integration with Russia. The question of identity becomes a little more complex when economic reform is discussed, but there is a clear correlation between identity and political orientation.\textsuperscript{22} Approximately half of the national decision-making elites in Ukraine support European integration\textsuperscript{23}, which has proved to be an important factor in moving the country closer to the European Union.

As discussed below, Belarus does not have such noticeable cleavages in its national identity, which causes the majority of the population to lean toward Russian cultural, political, and linguistic influences. Also, the national elites in Belarus view the concessions demanded to further dialogue with the European Union as a possible threat to their own positions of power. These factors have prompted skepticism amongst the Belarusian populace and have been to the Lukashenka regime’s advantage, as it can easily depict itself as an embattled leadership surrounded by hostile forces. Outside the government, opposition leaders in Belarus hoped to replicate the success that the Orange parties experienced in Ukraine. Unfortunately, due to several aspects of the Belarusian political system, they were catastrophically unsuccessful.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Pidluska, 190.
IV. Dispersing the “Blue Revolution” in Belarus

On March 2, 2006, Belarusian opposition candidate for the presidency Alyaksandr Milinkevich addressed a crowd of ten thousand people gathered on Freedom Square in Minsk. After urging the crowd to reconvene at October Square on March 19th, the day of the presidential election, Milinkevich removed a blue scarf from his neck, waved it in the air, and shouted, “Синий – наш цвет!” (“Blue is our color!”). Besides Milinkevich, another famous opposition presidential candidate, Alyaksandr Kozulin, was in attendance. Over the next few weeks, the police and Belarusian KGB responded by rounding up known opposition activists, either beating them savagely or throwing them in prison on charges of inciting public unrest.

On the day of the election, a large crowd gathered at October Square, which by 10:00pm was filled with around twenty thousand people. Both Milinkevich and Kozulin were there and they asked the demonstrators to return to the square the next day. At the demonstration on March 20th, the protesters formulated a Declaration of the People of the Republic of Belarus which called for the recognition of the election results as illegitimate and charged the Central Election Commission of Belarus with falsifying the counting. During the following three days a small tent city appeared on October Square, ultimately growing to about 35 tents. Milinkevich also announced plans for a large opposition

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demonstration, the “Day of Liberty,” to be held on March 25th. Police and OMON (Special Forces) stood around the area, detaining and harassing people headed to the square, many of whom were bringing supplies and warm tea to the demonstrators. On March 23rd, the Central Election Commission announced that incumbent candidate Alyaksandr Lukashenka had won the presidential election. The tent city on October Square continued to grow, as did the police presence around the square and on nearby streets.

Finally, on the “Day of Liberty,” events came to a head between the activists and the authorities. The night before, the police had quietly cleared the area of journalists and arrested everyone in the tent city, loading around three hundred protesters into vans and buses and taking them to an unknown location. Around noon, approximately five thousand demonstrators left October Square carrying flowers and flags. As they moved along Independence Avenue and Lenin Street, the demonstration grew to about ten thousand people. Before they could get much further, however, the crowd was brutally dispersed by members of the OMON wielding clubs and tear gas. Ultimately, about 500 people were arrested and charged, including Alyaksandr Kozulin, who was sentenced to five and a half years in a forced labor colony.

In a counter-factual historical world, these events might have been remembered as Belarus’s “Blue Revolution,” much akin to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the Rose Revolution in Georgia. The government might have been persuaded to hold another election in which an opposition coalition came to power through legal and democratic methods, which in turn might have propelled Belarus

\[25\text{ Ibid., 45-46.} \]
\[26\text{ Ibid., 47-48.} \]
along a trajectory toward further integration with the European Union. Indeed, the
description of the events above bears remarkable similarities to Ukraine’s Orange
Revolution. Why was a similar political event so unsuccessful in Belarus? Essentially,
the political and economic development of Belarus up to that point precluded any transfer
of power in the 2006 elections due to the absence of a nationally recognized and credible
opposition and the Lukashenka regime’s determination to prevent any challenge to its
power.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, the Republic of Belarus
became an independent nation. Lukashenka, following the dominant cultural affinity
within the Belarusian populace, has since the late 1990s, favored a political and economic
union with Russia. While he has equivocated on the idea after several oil disputes in
which Russia strong-armed Belarus into capitulation, Lukashenka heavily relies on the
Russian leadership for legitimacy and support. Belarus conducts the majority of its trade
with Russia (around 50% of its exports and 70% of its imports) and can attribute much
of its economic growth to subsidized Russian oil.

Compared to the other European republics of the former Soviet Union, Belarus is
by far the most repressive, receives the least amount of money from the United States and
the European Union, and is the least integrated with Western political and economic
institutions. According to several international organizations that monitor political rights
and civil liberties, Belarus has grown increasingly intolerant of dissent and anything
resembling political activism among the populace over the last decade and a half.28

27 Martha A. Starr, “Does Money Matter in the CIS? Effects of Monetary Policy on Output and
Prices,” Journal of Comparative Economics Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 2005), 444.
Compared with the other republics in the Soviet Union, Belarus experienced high economic growth rates between 1960 and 1985, the year that Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and the restructuring and reform of the Soviet economic and political system began. Fast-paced economic growth led to rapid urbanization, but with a strange twist: by the 1990s, most urban Belarusian citizens were still first- and second-generation city-dwellers. This aspect of Belarusian society has created an urban population that maintains a largely “feudal-patriarchal” set of values.\footnote{Leonid Zlotnikov, “Possibilities for the Development of a Private Economic Sector and a Middle Class as a Source of Political Change in Belarus,” in \textit{Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West}, ed. Margarita M. Balmaceda et al., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2002), 124.} This conservative outlook tends to disapprove of enterprise and business, while at the same time respecting authoritarianism and minimizing the rule of law and human rights. Thus, the Belarusian population proved especially vulnerable to cooptation by powerful politicians who used populist rhetoric in their solutions to the economic problems of the collapsing Soviet Union. Using resonant Soviet symbols, Lukashenka frequently references “Grandpa Lenin,” and many Belarusians reverently refer to the president as “father.”\footnote{Dov Lynch, “Catalysing Change,” in \textit{Changing Belarus}, ed. Dov Lynch (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2005), 97.}

These Soviet references are not just political tools. Lukashenka, the former boss of a Soviet chicken farm, was previously a Communist. During the immediate post-Soviet period (1991-1994), the remnants of the Communist Party in Belarus attempted to consolidate their control over capital and state enterprises, while maintaining the structure of the command economy. Throughout the 1990s and, indeed, even currently, former Party members occupied and continue to occupy many of the top posts in the...
Thus, the Belarusian experience with the transition from a Soviet-style economic and political system has been largely superficial, if at all.

This transition began under the leadership of Stanislau Shushkevich, who became chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet in the 1990 elections to that office. Similar to other reform-minded politicians in the Soviet Union such as Boris Yeltsin in Russia, Shushkevich rose to national attention by criticizing the government in Moscow. These oppositionists were able to assert their positions through Gorbachev’s glasnost’ reforms, which allowed limited public discourse and criticism of the government. Shushkevich, a physicist and academic, rose to popularity in 1986, when he criticized Gorbachev’s handling of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The disaster site was located in Ukraine, but much of the fallout drifted north into Belarus, contaminating about twenty percent of the land.

Shushkevich enjoyed the backing of the Belarusian Popular Front, an opposition party that formed during the later Gorbachev period. This party became vocal in its support for democratic reforms and marketization, but never enjoyed popular support and by 1994 had lost the few parliamentary seats it had gained. As head of the Supreme Soviet, Shushkevich became the head of state of Belarus following the breakup of the Soviet Union. While he was respected for his anti-Gorbachev stance on the Chernobyl disaster, Shushkevich represented a small group of politicians who supported democratic and economic reforms. Most members of the parliament belonged to the old guard of Soviet elites, who were determined to maintain their privileged position within the

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31 Zlotnikov, 125.
economy and resisted the marketization program of Shushkevich and his allies.\textsuperscript{33}

Economic conditions, described below, became worse, which put more pressure on the government to mitigate the negative impacts of both the partial economic reforms and the worsening situation in Russia, Belarus’ largest trading partner.

In 1994, Shushkevich was dismissed as head of the Supreme Soviet under charges of corruption, which many observers recognized as fabricated and politically motivated. Soon after, a constitution was introduced that established a dual power structure split between a president and the parliament.\textsuperscript{34} In the presidential elections that followed, Lukashenka beat the candidate offered by the restructured Communist Party, as well as Shushkevich and the Belarusian Popular Front’s candidate. Lukashenka had gained popularity as a member of parliament and the head of the anti-corruption committee that brought charges against Shushekich, and many Belarusians viewed him as a fresh face who promised decisive action. Although a former member of the Soviet nomenklatura, Lukashenka had made enemies of the Communists due to his initial pro-reform positions.\textsuperscript{35} He reversed these positions as the economy declined, and after taking office launched a populist agenda to revive Soviet-era symbols and economic planning.

As mentioned above, economists were split in the early 1990s over which course transition economies should take: gradualism or “shock therapy.” In Belarus, Shushkevich’s transition government pursued neither course in its entirety, but rather incomplete versions of each. The resulting liberalization of prices, combined with high


\textsuperscript{34} Marples, “Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe?” 35.

inflation and persistent governmental control of economic institutions, led to a decline in GDP and a significant decrease in the standard of living and purchasing power of the average Belarusian.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, the situation in Belarus from 1991 to 1994 can be characterized by half-hearted market reforms hampered by stubborn resistance from the government and the population. This experience has caused many Belarusians to view market forces with skepticism, and has helped Lukashenka maintain the image of being the only protection between the people and economic ruin.\textsuperscript{37}

In contrast with Ukraine, where the government delayed the implementation of economic reforms until the economy was in a state of near-crisis, in Belarus the populace experienced all of the negative effects of capitalism with none of the benefits, souring them on the idea as a whole. While both countries experienced economic hardships, they had different causes related to these policy choices. Ukrainian politicians chose to maintain most of the communist economic structures until the continued decline prompted desperate reversal measures. In Belarus, the transitional government attempted reform, but the adverse effects of even limited marketization prompted Lukashenka to reverse these measures and restore a largely Soviet-style command economy.

Advocates of “shock therapy” argued that speed is of the essence in transitional economies, and Belarus would appear to support that claim. Survey results from the period indicate that in 1990, 62.6\% of the population supported some sort of market economy. Following the poor performance of the Belarusian economy over the next few

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 125-26.
\textsuperscript{37} Lynch, 100-01.
years, however, that support had shrunk to 30.3% by 1994.\textsuperscript{38} By that time the “window of opportunity” for market reforms described by “shock therapy” economists had closed.

Enter Alyaksandr Lukashenka. As mentioned above, he became president in 1994 in the country’s first presidential election. Almost immediately the new president, the parliament, and the Constitutional Court came into conflict. These conflicts prompted Lukashenka to push through a referendum in November 1996 that reduced the size of the parliament and increased the president’s powers to appoint candidates to the Constitutional Court. Western institutions in Europe and the United States criticized these actions as undemocratic, beginning Belarus’ period of estrangement and isolation. Thus, at the end of 1996, Belarus’ experiment with reform ended and the country regressed to a pale imitation of the most dismal days of the Soviet Union.

Lukashenka has remained in power to this day by consolidating his control over the security forces, subsuming the legislature and judiciary to his rule, and cracking down on political opponents and media critics. In addition to political consolidation, Lukashenka has returned to a Soviet-style command economy. Prices are issued by presidential decrees, and large-scale state enterprises dominate the economy.\textsuperscript{39} While most of the population lives in conditions of relatively equal poverty, Lukashenka enjoys a “presidential fund” over which he exercises complete control. His political allies at the highest levels also enrich themselves at the expense of the general population.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, the upper stratum of society has elevated itself over the rest of the population through its absolute control over the factors of production and the country’s industrial resources.

\textsuperscript{38} Zlotnikov, 126.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 134.
This political and economic repression has created a situation in which large amounts of people participate in the second, or “shadow,” economy.\textsuperscript{41} Anyone familiar with the economic decline of the Soviet Union will recognize the phenomenon, which involves the smuggling of goods from neighboring countries, as well as illegal trading in local goods and services. Furthermore, regarding small- and medium-sized enterprises, the Belarusian government harbors hostile attitudes, which were explicitly shown in January 2008 when security forces violently cracked down on a demonstration of small-scale entrepreneurs.\textsuperscript{42} Such conditions directly impede the formation of entrepreneurial relationships, which, as Valerie Bunce has argued, can occupy important loci of power independent of the government.\textsuperscript{43} Lukashenka and his government are aware of the potential power that market capitalism can produce within the private sector, which explains the regime’s hostility to most privately entrepreneurial activities.

Belarus often has been called the last dictatorship in Europe for good reasons.\textsuperscript{44} Lukashenka has remained in power by steadily eroding any semblance of political freedom in the country. In the 1996 referendum, he established a rubber-stamp legislature, called the National Assembly, and extended his rule until 2001. The international community condemned this referendum, as well as the parliamentary elections of 2000 and the presidential election of 2001.\textsuperscript{45} In 2002, Lukashenka launched a retribution campaign against his critics from the 2001 election. Disappearances and murders among the opposition and independent media increased, and there are rumors

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 139-40.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
that these were carried out with knowledge from the highest levels of government. In 2004, Lukashenka pushed through a referendum that would allow him to run for unlimited terms, ensuring his victory in the 2006 presidential elections.\footnote{Ibid.}

Lukashenka learned much from the Orange Revolution. Not only has he adopted no-tolerance policies toward public demonstrations, he has instructed the security forces to use brutal methods in breaking up any opposition activities. Non-governmental organizations, independent media sources, and opposition leaders continue to suffer repression from the government. Laws forbid any unregistered organizational activity, and organizations associated with foreign aid are often refused registration because they are “radical and subversive.”\footnote{Steven Lee Myers, “Court in Belarus Convicts and Sentences 4 Election Observers,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 5, 2006, http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=FA0614F93A5B0C768CDDA10894DE404482} These restrictions affect organizations meeting in both public offices and private residences. The strict laws on NGOs have made EU efforts to fund civil society institutions particularly complicated.

Considering Lukashenka’s reliance on Russian economic and political support, it is not surprising that Belarus’s development is also greatly influenced by events in that country. In the last months of 2006 and early 2007, the Russian and Belarusian governments disputed over the prices of gas and oil. The conflict was temporarily resolved when Lukashenka agreed to sell Gazprom 50% of the national gas-transport monopoly Beltransgaz, but part of the agreement stated that Belarus would pay increasingly higher prices over the next several years. In March 2008, much to Lukashenka’s dismay, Gazprom came knocking on Belarus’ door for the first price
interval. Essentially, Gazprom is intent on charging Belarus higher prices for oil and gas imports, while Lukashenka has tried his best to postpone the price increases. This issue will have important consequences for Belarus’ development and will directly affect the relationship between political and economic liberalization in the country.

Belarus has enjoyed gas and oil subsidies from Russia since independence, largely as a holdover from the Soviet era. Many former republics that are tied into the old Soviet network of pipelines enjoyed these subsidies. In the past few years, however, the Kremlin (through the state company Gazprom) has begun the process of charging increasingly higher prices to its former colonies, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and finally Belarus. Belarus and Ukraine previously imported subsidized Russian oil and gas, refined them, and then sold them to Europe at market prices. In both countries, this practice has been responsible for impressive economic growth, which at the same time is directly tied to Russia’s economic performance.

The oil crisis between Russia and Belarus in late 2006 is particularly indicative of the roles of domestic politics, economics, and European energy security in Belarusian democratic development. In response to the price increase, Belarus began siphoning oil from the Druzhba pipeline and storing it in its own facilities. Russia responded by stopping the flow of oil to Belarus, and by extension, Central Europe. The process sparked a tense negotiation process between Lukashenka and Putin, during which the strategic price of reliance on Russian oil was revealed to both Belarus and the European Union. Lukashenka finally conceded and agreed to pay the higher prices and import

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duties. He also agreed to give most of the profits from the export of Russian oil to
Europe back to the Russians. The numbers in this case are staggering. The new import
duties on Russian oil equal ten percent of the Belarusian GDP.\textsuperscript{50} The process of sharing
export profits with Russia is gradual, and in 2009 Belarus is scheduled to give 85% of
this money back to the Russians.\textsuperscript{51}

The political and economic situation in Belarus is discouraging for those who
advocate a transition to democracy and a market economy. Not only has Lukashenka
consolidated political control, he has created an economic environment devoid of
competitive and innovative forces. The economic situation in the country will continue
to worsen as long as Belarus relies heavily on Russian oil and gas imports to fuel its
economy, because the good times of cheap oil are over. In this type of environment, it is
no surprise that Belarus did not see a “color revolution” in March 2006. The populace,
with the exception of a small and fragmented opposition, is clearly orientated toward
Russia, which offers negative examples regarding civil society, freedom of expression,
economic growth, and democratic political processes. The Belarusian government, very
much aware of the tactics used by the Orange Coalition in Ukraine, used every method it
could to silence the demonstrations and terrify anyone who entertained notions of dissent.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Central Intelligence Agency, The CIA World Factbook, Belarus, Economy Overview,
V. An Eastern Slavic Brotherhood: Identity Politics

Clearly economic and political structural factors have played an important role in determining the direction of Ukrainian and Belarusian progress toward democracy. As mentioned above, these countries’ citizens express varying national identities that relate to their perception of democratic values. In Ukraine, national identity has been a successful political tool for parties on both sides of the spectrum. Indeed, in many ways identity politics can appear even more important than ideological and policy issues. In Belarus, opposition leaders have failed to develop a mass following around identity issues and ideas regarding Belarus’ place in the world, leaving Lukashenka’s party to determine the country’s course.

Despite the fact that Ukraine’s current leaders have positioned the country against Russia on many geopolitical issues, the Ukrainian economy still depends heavily on Russian oil and natural gas transit and many Ukrainians do not want to see relations with the West compromise relations with Russia. While reducing the idea of national identity to an opposing set of two distinct options is always problematic, the main identity cleavage in Ukraine splits many people between an Ethnic Ukrainian identity and an Eastern Slavic identity. In Belarus, national identity issues fall along similar lines, between Nationalist and Soviet-Russian identities. These are terms borrowed from studies that have assessed these issues, and while they do not include all of the possible
national identity constituencies in these countries, they do present a useful framework with which to analyze their often opposing voices.

Those Ukrainians subscribing to the Ethnic Ukrainian identity likely view themselves as the core ethnic component of the country and advocate the supremacy of the Ukrainian language and customs. Similarly, those people who adopt this identity argue that Ukrainians are a “historically individualistic and freedom-loving people” whose rightful place lies with the democracies of Europe. This identity contrasts directly with the Eastern Slavic identity, which places more importance on an Eastern Slavic brotherhood of countries, including Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.

Similarly, in Belarus, there are two opposing conceptions of Belarusian identity: a Nationalist identity, and a Soviet-Russian identity. These two national identities are directly related to Belarusians’ perspectives on the best path of development for their country. Those favoring a Nationalist outlook tend to emphasize democracy and economic liberalization, and thus tend to identify with Western Europe and the United States. People of the latter inclination tend to view their place with Russia and a larger Eastern Slavic community.

Russia’s cultural influence over Belarus and Ukraine must be understood here as a source of attitudes valuing conformity, passivity, authoritarianism, and reliance on the state. These values in the two former republics are directly related to Russia’s historical domination under the tsars and then under the Soviets, as well as the prominence of Orthodoxy. As Ryszard Radzik argues, such societies have historically discouraged

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52 Shulman, 69.
53 Ibid., 69-70.
54 Radzik, 17.
55 Ibid., 26.
“democratic and autonomous existence based on the activity of individuals who felt independent of the state.”

Clearly, despite the fact that the Communist Party in the Soviet Union discouraged religious participation, the cultural foundations upon which the party built its regime already favored the values necessary to control the population.

Regarding Belarus, the Soviet-Russian identity is the dominant identity by far, with only a tiny fraction of educated, urban citizens and a few (largely Polish) communities in the west supporting the Nationalist plan. Due to the dominance of this identity, the foreign policy trajectory and the values of Belarusians regarding democracy and the role of government are generally more favorable to the Russian model. Thus, Belarusians view interference with the state, individualism, and freedom negatively, while viewing state paternalism, equality, and authoritarianism favorably.

In Ukraine, the identity split is much more complicated, with the population much more evenly split on issues such as democracy, state-paternalism, and the natural allies of the country. Each identity, however, correlates to a different set of values, as previously discussed. Thus, in Belarus the country generally supports an Eastern Slavic orientation, while in Ukraine it is not as clear. One of the most important explanatory variables in each of these cases is education, which denotes membership in the national elite, and is significant in citizens’ attitudes toward the role of government, the value of democracy, and the most desirable foreign policy vector for their country. In Belarus, however, the national elite consist of ex-Communist Party officials who view political liberalization with skepticism and rely on Russian leaders for material and diplomatic support.

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56 Ibid., 16.
Ukrainian elites, on the other hand, are almost evenly divided over the right course for their country and the values they uphold.  

The role of national elites and policy makers can never be underestimated. In Ukraine, the national elite is split over their country’s identity, hence it is not surprising that Ukrainian foreign policy alignment has lurched back and forth between the European Union, NATO, and Russia. In Belarus, where the top policy makers have relied on Russian support and most of the national elite were banned from traveling to EU countries for the last twelve years, the cleavages between national identities have not been as apparent.

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57 Pidluska, 190.
VI. The Foreign Assistance Gap: Western Financial Engagement

Identity politics can explain much of the variation between how Belarus and Ukraine have developed since independence, but such an explanation does not capture the entire story. A glance at the different levels of engagement between these two countries and the West reveals quite disparate levels of foreign assistance. The European Union in general has not engaged Belarus with the same level of involvement and support as it has Ukraine, the lack of which is explicitly linked to the policies of the Lukashenka regime.\(^\text{58}\) The European Union still offers some support to Belarus, mostly in the areas of the environment, energy, and higher education, but has conditioned any further engagement on significant political and legal reforms.\(^\text{59}\) On the other hand, EU support for Ukraine has been much higher in terms of the amount of funding and the level of engagement.\(^\text{60}\)

The United States, much to Russia’s chagrin, has also engaged quite extensively with Ukraine. Russian leaders view such policies as unwelcome intrusions in their own backyard, while American policy makers have adopted a view of Ukraine as an important strategic partner in the continuing push of Western ideals, especially in the wake of the Orange Revolution. Belarus, on the other hand, has failed to attract much attention in the


United States, which can be seen by its low level of foreign assistance (see Table 3 below).

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<tr>
<td><strong>Total U.S. Economic Assistance (in millions of dollars), Ukraine</strong></td>
<td>272.8</td>
<td>281.5</td>
<td>194.9</td>
<td>135.3</td>
<td>127.3</td>
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<td><strong>Total U.S. Economic Assistance (in millions of dollars), Belarus</strong></td>
<td>3.2</td>
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**Table 3. U.S. Economic Assistance to Ukraine and Belarus, 1998-2007**

U.S. funding for Belarus increased in the 2005 budget after the passage of the Belarus Democracy Act in 2004, which pledged around $23 million for organizations that were working toward democratic reforms, more independent media, and the improvement of human rights in Belarus. The bill also stated that sanctions against top Belarusian officials and their families should be encouraged, and urged international financial institutions not to lend aid to the Government of Belarus except for humanitarian activities. Any further funding is conditioned on democratic reforms taken by the

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Belarusian government. Although the U.S. government has pledged some funding for Belarus, it is much smaller and more restricted than its support for Ukraine.

After reviewing the structural differences between these countries, one should not be surprised to find such discrepancies in economic assistance from the West. Belarus began its pariah course after the 1996 referendum that reformed the legislature and allowed Lukashenka to extend his term until 2001. On the other hand, while Ukraine did not begin reform of its political or economic system until the mid- to late-1990s, the country was making significant progress toward integrating with the West and hoping to join the European Union one day. Belarus has neither articulated such goals nor demonstrated a desire to pursue the reforms that Ukraine enacted, which may have led Western policy makers to view economic assistance as an ineffective way to bring about democratic reforms. Thus, structural and identity factors have led to the decisions that awarded Ukraine with more Western assistance than Belarus, but this outcome has in turn affected the two countries’ development to date. The limited investment in Belarusian organizations, however, could help reform processes once certain political and economic conditions have changed, like in the case of Ukraine.

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62 Ibid.
VII. Hindsight and Foresight: Ukraine and Belarus in a Foreign Policy Context

While the situation is bleak in Belarus, there do seem to be some cracks in the facade. Several indicators hint at the possibility of reformist sentiments gaining widespread support. Before these are discussed, however, a closer look at the different experiences with EU foreign policy might help understand why Ukraine has tilted toward Europe, while Belarus has tended to look east to Russia. The structural and social differences discussed above offer part of the explanation for the divergent paths taken by these two countries, but another explanation lies in each country’s relationship with the European Union.

The country that played the largest role in beginning Ukraine’s path of European integration was Poland. Ukraine and Poland have a long, often antagonistic history, yet these differences were set aside in the mid-1990s as both countries aspired to join European institutions. While Poland was undoubtedly favored for entry into the Union, many European leaders remained skeptical of Ukraine’s abilities to reach sufficient levels of political and economic reform for membership. Poland, very much aware of the importance of stability and friendly relations with its eastern neighbor, decided to take on the role of Ukraine’s “ambassador in Brussels.”63 The Poles actively promoted cooperation between NATO and Ukraine, signed important trade agreements with Kiev.

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63 Wolczuk, 175.
and established bilateral partnerships at multiple levels of government.\textsuperscript{64} While cooperation between the two states has since stalled, Poland helped lay the groundwork for the course that Yushchenko continued as prime minister and continues today as president.

Belarus’ engagement with Poland has been quite different. The two countries each contain large minority populations of the other’s ethnic group, so intuitively one would assume that cross border communication and exchange would be frequent. Until 1997, many Belarusians did cross the border quite frequently to engage in trade in eastern Poland. This large shadow economy was an important source of revenue for many Belarusians and fostered informal interactions between citizens of the two countries.\textsuperscript{65} Official relations between Poland and Belarus, however, started cold and grew colder soon after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. The main issue between them became NATO expansion, as Poland vied for inclusion and Belarus remained hostile to the alliance.

In the mid-1990s, the state-run media in Belarus launched an anti-NATO campaign in which it tried to prevent Polish ascension by casting doubt on the stability of Poland’s relationships with its neighbors.\textsuperscript{66} Around the same time, the European Union began retreating from its ties with Belarus following the 1996 referendum that extended Lukashenka’s term and established the rubber-stamp legislature. Brussels withdrew its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and conditioned any further engagement on reforms and concessions made by Minsk.\textsuperscript{67} Thus, while Ukraine for over a decade has

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 175-76.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{67} Lynch, 107.
followed a course of increasing engagement with Europe, Belarus and the Union have been at odds for almost the same amount of time.

The relationship between them has followed a predictable pattern: following actions taken by the Lukashenka regime, the EU institutions first declare unhappiness with the developments, call for the Lukashenka regime to fundamentally alter its course, and finally offer further integration as a prospect for Belarus if the changes are enacted. This strategy has a fundamental flaw that has prevented its desired outcome: namely, that Belarus does not want to join the European Union. The main EU foreign policy tool is the prospect of further integration, so if a state does not want to join, the Brussels is largely powerless to encourage reforms. Lukashenka has repeatedly rejected “Western-liberal values” and called for the establishment of an “Eastern European Civilisation.”

The breathing room resulting from his close relationship with Russia has made it possible for Lukashenka’s regime to survive without taking the Europeans very seriously. Belarus still conducts a large amount of its trade with the European Union, meaning that its leader has been able continue to ignore economic, and by extension, political pressure.

The good times can never last forever though, and slowly but surely Belarus is starting to wake up to the reality of its long isolation. There are several indicators that the country could slowly move in a more democratic direction. All of these signals, however, could potentially be countered by more sobering realities. Indeed, 2008 was a year of contradictions in Belarus, as the regime at times appeared to lean toward Europe, and in other instances maintained its pariah course. Within the same year, the administration brutally suppressed peaceful demonstrations in support of such issues as

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68 Ibid., 97-98.
69 Zurawski vel Grajewski, 90.
70 Ibid., 89.
rights for small- and medium-sized enterprises and Belarusian independence, while later it released all of its political prisoners, including Alyaksandr Kozulin. On the same day in March, it allowed the European Commission to open offices in Minsk and asked U.S. Ambassador Karen Stewart to leave.

In September 2008, national parliamentary elections were held in which opposition candidates were allowed television access and permission to openly campaign for the first time. Not a single seat went to an opposition candidate, despite Lukashenka’s statements that he wanted the opposition to win at least a few contests so that reengagement with Europe would be possible. While the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe cited serious flaws in the election, it admitted that the country has made some minor improvements. Thus, the OSCE did not declare the results “undemocratic,” it expressed serious reservations, saying that it could not declare them “democratic.” Essentially, both sides opted out of any decision that might fundamentally change EU-Belarusian relations: Belarus made token efforts to demonstrate that it was allowing democratic processes, while Western institutions did not have to condemn the results outright and further alienate the recalcitrant Lukashenka, who warned that he would break all relations with the European Union if it declared the election undemocratic.

So what has happened that has made Lukashenka allow even these minor concessions? Essentially, nothing new or novel has occurred. The country has consistently pursued a policy of largely spurning the Europeans for Russia, but also

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72 Ibid.
pursues a policy of “meeting the needs of the time” through other political and economic mechanisms in Europe and the CIS.\textsuperscript{73} As discussed above, relations between Minsk and Moscow have been cool of late. Russia has increased the cost of oil and gas for Belarus, which will ultimately pay market prices. Belarus, on the other hand, offered lukewarm and belated support for Russia’s war with Georgia in August 2008 and has yet to recognize the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Recently, Lukashenka asked both Russia and the International Monetary Fund for loans of around $2 billion. Apparently he is hedging his bets, even though he claims that they are unrelated.\textsuperscript{74}

It would appear that Lukashenka has realized his predicament of relying on Russia for breathing room and is prepared to make some concessions that could bring him closer to the European Union. While a European trajectory is hardly a popular notion among average and elite Belarusians, there is some evidence from a recent poll conducted by the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies that Lukashenka is losing popular support, which he has consistently enjoyed at very high levels.\textsuperscript{75} These sentiments help bolster hopes that those younger generations, who do not remember the Soviet Union, might push the country in a more democratic direction. Belarusians might not know what they want, but they do feel that a change is needed, especially in the worsening global financial situation.

\textsuperscript{73} Khvostov, 189.
In this environment, the next actions taken by EU policy makers will be quite important in Belarus’ development and will have important implications for further relations. As previously mentioned, the European Union has taken a largely hands-off policy regarding Belarus, choosing to issue statements and condemnations, combined with travel bans and limited economic sanctions. This policy has not been very effective because Lukashenka could always fall back on Russia for support. Currently, that alliance seems to be strained, which could translate into gains for democratic forces in Belarus. These changes can only occur, however, with increased contact between EU states (particularly Poland and Lithuania) and their eastern neighbor. The possibility of increased contact between Poland and Belarus is particularly encouraging, considering the role that that country played in Ukraine’s movement toward the West. Significantly, Poland and the Baltic states have emphasized the need for continued dialogue between the European Union and its eastern neighbors, and in May 2009, Belarus attended a meeting of the Eastern Partnership program.76

There are still several problems that could possibly stand in the way of increased dialogue and cooperation between Belarus and the European Union. As discussed above, the economic situation in the country has excluded the vast majority of the population from real market interactions. Most Belarusians live in conditions of relative poverty, and the government still controls most of the economy. Essentially, Belarus has made almost no transition from a Soviet-style economic system to even a mixed market. In order for the country to experience real democratic transformation, economists will have to develop a plan for an economic transition.

Actually, Belarus could possibly stand to benefit from the experiences of other post-communist economies in the region. Now that there is some historical distance between the transitions of the early 1990s and the “color revolutions” from the middle of this decade, the country could use the policies and programs that worked well and avoid the ones that have not. For example, Alyaksander Milinkevich, one of the most prominent Belarusian opposition figures, harkened back to the 1989 roundtable talks between Jaruzelski’s and Walesa’s factions in Poland in an open letter to Lukashenka that called for national reconciliation.\textsuperscript{77} Also, Polish foreign policy makers seem particularly eager amongst their EU colleagues in their desire to work with Belarus and Ukraine.\textsuperscript{78} Poland is often held up as one of the greatest success stories of post-communist political and economic transition, which could help Belarusian development if a strong partnership was established between these two countries. While a similar partnership stalled between Poland and Ukraine in the 1990s, it was under this working relationship that Ukraine developed and began to articulate its desire to one day join the European Union.

Unfortunately, many of the conditions needed for increased citizen participation and the social institutions necessary for democracy simply do not exist in Belarus. Some critics argue that the current U.S. and EU policies encouraging the growth of Belarusian civil society are getting ahead of themselves. In other words, they are based on “the existence of institutions that in Belarus were totally destroyed” by the Lukashenka regime.\textsuperscript{79} Thus, even if there was to be political liberalization, it would have to

\textsuperscript{77} Grigory Ioffe, \textit{Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark} (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 224.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 224
accompany efforts to foster the development of the civic institutions and private enterprises so vital for democracies to succeed.

Finally, the most important obstacle for democratic reform in Belarus is the continued support of Russia. While Lukashenka and Putin have disagreed over the price of oil and gas, the two still maintain their mutual commitment to strong Russian-Belarusian relations. Both view the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as a travesty and have taken lessons from this and the other “color revolutions.” Putin has adopted the strategy of propping up weak political parties and state-sponsored organizations in an attempt to offer citizens the specter of democratic choice and engagement. Lukashenka, on the other hand, does not possess the political finesse for such a course. He has simply resorted to brutality.

There is another worry regarding Russian-Belarusian ties, which appeared in the latest negotiations over oil prices: the proposed union between the two states. Gazprom has proposed that it would reduce oil prices within the framework of a confederation between the two countries. Such an arrangement would also allow Russia to install nuclear weapons in Belarus in order to counter proposed American installations in the Czech Republic and Poland.\(^80\) Any talk of democratic development in an independent Belarus will become null and void if the country is simply absorbed by the Russian Federation. While this idea has been discussed for over a decade, it still exists on paper more than in practice. Lukashenka has repeatedly condemned the primacy of Russia in the union and has declared that he will not support such a relationship unless both parties are equal decision-makers. Given the massive disparities in wealth, military power, and

population, this demand seems unrealistic. Lukashenka could conceivably relent, however, if Belarus slides into recession and its currency reserves dwindle. He might see absorption by Russia as a welcome alternative to a failed state and a loss of power.

If ever there was to be a “color revolution” in Belarus, it would have occurred in March 2006. For many reasons, this did not come to pass, despite some optimistic predictions for the election outcomes. As argued above, the idea of a “color revolution” as a truly revolutionary process deserves some critical rethinking, given the distance between those heady days of 2004 and 2005 and the more sobering reality four years later. These three political events were important, necessary steps on the road to democratic consolidation, producing images and slogans that will endure as symbols of a more optimistic future. Belarus is not likely to have such dramatic advancements as the “color revolutions,” but will likely follow a trudging, incremental path. Given the current state of the country and its leadership, however, even small steps can appear revolutionary.
Bibliography


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