

The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a Color Revolution

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Abstract: This article explores how the Russia-Belarus relationship has countered external forces that have been shown to promote democratization. It seeks to answer the following questions: According to the democratization literature, what external factors make democratization more likely? How have Russia-Belarus ties countered these factors? And, how best can the United States and the European Union promote democratization in Belarus?

Key words: authoritarianism, Belarus, democratization, European Union, external variables, Russia

These aren't "color" revolutions—they're banditry under the guise of democracy . . . this banditry is imposed and paid for from outside, is carried out to benefit individuals who don't care about their countries and peoples, and interests only those who have imperialist ambitions and are trying to conquer new markets.¹

—Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka

Russia's relationship with Belarus is closer than that of any other ex-Soviet republic. In the mid-1990s, a process of reintegration was proposed, with a Russia-Belarus union state as its eventual goal, leading to full political, military, and economic integration. However, disputes over the structure of the union, as well as the uneasy relationship between Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Russian President Vladimir Putin, have stymied any substantive progress. Although quite successful on the military front, the Russia-Belarus union, the cornerstone of Russia-Belarus relations, has been seen by scholars as an overall failure.² This article argues, however, that the relationship between

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Minsk and Moscow, and the promises of an eventual union between the two states, has been a political success for both Lukashenka and Putin. Both presidents have used this process to protect Belarus from the efforts of the European Union (EU) and the United States to spread democracy in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In effect, the relationship between the two countries is an antidemocratic alliance aimed at insulating Belarus from political reforms.

Grounded in the democratization literature, this article explores how the Russia-Belarus relationship has countered external forces that have been shown to promote democratization. It seeks to answer the following questions: According to the democratization literature, what external factors make democratization more likely? How has the nascent Russia-Belarus union countered these factors? How best can the United States and the EU promote democratization in Belarus? In addition to answering these questions, this article makes a contribution to the democratization literature by illustrating how external forces can be instrumental in promoting or preserving authoritarianism, as well as creating an international environment where there is actually a disincentive to democratize. Moreover, this article will assert that the Kremlin leadership derives significant benefits from preventing democratization on its doorstep.

This article will proceed as follows. First, it provides an overview of the democratization literature, paying special attention to the external factors that have been seen as to promote democracy. This section asserts that these external factors can be neutralized by countervailing external forces that can actually sustain and promote authoritarianism. Second, it provides an overview of the history of the proposed Russia-Belarus union. The three sections that follow examine how the Kremlin has insulated the Belarusian leaders from external pressure to democratize by undermining Western policies and by providing Belarus with an alternative to European integration. The conclusion of this paper focuses on the effects of an international environment that provides disincentives to democratize and the purposes that such an environment serves for the Kremlin leadership. Moreover, it evaluates the prospects for democratization in Belarus and explores strategies for Western states to bring about a color revolution in that country.

External Factors and Democratization

Several scholars have noted that in most analyses of variables that promote democratization, domestic factors have vastly overshadowed external or international factors.³ It is widely assumed that domestic explanations for democratic transitions are of primary importance in determining the course of political change in authoritarian regimes, though the balance between internal and external variables remains a matter of debate.⁴ Certainly, a positive domestic environment plays a necessary role in any democratic transition or consolidation. Without the proper political conditions within a country, democracy will invariably fail.

However, democratic outcomes are also heavily influenced by external forces. External forces can play an active role in promoting democratization and reinforcing democratic consolidation, or they can create disincentives to democratize and undermine democratic reforms. Since the end of the cold war, there has been

a significant increase in the number and quality of international-focused studies. The crucial role the EU has played in advancing and strengthening democracy in Eastern Europe has given greater credence to external causes of democratization. The importance of the EU in this process has also meant that the democratization literature, when taking an international perspective, has tended to focus on the role of international institutions.

Three international factors, in particular, have been identified as being influential in furthering the spread of democracy: regionalism, conditionality, and integration. Each of these broad variables is an amalgam of more specific influences previously cited by scholars. Moreover, each is centered around the pressures faced by an authoritarian regime within the context of international democratic trends. As Alex Pravda put it, an international pull toward democratization complements and accelerates the domestic push of internal forces.⁵

Regionalism, particularly in the context of post-cold war Europe, is viewed by scholars as either constituting the geographic component of a wave of democracy;⁶ contagion through proximity;⁷ the liberal-democratic ideological paradigm;⁸ a regional zeitgeist;⁹ or, international socialization.¹⁰ Regardless of its exact formulation, regionalism refers to the relationship between a state's internal political process and the values and norms that dominate its geographic region. It is a largely passive process by which democratic values spread from one country to another, whether through diffusion, demonstration effects, or other means. According to this concept, authoritarian regimes located in regions in which democracy is the preferred or dominant form of government will find themselves coming under increasing pressure to liberalize their political systems as more governments begin or complete the transition to democracy. The classic case of this process was Eastern Europe during the late 1980s: as Poland entered its transition toward democracy, other Communist states found it more difficult to resist the tide of democratization, which in turn created a cascade effect throughout the region. During the 1990s, as well, states that had overthrown communism, but appeared to be sliding back toward authoritarianism (e.g., Slovakia and Romania), ultimately made the transition to democracy through the realization that the path of authoritarianism would lead to their isolation within Europe.

Whitehead, however, identified a number of problems with this variable.¹¹ For example, what determines the boundaries of the contagion? Is it possible that certain states may be immune to this process? Moreover, how does the sequence begin, end, or order itself? Given the passive nature of the process, it is not surprising that the causal mechanisms of regionalism are ambiguous. Nevertheless, it seems that the overall regional environment played a significant role in limiting the options of eastern European leaders. The EU, as well as the United States, were fully committed to the promotion of democracy in the region as the only legitimate form of government. As Zielonka stated, "This consensus created an unprecedented historical situation: Eastern European countries found themselves operating in an international environment which considers democracy to be the only game in town."¹² Fear of international isolation, as well as the perception of external forces trying to bring about regime change, create increasing pressure to

democratize. Thus, democracy becomes more likely as the alternatives to democracy are either unavailable or seen as illegitimate.

The second external factor, conditionality, is an active policy that influences the cost-benefit analysis of an authoritarian regime, with the purpose of promoting democracy. Other scholars have referred to a similar process of direct intervention in a country's domestic political system through political, diplomatic, economic, moral, cultural, or persuasive means.¹³ States interested in the spread of democracy use a mix of punishments and benefits (or the threat or promise thereof) to bring about regime change in an undemocratic state. If authoritarian regimes begin moving toward democracy, they are rewarded with closer ties, aid and loans, trade concessions, and other benefits. If they persist in suppressing their people, they are punished through a variety of means such as international isolation, trade and economic sanctions, or aid to opposition groups. In the European context, democracy promotion has been limited to peaceful means, though in other cases covert and military intervention has been used.¹⁴

Haken Yilmaz's formulation of conditionality is interesting in that it directly connects international pressures to the decision-making process of authoritarian leaders.¹⁵ Domestically oriented studies have tended to focus almost exclusively on the domestic-level cost-benefit analysis between the internal costs of resisting democratic reforms and the internal costs of tolerating a democratic opening. Yilmaz adds another level to this calculation by advancing the notion of the expected external costs of suppression—the price imposed on an authoritarian regime by other states for refusing to allow democratization. According to Yilmaz, “the government would choose to indulge in democratic reform if it estimates that the external costs of suppression are higher than the internal costs of toleration. On the other hand, if the government assesses the internal costs of toleration to be greater than the external costs of suppression, then it is unlikely to start [a] political opening.”¹⁶ As the external penalties for not democratizing increase, it is more likely that authoritarian leaders will allow democratic reforms. Moreover, external forces are not limited merely to sticks: the use of carrots will increase the expected external benefits of democratization and, consequently, reward governments for allowing democratic reforms. Thus, external states can alter the cost-benefit calculations of authoritarian leaders and help bring about democratization.

The final factor is a special form of conditionality that is largely specific to the European context, but could conceivably apply to other cases. The prospect of integration into international institutions, especially the EU, is a powerful motivating force for states to embark on democratic reforms. Before 1989, the political and economic success of the EU's predecessor (the European Community) served as a powerful example for Eastern Europeans. Numerous commentators, politicians, and leaders identified their desire to return to Europe after decades of Soviet domination.¹⁷ To accomplish this, Western institutions, such as the EU, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Council of Europe (CoE), imposed specific conditions on eastern European states to be considered for membership. The most important of these requirements was that applicants establish a liberal democracy.¹⁸

The prospects for EU integration are seen as so important in promoting democracy that Dimitrova and Pridham cite the EU's "distinct integration model as a form of democracy promotion."¹⁹ In her study of pre-accession conditionality in Eastern Europe, Diane Ethier found the impact of the EU to be substantial.²⁰ In specific cases such as Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Romania, scholars have found a significant relationship between membership requirements, on one hand, and democratic reforms or other social changes, on the other.²¹ The means by which this occurs are three-fold. First, while democracy in general can be seen as the only game in town within Europe, the same could be said about the EU: the benefits of membership are considered so significant that there appears to be no legitimate alternative. Second, the preaccession process is so specific and detailed that regimes have a clear roadmap of what they need to do to become members. The relationship between democratic reforms and advancement in the process provides powerful incentives for policymakers and the public to support further democratization. Finally, the process becomes self-reinforcing as states move closer to EU membership. Once the process of EU accession begins, it is more likely that further democratic reforms will be introduced.²²

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One factor that runs counter to this process is the location of a particular state in the queue for membership. As Ethier finds, “the evidence suggests that EU conditionality works only when the stake or reward is accession to the union.”²³ In the case of North Africa, there is no real possibility that states will be considered for membership and therefore the role of the EU in promoting democracy is negligible.²⁴ As a result, the relative impact of EU democracy promotion is lessened the further that states find themselves outside of the process—i.e., that accession is impossible or highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

It is important not to take a deterministic approach to the spread of democracy. External factors may influence the timing and course of democratization, making it more likely. However, the three factors identified above are neither individually nor collectively sufficient to bring about regime change. Even within the European context, where the pressure is the strongest, there are exceptions that seemingly exist outside of the democratic trends on the continent, such as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under Slobodan Milošević, Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar, Ukraine prior to the 2004 Orange Revolution, Moldova, and, of course, Belarus. Pridham calls these pariah regimes, which “normally satisfy the formal criterion of procedural democracy but are deficient in those areas of substantive democracy relevant to international opinion, especially in the part of the world in which they are located.”²⁵ The existence and

survival of such regimes raise a number of important questions about the effect of external factors on democracy promotion.

The survival of pariah regimes can be facilitated by international factors that impede the push for democratization. In Shehata's study of Egypt, the international environment was seen as an impediment to democracy.²⁶ In another study, Forsythe showed how the United States actively subverted democracy in Latin America during the cold war.²⁷ In the European context, however, the international environment is not only conducive to democracy, but actively supports its spread. Therefore, either domestic political dynamics must be strong enough to resist these trends, or there must be countervailing external forces at work. In terms of the three external factors identified above—regionalism, conditionality, and integration—it is possible to identify ways in which external pressures for democratization can be undermined.

To use an analogy, one can conceive of the external forces promoting democracy as a form of gravity—Pravda's pull, for example. The stronger these forces are, the more likely a state is going to be pulled into a specific orbit; in this case, the weight of European democratic trends, when coupled with specific policies of Western states and the potential for membership in the EU, creates a powerful force drawing states away from authoritarianism and toward democracy. To extend the analogy, the international environment may also include an opposite gravitational force that resists democratization. Specifically, this can be accomplished by undermining each of the factors identified above. A state may be able to successfully isolate itself from European trends by identifying itself with an alternative external identity or historical trend. Furthermore, economic sanctions, the lack of favorable trading relationships, and political/diplomatic isolation may be countered by alternative sources of economic support and legitimacy. Finally, the power of the EU is based on its sheer size, the perception of benefits for members, and the lack of any legitimate alternative. If these were undermined, the power of the EU to promote democracy would be lessened.

In the following sections, it will be shown that the proposed Russia-Belarus union state, and the close relationship between Moscow and Minsk, has this very effect. By providing the Lukashenka regime with economic support, political legitimacy, and an alternative to European integration, the prospects for the union state subvert the potential for democratization in Belarus and, in effect, insulate it from the democratic trends in Europe. Specifically, the union state reinforces differences between Belarus and Europe by focusing its identity and future toward the East, rather than the West (regionalism); it allows the Belarusian regime to resist specific pressures from the West by supporting regime survival (conditionality); and provides it with an alternative to EU membership (integration).

The Russia-Belarus Union

In many ways, the proposed Russia-Belarus union has its origins in both Russian and Belarusian national identity.²⁸ For Russia, the near-simultaneous development of the state, nation, and empire led Russian national identity to have a strong imperial content, which was later reinforced by the Soviet Union. Consequently, the

development of a Russian identity based on the nation-state of the Russian Federation is less accepted than the notion of reintegrating at least parts of the former Soviet Union. Belarus is the country closest to Russia and it constitutes one of the three components (along with Ukraine) of Kievan Rus. Therefore, it is only logical that the two should be joined together, and this became the imperial default for many Russians.²⁹ Moreover, it is widely accepted that Belarus lacks a firm national identity.³⁰ From the elimination of its cultural elite under Stalin, to its rapid urbanization, as well as the russification and de-ethnization of Communist ideology, Belarusian national identity was the most Soviet and pro-Russian in nature. A separate Belarusian existence does not have a firm foundation and rejoining Russia has widespread support. Although Belarusian President Lukashenka is often credited with the idea of the union, the first moves toward reintegrating Russia and Belarus began in September 1993, under Belarusian Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich. During talks with his Russian counterpart, Viktor Chernomyrdin, the two signed agreements on establishing a ruble zone and monetary union.³¹ Lukashenka, who became president in 1994, campaigned on Soviet nostalgia and support for reintegration with Russia. In 1995, he held a referendum restoring the Soviet-era flag and state symbols, as well as making Russian an official language. Attempts to expose the Soviet Union's bloody past were suppressed. Establishing an economic, political, and military union with Russia became official state policy and, in 1995, agreements on a customs union and military integration were reached.

Actual moves toward establishing a full union between the two states began in April 1996, during the Russian presidential campaign. To undercut nationalist and communist candidates, Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed a treaty with Lukashenka creating a community between Russia and Belarus. This document called for political and economic integration and the creation of a number of supranational institutions, symbols, and an anthem. Although ratified by both legislatures, the treaty was quite ambiguous and disagreements over the pace and nature of integration were not resolved. Nevertheless, a second treaty, signed a year later, upgraded the community to a union, sought to strengthen joint institutions, and established as one of its chief aims the consistent progress toward voluntary unification.³² As a result of this treaty, the Parliamentary Assembly of Belarus and Russia opened in Kaliningrad and passed a number of draft laws and resolutions. Moreover, a union budget was adopted and a commission was established to harmonize laws between the two countries. Nevertheless, progress was slow and many provisions of the 1996 and 1997 treaties were not implemented.

Further agreements and treaties, including a pledge by both sides in 1999 to deepen the union and set a timetable for reintegration, have not been able to overcome very serious disputes over both the conception and implementation of union. The central problem is one of structure: whether Belarus and Russia would achieve union as equals, or would the former, which is many times smaller than Russia in terms of its economy, population, and landmass, be subordinate to the latter. Under the first formulation, supported by Lukashenka, Belarus would retain its sovereignty and have an equal say over union policies. By contrast, most Russian officials believe that Belarus should simply join the Russian Federation

(possibly as six *oblasts*), as expressed in Russian President Vladimir Putin's comments to that effect in June 2002. Moreover, Russia's economic reforms have not been matched by the Lukashenka regime, which rolled back even the modest reforms enacted in the early 1990s. Consequently, any attempt to merge currencies and economies, even if the two sides were able to resolve the larger structural issues, will continue to be hampered by Belarus's unreformed economic system. Finally, the political ambitions of Putin and Lukashenka have conflicted. Lukashenka has used the idea of union to increase his popularity in Belarus; it is also believed that he has sought to use all-union institutions to achieve domination of both Belarus and Russia. On the other hand, Putin, whose leadership style does not allow for political rivals, has seen Lukashenka as a threat and seemingly attempted to slow down the pace of reintegration with his June 2002 comments, which were rejected as out of hand by Lukashenka. As a result of these disputes, the Russia-Belarus union has not been established in any substantive form.³³

Nevertheless, the prospects for such a union remain alive. Neither side appears willing to scuttle it. Although he attempted to recast himself as a nationalist defending Belarusian interests against Russian encroachments during 2002–03, Lukashenka's popularity and legitimacy rests on reintegration with Russia. The dispute over structural issues remains, at least rhetorically, just that: a difference of opinion over how, not whether, Russia and Belarus should merge.³⁴ Furthermore, the notion of integration with Belarus remains popular in Russia, even if the Kremlin is less enthusiastic about it. Despite political discord between Moscow and Minsk, Putin has continued to support Lukashenka politically and diplomatically, and has not sought to legitimize the Belarusian opposition. Moreover, Putin has not pressured Lukashenka to democratize, nor has he cut off subsidies, which prop up the Lukashenka regime.

The Russia-Belarus union, although more a rhetorical creation than an actual one, serves a very real purpose in the domestic politics of both countries. One of its key effects, however, is in allowing Belarusian authoritarianism to persist. The following three sections illustrate how the prospects for reintegration serve to insulate the Lukashenka regime from the democratic trends in Europe by providing Belarus with both an alternative to Western integration and the means to resist Western pressure.

Regionalism

The process of regionalism is most effective when there is an existing conception of the state as part of a larger community or civilization. Such a grouping has certain perceived characteristics that states should conform to. Nowhere is this more powerful than in Europe, which has long had a collective identity as European, even if the boundaries and content of such an identity have changed over time.³⁵ In the post-cold war period, the notion of European is tied closely with a belief in international institutions, human rights, and, especially, democracy.³⁶ The European criteria developed by the EU specifically states the following: "Membership requires that [a] candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and pro-

tection of minorities.”³⁷ Built within this process is a determination of a states degree of Europeanness.³⁸ While not all democratic states are European, there is a strong assumption that all truly European countries are democratic.

Since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, a dominant theme for Eastern European states has been the desire to return to Europe—that is, to rejoin the European community from which they were estranged during the period of Soviet (read: Eastern or Asian) domination.³⁹ For nearly all countries in geographically-defined Europe, this was not an issue: the manner in which they presented themselves to the EU reflected both a historical narrative of being European and a commitment to European values, including democracy.⁴⁰ Thus, it is important to look closely at the language and rhetoric of state leaders who seek to define their respective countries as either European or not.

In some cases, such as Ukraine, the definition of a state’s identity remains contested.⁴¹ The 2004 election pitted those who sought a closer relationship with Europe against those who wanted a closer relationship with Russia. The ultimate victory of the Western-oriented Viktor Yushchenko over the Eastern-oriented Viktor Yanukovich was also a victory for those who, like Yushchenko, believe that Ukraine’s future lies with Europe. “Together with its nations we belong to the same civilization and share the same goals. History, economic prospects and the interests of the people give a clear answer to the question of where our future lies. Our place is in the European Union. Europe holds Ukraine’s historic chance to fulfill its potential.”⁴² Yushchenko’s language contrasts sharply with that used by Lukashenka to define Belarus.

Russian identity, too, has been contested.⁴³ In the post-Soviet period, there are people, known as Atlanticists, who wish to define Russia as a fundamentally European country. The fall from power of former Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, who was close with the Atlanticists, severely weakened this idea. In its place, the historical traditions of Slavophilism and Eurasianism have increased in importance. Russian President Putin has adopted some of the language of the Eurasianists, though he has not followed all of their policy prescriptions. His domination of the Russian political system has further weakened the Atlanticists.⁴⁴

In Belarus, the dominant notion is that it, along with Russia, belongs to a separate civilization—one that is Slavic and Orthodox. The East’s values, according to this conception, are fundamentally different than those of the West. Consequently, the regional trends evident in the West hold little in the way of an example for Belarusian political, social, or economic development. This thinking has many similarities to the Slavophile ideology of imperial Russia. The Slavophiles argued that the Westerners were wrong in ignoring Russia’s history, culture, and contributions to humanity. In essence, Russia had retained what the West had lost: its soul. Russian culture and social arrangements were superior to the West because they were based on organic collectivism and an Orthodox Christian faith—in contrast to the Western values of capitalism, rationality, and individuality, all of which leave humanity mired in spiritual poverty. Russia represented a unique civilization whose soul was under siege from Western forces and influences, introduced most powerfully by Peter the Great’s reforms. They desired to

return Russia to its pre-Petrine roots and based their model society on that of the peasants, who were seen as uncorrupted. The supranational and imperialist Pan-Slavic movement—which aimed to unite the Slavs against the West—developed out of the Slavophile ideology.⁴⁵ The possibility of a Russia-Belarus union state reinforce these trends by providing Belarus with a clear choice between the EU (West) and union with Russia (East).

In an interview in June 2003, Lukashenka discussed his belief in the distinctiveness of Eastern European civilization, which includes the Slavic countries of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, and the role that Belarus has in defending it:

We have just been following our own path, and this path has taken us to a situation where we have kept alive the sacred things characteristic of this Eastern European civilization in the hearts, souls and minds of our people. This civilization has always been here. We have held on to these features. We have preserved all the best and most treasured traits that have been passed down for centuries. Belarusians have preserved them. We have not discarded them.⁴⁶

Lukashenka also contrasted Slavic and Western cultures by claiming that “the East would never accept the cult of force, indiscipline, and lack of morals in the Western way of life that they [the West] are trying to impose on us.”⁴⁷ Looking to the West, rather than to Russia, would be disastrous for Belarus: “Belarus’s westward drift would be tantamount to breaking away from the Eastern Slavic civilization, where the country belongs. . . . In the West [we] would be in the subordinate, and not commanding position. Following in the footsteps of the Baltic countries would be very wrong.”⁴⁸ This theme, of discarding Belarus’s Slavic/Eastern heritage through integration with the West, is common in Lukashenka’s speeches⁴⁹ and he has asserted that the West is a political enemy of the Slavic people which seeks to isolate them and set them against each other.⁵⁰ The Eastern foundation of the proposed union was also evident in April 1996 when Patriarch Aleksy II, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, blessed the signing ceremony of the Community Treaty.⁵¹ In 2001, the Patriarch honored Lukashenka with the first ever Christian Orthodox Unity award.⁵²

The pattern of looking toward Russia, rather than Western Europe, has also been grounded in widespread nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Prior to the Communist period, Belarus was among the poorest regions in Europe. After World War II, and massive Soviet investment in the devastated (and territorially enlarged) republic, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was a showcase for Soviet manufacturing and economic development. Despite the serious economic problems throughout the rest of the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev period, the Belarusians emerged in the best economic shape of all the former Soviet republics (with the exception of the Baltics). This instilled a high level of pride in Soviet achievements and further reinforced the connection between Soviet and Belarusian identity.⁵³ As cited above, Lukashenka capitalized on these feelings by reintroducing Soviet symbols at the expense of uniquely Belarusian ones—for example, the white-red-white flag of the post-Soviet period was replaced by a version of the republics’ Soviet flag. Moreover, the touchstone for the Belarusian historical myth was changed from the declaration of state sovereignty in July 1990 to the July 1944

liberation of Minsk by the Soviet army.⁵⁴ Soviet-era textbooks and historiography were reintroduced into the Belarusian schools and the glorification of the Soviet period became official state policy. By focusing on the Soviet Union, therefore, Lukashenka perpetuated the Soviet-period mindset of East versus West, further alienating Belarus from European trends and identity.

Conditionality

One of the primary means by which democratic states attempt to spread democracy to authoritarian regimes is through conditionality: a process by which a mix of benefits and punishments are offered to a nondemocratic government in hopes of precipitating a democratic transition. The United States, as well as European institutions, such as the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and CoE, have sought to bring Belarus's increasingly authoritarian political system in line with democratic principles through a policy of diplomatic, political, economic, and strategic isolation. In some cases, they have actively supported groups within Belarus opposed to the Lukashenka regime. However, in each of these four areas, Russian policy has alleviated Western pressure by providing the Lukashenka government with alternative sources of support.

Diplomatic

The diplomatic isolation of Belarus is focused on excluding it from the West, both rhetorically and by blocking its membership to key European institutions. The Bush administration has been particularly harsh in its rhetoric toward Minsk, calling it an "outpost of tyranny" and the "last true dictatorship in the center of Europe."⁵⁵ In October 2004, the U.S. enacted the Belarus Democracy Act, which imposed sanctions on Belarus and funded opposition groups in the country with the caveat that they support democratic change. The EU, on the other hand, has been more willing to pursue a policy of engagement, but it has also openly criticized the Lukashenka regime as detrimental to its European identity and has helped fund the democratic opposition in Belarus.⁵⁶ Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy, stated before the European Parliament that Belarus's political system placed it outside the "family of European nations."⁵⁷ This statement was in line with the EU's broader Belarus policy: in late 1996 and early 1997, following the fraudulent November 1996 referendum that granted Lukashenka nearly unlimited power, the EU abandoned steps toward a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Belarus (making it the only country in Europe without such an agreement), suspended ministerial contacts, and froze nearly all aid programs to the country. Moreover, in the summer of 1998, senior Belarusian officials were banned from entering EU territory.⁵⁸ Due to poor EU-Belarus relations, the completion of a trade agreement has been postponed indefinitely, forcing bilateral trade to remain governed by an outdated 1989 agreement between the EU and the Soviet Union. As a result, EU-Belarus trade flow is marginal.⁵⁹ An attempt to engage Belarus was made in 1999 by offering highly conditional incentives for the Lukashenka regime to follow democratic procedures for the upcoming elections. These ultimately failed as the elections were highly flawed.

Other European institutions, such as the OSCE and the CoE have attempted to influence Belarus's political system.⁶⁰ The OSCE troika issued a strongly worded statement criticizing the November 1996 referendum and an OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group was created to promote democratization in Belarus; the latter included financial support for Belarusian groups to monitor the Lukashenka regime and its policies. In January 1997, the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE suspended the Special Guest status of Belarus's National Assembly and Belarus was not invited to the CoE's October 1997 summit. In fact, Belarus is the only country in Europe that is not a member of the organization.

Although Belarus has been effectively blocked from the West because of Lukashenka's policies, this is not the case with its eastward leanings. Russia remains a staunch ally of Belarus and has not sought to isolate Belarus or put any serious pressure on the Lukashenka regime to democratize. Putin regularly meets with Lukashenka, conferring on him political legitimacy and recognizing his important role in Russian politics. Moreover, given the widespread popularity of the union state project in Russia and Belarus, Putin's meetings with Lukashenka help reinforce the latter's domestic standing. In July 2005, for example, the two presidents met to discuss moving the union state forward. This represented their sixth meeting in 2005 alone.⁶¹ Although the Russia-Belarus union has been hampered by structural issues, Putin seemingly remains committed to it and has not imposed any conditions of his own over Belarus's domestic political system or Lukashenka's authoritarian tendencies.⁶² Instead of democracy in Belarus, economic issues, Putin's desire to retain his preeminent position within the Russian political system, and the relative power of the two entities have been most important in Putin's political thinking about the union.

In April, Putin gave a clear boost to Lukashenka by meeting with him in the Kremlin the day after U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Belarusian opposition figures—during which she stated that it was time for change to come to Belarus.⁶³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rejected Rice's comments: "We would not, of course, be advocating what some people call regime changes anywhere . . . We think the democratic process, the process of reform cannot be imposed from outside."⁶⁴ Russia's support for Belarus at this time of increasing American pressure was considered so important that Lukashenka publicly thanked Putin and Lavrov for "the immense support we received from them in a very complex period of our history as an independent state."⁶⁵ He even made jokes about Rice's statement, seemingly secure in his knowledge that he had the Kremlin's backing.⁶⁶

Political

Putin has also given Lukashenka political cover in response to Western criticism of Belarus's flawed and undemocratic elections. Parliamentary elections in October 2000 and March 2001 solidified Lukashenka's power and increased Belarus's international isolation. Nevertheless, Putin honored Lukashenka with the Russian order For Services to Fatherland in April 2001 for the latter's support for the reunification of Belarus and Russia.⁶⁷ During the September 2001 presidential election, Putin

openly supported Lukashenka; and a number of visits from prominent Russian officials, seemingly at the Kremlin's behest, helped to bolster Lukashenka's domestic support. Furthermore, Russian television stations, which are broadcast into Belarus and largely controlled by the Kremlin, avoided negative reports on Lukashenka and devoted nearly all of its coverage to a positive portrayal of the Belarusian president.⁶⁸ In the aftermath of the election, which European institutions universally called unfair and fraudulent, Putin telephoned Lukashenka and congratulated him on his convincing victory.⁶⁹

A similar pattern occurred during the October 2004 elections, which included a referendum allowing Lukashenka to run for president an unlimited number of times and a parliamentary election in which opposition parties failed to win a single seat. Again, Western institutions and countries were unanimous in their rejection of the legitimacy of both votes. Although Putin was less supportive in this instance—for example, he did not openly support Lukashenka and Russian television was less complementary toward him⁷⁰—the Kremlin ultimately rejected Western criticisms and recognized the fraudulent elections. They were declared legitimate by the Russia-Belarus union state secretary Pavel Borodin. Borodin framed Western criticism as a reaction to the process of Belarus-Russia unification.⁷¹ Igor Ivanov, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, former foreign minister under Putin, and a top Putin advisor, gave a lengthy defense of the conduct and outcome of the referendum.⁷² Other official Russian observers echoed these comments, and the Russian Foreign Ministry called the vote transparent.⁷³ Later, the Kremlin opposed American sanctions imposed against Belarus under the Belarus Democracy Act.⁷⁴ Without the Kremlin's support, it would have been far more difficult for Lukashenka to perpetrate electoral fraud.

Economic

Belarus is also economically isolated in Europe. The U.S. and the EU have imposed restrictions on financial aid to the regime and EU-Belarus trade is hampered by the lack of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Although neither has imposed significant economic or trade sanctions against Belarus, some discussion has already begun within European circles over the possibility of tying economic relations with Belarus to its acceptance of Western values.⁷⁵ Even if such a policy were to be established, it would likely be ineffective without Russian support. First, trade between the West and Belarus is minimal. Structural problems in Belarus's manufacturing base, and the noncompetitiveness of Belarusian products in the world market, limit Belarus's ability to export to the West. A lack of hard currency also prevents Belarus from importing many products from the West. Second, in terms of trading partners, Belarus's economic fate is so closely tied with Russia that its relationship with the West is a distant, secondary concern. Belarus ranks third (after Germany and Italy, and equally with Ukraine) among Russia's trading partners and, for Belarus, Russia is responsible for 50–60 percent of its trade as well as 90 percent of its energy supplies.⁷⁶ The trading relationship between Belarus and Russia is also imbalanced in Belarus's favor: it largely imports fuel and raw materials from Russia and exports finished goods.⁷⁷ As a

result, the possibilities for the West to use economic pressure against the Lukashenka regime are limited.

In addition to its trading relationship, Russia has been instrumental in sustaining the Lukashenka regime through economic assistance. Without it, Belarus's unreformed economic system would simply not be able to survive: not only did Lukashenka reverse even the modest economic reforms made by his predecessor, but he returned to a neo-Socialist model of state economic control, ranking 25 out of the 26 transition economies in overall progress in economic reform.⁷⁸ Russian aid also compensates for the lack of Western foreign aid. It comes in two forms: energy subsidies and benefits from the union. First, Russia heavily subsidizes supplies of oil and natural gas to Belarus, which in turn subsidizes Belarus's standard of living and reduces costs on its exports to Russia, thus making them more competitive than they would ordinarily be. Furthermore, Russia cancelled much of Belarus's debt, especially from energy exports. Overall, Russian subsidies have account for some 20 percent of Belarus's gross domestic product (GDP).⁷⁹ Second, the Russia-Belarus customs union, a product of the union process, helps Belarus far more than Russia, given the differences in size and markets. Moreover, Belarus is allowed to use barter rather than currency in its dealings with Russian businesses, which allows it to sell far more of its own products than it would under a competitive trading relationship. Russia also provided Belarus with an approximately \$200 million loan to help with monetary integration.

Strategic

The westward enlargement of NATO has further isolated Belarus. Although the alliance has a smaller membership than either the CoE or the EU, NATO expansion represents the de facto strategic and military unification of Europe under one organization. Although Belarus is a member of the Partnership for Peace program and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, and even participated in a NATO peacekeeping exercise in June 2005, Lukashenka has been a vocal critic of the alliance, calling it an insidious and horrible monster.⁸⁰ Belarus's overall level of cooperation with the alliance has been minimal. With the ascension of Poland to the alliance in 1999, and Latvia and Lithuania in 2004, Belarus's western and northern borders are now NATO's borders. With a clear desire by the new Ukrainian president to seek NATO membership, Belarus may soon find itself surrounded by NATO countries on three sides. Although Minsk has not given any indication that it wishes to join NATO, Belarus would be ineligible under its current political system: it is clear from the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement that states must be committed to democratic values to be considered. While it is unlikely that Russia will join NATO, it does have a special relationship with the alliance under the NATO-Russia Council. Therefore, Belarus's relationship with NATO places it out of the mainstream of European security policy.⁸¹ Belarus's close alliance with Russia prevents its complete strategic isolation. Although the military relationship between Russia and Belarus began in July 1992 with a host of military agreements, these ties were deepened signifi-

cantly following Lukashenka's shift toward both authoritarianism and an eastward-focused foreign policy. The absence of any real conflict on a host of military issues—such as denuclearization, the status of Russian troops in Belarus, and the leasing of military facilities to Russia—has allowed for a series of agreements and treaties to be signed which, according to Martinsen, has transformed Belarus into a Russian military district.⁸² Belarus's importance to Russian security has been made explicit in Russia's national security concepts and military doctrines since the late 1990s. Following NATO expansion, Belarus became Russia's de facto shield against Western military encroachment.

For some, the Belarus-Russia union represents the cornerstone of regional and global balance against the United States and its allies. It is often referred to as promoting global multipolarity to counter American hegemony.⁸³ This became especially important after the unilateral, American missile attacks against Afghanistan and Sudan (August 1998), the U.S.-British air strikes against Iraq (December 1998), and the war against Serbia over Kosovo (Spring 1999). These attacks made plain the strength of the U.S. and its dominant position in both the international system and Europe. The Russia-Belarus union supplied Lukashenka with a rhetorical tool to portray Belarus as playing a significant role in opposing the West. As he stated during his January 1999 speech before the union's Parliamentary Assembly:

The Union of Belarus and Russia should become an actual counterweight to the unipolar world that has currently developed, a powerful driving force in breaking the aggressive transatlantic monopoly, and an international core of the new unification of countries. Thinking on a large scale, the strengthening of our unity is a historic chance of the entire Slavic civilization to survive under the current grim conditions of the world's repartition. This is a chance to defend one's own originality and place among other communities and states on an equal footing.⁸⁴

By providing Belarus with military security, the Russia-Belarus union allows Minsk to avoid strategic isolation in Europe, withstand the pressure to conform to the political values in Europe, and reinforce its opposition to the West.

Integration

The attractiveness of membership in Western institutions is spurred by the widespread belief that there is no legitimate alternative to a return to Europe. If EU membership is seen as necessary for the well-being of one's country, then it is more likely that politicians will advance, and populations will embrace, an agenda that makes membership more likely. As a result, democratization becomes more likely as states ready themselves for possible ascension. In Belarus, as opposed to nearly every country in Europe, Lukashenka has promoted the notion that EU membership will be harmful to Belarus's well-being; instead, union with Russia is seen as a more attractive option.

For the regime in Minsk, the EU represents the worst of the Western values of crass materialism and unchecked capitalism, as opposed to Belarus, which represents the spiritual values of the East. This message is consistently broadcast through the state-controlled media in Belarus and, as a result, only a small part

of the Belarusian population blames Lukashenka for their current economic problems.⁸⁵ Moreover, according to Lukashenka, the aftermath of EU expansion has caused serious “problems” for new members, “including [difficulties for] peasants, unemployment, competition, competitiveness, and more”—all of which Belarus should avoid.⁸⁶

Given these perceptions of the EU, membership in the organization is simply not an option for the Lukashenka regime. Lukashenka has made it very clear that he does not wish to relinquish his hold over society and accede to EU rules.⁸⁷ More important, however, the regime and (seemingly) the Belarussian people are simply unwilling to undertake the economic reforms required with membership. Short-term economic stability (in terms of pensions, salaries, employment, and so on), rather than long-term economic reform and structural change, became the accepted mantra of Belarusian society.⁸⁸ Thus, EU membership would be too painful and expensive for Belarus to undertake.⁸⁹ Even if it were to apply, Brussels would not accept Belarus because of the latter’s unreformed economy and authoritarian government.

The Belarusian model of development, as Lukashenka describes it, stands in opposition to Western-style capitalism and market economics, and avoids “throw[ing] unprepared people into the market abyss.”⁹⁰ It emphasizes state control over the economy and has been described as a “Soviet theme park,” which “establish[es] a Soviet-type model, without a Communist Party.”⁹¹ For example, large state firms account for some 80 percent of Belarus’s gross domestic product (GDP) and have not been privatized; moreover, the collective and state farm system has been preserved, unlike any of the other former Soviet republics. It has consistently had the highest rate of inflation in the region, the state sector is not profitable, and the business climate in Belarus is extremely poor.⁹² According to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, the current macroeconomic policy mix is ultimately unsustainable.⁹³ The need to undertake painful structural reforms has only been avoided by Russian subsidies and beneficial trading relations. Without Russia’s help, the Belarusian economy would most likely collapse.

Even Russia, with its own reform program, is seen as embracing the negative aspects of Western economic culture.⁹⁴ However, it is hoped that Russia will return to the correct path of economic development, represented by the Belarusian model.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it is assumed that integration with Russia would be beneficial to Belarus, or at least far less painful than integration with the West. According to one poll, support for integration with Russia (62 percent) is far greater than with the EU (15–18 percent).⁹⁶ According to Lukashenka, “one of the cornerstones of the Belarusian model is integration with Russia, largely because of the potential benefits for Belarusian society, but also because nobody is waiting for us in other markets.”⁹⁷ There seems little point in attempting to look westward since Belarus, in its current form, will not be accepted. Therefore, it is believed that the country’s future lies eastward. Without a change in Lukashenka’s thinking or in public sentiments, it is unlikely that the prospects of EU integration will be sufficient to entice a democratic opening in Belarus.

The EU represents not only economic reform, but also Western-style democracy. As criticism of his ruling style increased, Lukashenka's rhetoric against the West became more and more hostile, and he increasingly contrasts Western values and conceptions of democracy with those in Belarus. For example, he attacked foreign models of liberalism and defended a uniquely Belarusian model of democracy, based on Belarusian values.⁹⁸ The Belarusian model concept, while largely economic, has both social and political components as well.⁹⁹ As Lukashenka explained during the 2002 Independence Day celebrations, "The wise Belarusian people, having lived through the first several years of independence in a state of lawlessness, rejected foreign proposals. They chose their own consistent and evolutionary path, all the while maintaining law and order and avoiding conflict and holding to the path of peace and creative labour."¹⁰⁰ In reality, this model places a heavy emphasis on social stability based on a direct relationship between the people and their president to create a populist, patrimonial, and president-dominated state. Of course, this comes at the expense of any real opposition. Nevertheless, Lukashenka defended his country's political system as unique and in line with Belarus's collectivist approach to politics. Because the Belarusian model conflicts with the interests of the West, Lukashenka claimed "that Belarus is now the object of an ideological offensive from the West to rewrite our heroic history and compromise our cultural values . . . Propaganda of violence, moral degradation and enrichment by any means is just one of the ideological injections aimed at the souls of our people."¹⁰¹ In his 2003 State of the Nation speech, Lukashenka criticized the United States's notorious Belarus Democracy Act, which, he claimed, sought to overthrow the Belarusian government and break the bonds between Belarus and Russia.¹⁰² In a very thinly veiled attack on the Western powers, which overwhelmingly criticized the October 2003 parliamentary election and referendum, he assailed those who wish to impose their perception of democracy above the interests of entire countries and people.¹⁰³

Not all Belarusians agree with Lukashenka's conception of Belarus as fundamentally linked to Russia and the East. As Grigory Ioffe put it, "the key divide within Belarus is between two memorial cults: neo-Soviet, represented by Lukashenka, and nationalist, represented by the opposition."¹⁰⁴ The latter seeks to separate Belarus from Russia, define Belarus as a European country, and promote Western and European values such as democracy and human rights.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Lukashenka's hold on Belarus is strong, the opposition is weak and internally divided, and, despite the absence of free and fair elections, Lukashenka's worldview probably has majority support in the country.¹⁰⁶ Thus, according to the dominant national narrative in the country, Belarus is geographically located in Europe, but not a part of Europe. Together with Russia, Belarus constitutes a separate community on the continent.

Conclusion

The situation in Belarus is such that the external factors that have been shown to promote democratization have been weakened or undermined by its relationship with Russia in general, and by the proposed Russia-Belarus union in particular.

Lukashenka has been successful in defining Belarus as part of the East, as opposed to the community of Western Europe. This stands in sharp contrast to nearly all Eastern European states, which have attempted to define themselves as connected to Western European culture, trends, and identity. Russia's ambiguous relationship with Europe, which continues today under the guise of Eurasianism, and Belarus's close relationship with Russia, provides the regime with an alternative identity: one which taps into notions of Slavic and Orthodox uniqueness, as well as a pro-Soviet and pro-Russian identity.

Specific attempts to pressure the Belarusian government have been counteracted by Moscow. Russian leaders, including Putin, have consistently legitimized Lukashenka's rule both diplomatically and politically, going so far as to actively defend Belarus's questionable elections. In the economic realm, Russia-Belarus trade and Russian subsidies protect Belarus from any possible trade sanctions from Western Europe and sustain the regime's unreformed economic system. Without these policies, Lukashenka would find it far more difficult to retain power by guaranteeing socioeconomic stability. This relationship has been most successful strategically: the Russia-Belarus alliance prevents Belarus from becoming militarily isolated in Europe and reinforces the idea of the West (NATO) against the Eastern Slavs (Russia and Belarus).

Finally, the proposed Russia-Belarus union provides Belarus with an alternative to EU membership. Without the prospect of integration with Russia, Belarus would come under increasing pressure to choose between two, stark options: complete isolation or integration with the EU. The former, if Russia were not supportive of the regime, would likely be disastrous for Belarus. The latter would require political and economic changes that would undermine the regime and likely mean the end of Lukashenka's presidency. As a result of these policies, and Belarus's relationship with Russia, the union state has been a success: while it has not produced many institutional outcomes, and its very structure remains a matter of contention, it has protected Belarus's political system against specific pressures and general trends evident in Europe.

This conclusion raises three important questions. What are the theoretical implications of the situation in Belarus? How best can the United States and Western Europe promote democracy in Belarus? Why would the Putin administration permit Belarus to remain nondemocratic?

The case of Belarus indicates that the external forces that promote democratization can be undermined and replaced with an international environment that actually promotes disincentives to democratize. In Belarus, there is little reason for Lukashenka to accede to Western demands since Russian support allows him to resist Western pressure and maintain power. As stated before, democratization is first and foremost an internal process. However, the existence of offsetting factors may actually undercut the power of external forces to promote democracy: the lack of a democratic opening may be due less to the ineffectiveness of external support for regime change, than to the existence of an international environment that creates disincentives to democratize. As a result, when considering the role of external variables in the process of precipitating a democratic transition,

researchers must consider both the source and intensity of the countervailing forces. Moreover, scholars need to consider whether certain types of countervailing forces are more important than others. In the case of Belarus, there is a wide range of such forces and the importance of any specific one is difficult to determine; in other cases, the relationship between a particular external variable and a lack of democratization may be clearer. Finally, more research needs to be done on whether an increase in external pressure for democratization, aimed at overwhelming external forces to the contrary, will be effective. It is possible that given a certain level of support for an authoritarian regime, external pressure will be ineffective or even counterproductive.

It seems obvious that the best way for the U.S. and Western Europe to promote democracy in Belarus is to get Russia's cooperation. So far, Russian subsidies and support have allowed Lukashenka to retain power. If these were withdrawn, Lukashenka's position would become increasingly untenable, possibly precipitating a democratic transition from within the regime or outside of it, like in Ukraine and Serbia. This, however, raises other questions. What would it take for the Kremlin to, in effect, give up Lukashenka? Would it be best to use carrots (benefits, such as foreign aid or increased trading opportunities) or sticks (for example, sanctions or isolation) to cause a change in Russian policy? The former may be ineffective and the latter may actually cause Russia to align itself more closely with Belarus. Any answer to these questions must consider Russia's interests in perpetuating authoritarianism in Belarus.

The Kremlin has substantial interests in an authoritarian Belarus. Putin's regime has slid toward authoritarianism since he assumed the presidency in 2000.¹⁰⁷ Some have argued, given his support of election fraud in Ukraine in 2004, that Putin wishes to form a commonwealth of nondemocratic states—including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—which would aim to insulate its authoritarian members from democratization.¹⁰⁸ This would be akin to the 1815 Holy Alliance between Austria, Prussia, and Russia, which aimed to preserve conservative governments against the rising tide of liberalism. According to this reasoning, by perpetuating authoritarianism in Belarus, Putin makes it less likely that a color revolution would spread to Russia itself. Thus, in pressuring the Kremlin to precipitate democratization in Belarus, the West may be asking it to loosen its own grip on power.

Less speculative is the fact that a democratic Belarus is more likely to align itself with the West. Ukraine is a good example: soon after Yushchenko's victory in the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine began the process of seeking membership in the EU and NATO. If Lukashenka were undermined in Belarus, and a democratic, pro-Western opposition were to assume power, then Belarus, like Ukraine, would be effectively lost to Russia. As one Russian commentator put it, "We have lost Ukraine and if we now lose Belarus, in a certain period the North Atlantic alliance will be standing along the full length of our western borders . . . This is an issue of prestige and security."¹⁰⁹ Belarus represents the cornerstone of Russia's security policy in Europe in terms of its Western reach, military bases, and early warning systems. If Belarus were to decisively shift away from the

Kremlin, then Russia's zone of control, and the West's zone of influence, would shift further eastward.

Belarus's continuing isolation makes the regime in Minsk more dependent on Russia for its very survival. Although Lukashenka and Putin do not always agree, and the former is often an irritant to the latter, Russian support ensures a subservient relationship between the two countries. In some cases, Belarusian debts to Russia have been repaid through the transfer of shares in Belarusian industries to Kremlin-controlled businesses, which further deepens Belarus's dependence on Russia.¹¹⁰ Moreover, Russia's dominant position guarantees that Belarus will not adopt any policies that run counter to Russia's security interests. Consequently, Russia's level of control over Belarus would be compromised by a democratic transition.

Finally, Belarus's dependence on Russia also has benefits for Russia in its relationship with the West. The necessity of Russian support for political change in Belarus raises Putin's profile and, in a way, makes the West dependent on the Kremlin: if the West wishes to affect change in Belarus, there is a growing realization that it must deal with Putin and resist any urges it may have to isolate Russia over the Kremlin's foreign policy and growing authoritarianism. In effect, an authoritarian Belarus serves as an insurance policy, guaranteeing that the West must take Russia seriously and continue to deal with Russia on the Kremlin's terms.

The future of democracy in Belarus, of course, ultimately lies with its people and its government. However, whether such a future is more or less possible lies with Russia. The interaction between the domestic forces in Belarus that want a political revolution, the desire of the Lukashenka regime to continue in power, and the role of the West in promoting democratization, must contend with the countervailing role that Russia is playing in perpetuating the last authoritarian regime in Europe. In this respect, the prospect of a Russia-Belarus union state has been a success.

Postscript

In March 2006, Alyaksandr Lukashenka decisively won another term as president of Belarus with an official "election" result of 83 percent. The quotes around the word election are intentional: international observers and foreign governments harshly criticized the fairness of the vote in a near-universal chorus of condemnation. Opposition candidates were restricted from effectively campaigning, anti-Lukashenka rallies were dispersed by Belarusian security services, and the regime tightened its near monopoly on the Belarusian media. One voice, however, stood alone in supporting this result: Russia. This was not surprising and is consistent with the findings of this article. This postscript briefly illustrates how the pattern of Russian support for authoritarianism in Belarus continued throughout the 2006 electoral campaign.

In Vladimir Putin's annual press conference for international journalists in late January 2006, the Russian president was circumspect in response to a question about Russia's support for Lukashenka. Rather than supporting "this or that political figure at any price,"¹¹¹ Putin asserted that he was interested in Russia developing an "open-handed policy" with the *state* of Belarus, not its *regime*. While this may have marked a departure from the Kremlin's support of Lukashenka,

Sergei Ivanov, Russian defense minister and heir apparent to the Russian presidency, made it clear that no such departure would occur. In a statement during the 42nd International Conference on Security Policy in early February 2006, Ivanov identified Lukashenka as “the most popular politician in Belarus. Whether you like it or not,” and issued an ominous warning to opponents of the regime in Minsk: “We treat negatively a flare-up of disorders after the elections and believe it is necessary to do [our] utmost to prevent them.”¹¹² This statement indicated that Moscow would not countenance a color revolution in Belarus.

Later in February 2006, other Russian officials came out in support of Lukashenka and opposed any attempt to pressure the Belarusian regime. During a meeting with his Belarusian counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized the West for attempting to dictate political standards to Belarus and warned against attempting a “regime change” in the country.¹¹³ In response, the Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynaw thanked Russia for its support and claimed that “it is on the western front that we encounter our biggest problems, including the intent to influence processes taking place within our country.”¹¹⁴ This theme of external pressure on Belarus’s political system was common for Belarusian officials in the weeks before the vote.¹¹⁵ The Czech and Polish governments, in particular, were a focus of the regime’s ire.¹¹⁶

The Russian government also showed its support for Lukashenka in other ways. For example, Russian state-controlled television portrayed Lukashenka in a positive light and discounted the legitimacy of the opposition.¹¹⁷ A little more than a week before the vote, these same stations ran stories that openly criticized the Belarusian opposition and leveled charges against Ukrainian, Georgian, and other Western governments for interfering with Belarus’s internal affairs.¹¹⁸ Around the same time, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov met publicly with Lukashenka, conveyed Putin’s greetings to the Belarusian president, and praised the two presidents for their work together on the Russian-Belarus union state.¹¹⁹ During this meeting, Fradkov all but endorsed Lukashenka for a third term by stating:

It’s vital to synchronizing our actions in the economic field and integration processes. This will be in line with the political expectations of the Belarusian people in connection with the presidential election . . . I’m sure that the people of Belarus will make the correct choice—the one that promotes cooperation between our countries and the union of the two states.¹²⁰

In addition, it was announced that Belarus would pay far less for its natural gas imports than Ukraine, contrasting the benefits provided to a cooperating, pro-Russian government in Minsk with an uncooperative, pro-Western government in Kiev.¹²¹

The importance of Russia-Belarus integration was reflected in Russian support for the Minsk regime. Pavel Borodin, state secretary of the union of Russia and Belarus and a close Putin ally, emerged as the one of the strongest defenders of Lukashenka both before and after the election. On March 9, Borodin highlighted Lukashenka’s self-sacrificing nature and argued that what Belarus needs is “a leader” on par with Leonid Kuchma, Askar Akayev, and, “one of the great-

est Georgians after Stalin,” Eduard Shevardnadze.¹²² It is important to note that all three of these figures (or in the case of Kuchma, his handpicked successor) were ousted from power by the Orange (Ukraine), Tulip (Kyrgyzstan), and Rose (Georgia) revolutions, respectively. Borodin also denied the existence of any media restrictions in Belarus. After the election, Borodin was quick to claim that the vote was legitimate and reflected the true will of the Belarusian people.¹²³ Borodin also compared Lukashenka to the “excellent presidents” wrongfully overthrown through color revolutions.¹²⁴

In the aftermath of the vote on March 19, international observers resoundly criticized the manner of the election.¹²⁵ However, Borodin’s statement about the fairness of the vote was echoed by top Kremlin officials. Observers from the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) attacked “the biased claims and harsh evaluations” of Western countries and denied that there were any “systematic or widespread” irregularities, calling the vote “free, open, and transparent.”¹²⁶ The Russian Foreign Ministry, including the foreign minister himself, came to the same conclusions as the CIS observers.¹²⁷ Finally, Putin publicly congratulated Lukashenka on his victory, citing his hope that both sides could now make “real progress” on the Russian-Belarus union state.¹²⁸

From these statements, Russian support of authoritarianism in Belarus continued even though Putin and Lukashenka reportedly do not get along and the Russian-Belarus union state is stalled.¹²⁹ This illustrates that the Kremlin’s support for particular regimes is increasingly based on undermining democratic trends in the former Soviet Union. Whether this is a reflection of international politics or domestic political considerations is unclear at this time. However, the reality is probably a mixture of the two: authoritarian leaders, partly because of the international isolation generated by their authoritarian tendencies, are more likely to agree to Russia’s policy agenda, while at the same time there is probably some fear in the Kremlin that democratic transitions may become contagious and possibly call into question the survival of the Putin regime. Given Russian policy up to and after the 2006 Belarusian “election,” it is reasonable to predict that it is in Russia’s interests to prevent the occurrence of further “color revolutions.”

NOTES

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