



Why the 2020 Belarusian Protests Failed to Oust Lukashenka

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Abstract

This article uses a comparison with Ukraine to investigate why protests against Lukashenka in 2020 failed to oust the Belarusian dictator. First, in contrast to his counterparts in Ukraine, Lukashenka successfully built new authoritarian economic and coercive institutions in the 1990s that raised the costs of opposition activity and reduced challengers' access to business support. Second, Belarus has lacked a strong national identity that was critical to opposition success in Ukraine. In Ukraine, relatively powerful anti-Russian nationalism repeatedly motivated a core group of anti-incumbent activists and facilitated the opposition's control over local power structures that supported protest activities at critical moments. In Belarus, weak national identity and consequent dearth of committed activists in national government institutions in the 1990s hampered efforts to challenge Lukashenka's consolidation of authoritarian power. In addition, weaker national identity undermined the capacity of opposition forces to control local power structures that might have aided opposition protest.

Keywords: democratization; authoritarianism; Belarusian politics; Lukashenka; protests

In August 2020, the long quiescent Belarusian opposition seemed to be on the brink of victory. After Alyaksandr Lukashenka's fifth – and likely falsified – reelection, hundreds of thousands of protesters filled the streets of Minsk, regional capitals, and even rural areas. These were the largest demonstrations in Belarus since independence and, quite possibly, in the country's history.¹ However, even in the face of initial ambivalence from Lukashenka's patron, Vladimir Putin, the Belarusian dictator weathered the crisis. While the protests were large by Belarusian standards, they never generated an effective siege of the government that might have convinced the President's allies to defect and the regime to collapse.²

To understand this failure, we compare the Belarusian case to Ukraine, where large-scale protests have repeatedly ousted executives since 1990. The comparison suggests that two factors were critical to the opposition's impotence in Belarus. First, its inability to mount a more serious challenge can at least partly be traced to the fact that Lukashenka was more successful than his Ukrainian counterparts in building powerful authoritarian economic institutions in the 1990s. The concentration of economic resources (and construction of a powerful coercive apparatus) have significantly raised the costs of opposition and reduced opposition access to business support. Second, Belarus has lacked a strong national identity that was critical to opposition success in Ukraine. In Ukraine, relatively powerful anti-Russian nationalism repeatedly motivated a core group of anti-incumbent activists and facilitated the opposition's control over local power structures that supported protest activities at critical moments. In Belarus, weak national identity and consequent dearth of committed activists in national government institutions in the 1990s hampered efforts to challenge Lukashenka's consolidation of authoritarian power. In addition, relatively weak national

identity likely undermined the capacity of opposition forces to control local power structures that might have aided opposition protest.

The Puzzle of Opposition Failure in Belarus

A powerful opposition challenge in Belarus appeared to come out of nowhere in the summer of 2020. First elected with 81% of the vote in 1994, Lukashenka had easily ridden rough shod over the constitution's two-term limit and won "elegant victories" in Presidential elections in 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2015.³ These elections, characterized by extensive fraud,⁴ would likely have been won by Lukashenka anyway, particularly as the authoritarian leader enjoyed genuine approval from a significant portion of the Belarusian population. While opposition protest campaigns regularly occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, they were not sufficiently large or sustained to present a serious challenge to Lukashenka's power.⁵

In the run-up to the 2020 election, however, things looked different. Due in part to a global drop in energy prices and Russia's decision to reduce energy subsidies, the economy was stagnating. Lukashenka had also treated the COVID-19 threat in a flippant manner – recommending that people drink more vodka to ward off the epidemic. Partly as a result, Belarus had four times more COVID-19 cases per capita than neighboring Ukraine on the eve of the Presidential election (Worldometer 2021a; 2021b).

Furthermore, Lukashenka confronted tensions with Putin. In January 2020, Lukashenka had accused Moscow of attempting to "dissolve" Belarus into Russia (RFE/RL 2020a) and later alleged that Russian mercenaries were planning a terrorist attack against the regime (Bykowski and Bushuev 2020). Putin reportedly pressured Lukashenka to give greater powers to the legislature (Whitmore 2021). In late August 2020, independent Belarusian newspapers were able to turn to Russian publishers after Belarusian printers refused to publish their papers (*Hrodno 015.by* 2020). Many observers felt that Lukashenka's survival was "contingent on Russia's support" (Leukavets 2021, 90).

In the weeks before the election, the opposition was clearly energized. Civil society and grassroots networks began to form and organize nationwide months before election day (Mateo 2022, 39). The three leading opposition candidates – Viktor Babaryka, a former regime insider with close Kremlin ties, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a well-known video blogger and Valery Tsapkala, a former diplomat who had worked in Lukashenka's first electoral campaign – all received unusually enthusiastic responses to their efforts to collect the required signatures for candidate registration. Lukashenka then inadvertently united the opposition by barring all three candidates while permitting Tsikhanouski's wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, to run. Tsikhanouskaya brought the various opposition forces together: two representatives of the other candidates – Tsapkalo's wife, Veranika Tsapkala, and Barbaryka's chief of staff, Maria Kalesnikava – threw their support behind her campaign. Tsikhanouskaya campaigned with the two women and announced that if elected, she would immediately organize new, free, and fair elections (*Radyio Svaboda* 2020). Tsikhanouskaya's campaign received enthusiastic support. On July 30, an opposition rally attracted sixty thousand people despite being forced to hold the demonstration in a park on the outskirts of the city (RFE/RL 2020c).

The official results of the election – indicating that Lukashenka had beaten Tsikhanouskaya 80 to 10 % – appeared fantastical. Thousands immediately protested across the country, with 19 settlements protesting the night of the elections. By the following week, at least a hundred thousand came out to protest (Mateo 2022, 28). The government responded with unprecedented force in the country's history (Nikolayenko 2022, 84) – riot police officers used flashbang grenades, rubber bullets, and batons indiscriminately against protesters, journalists, and bystanders alike. In Minsk, police concealed themselves in ambulances and emerged to attack protesters (*Nezavisimaia Gazeta* 2020). Gruesome images of bruised and beaten activists tortured in confinement spread across the internet (*Tut.by* 2020a)⁶ and on Belarusian state television (Lisitsyna 2020). To avoid repression, protesters adapted "be water" strategies from the 2019 Hong Kong protests – briefly occupying

individual metro stations and other public spaces before moving to other parts of the city. An estimated seven thousand people were arrested in the first days after the election (*Tut.by* 2020b). Tsikhanouskaya was then forced to record a statement from the Central Election Commission office calling for the protests to end after the candidate's children were allegedly threatened by the authorities (Roth and Auseyushkin 2020). Tsikhanouskaya and her children were then forced to leave Belarus to neighboring Lithuania.

At the same time, widespread government repression backfired and ended up generating greater outrage than the stolen election itself. Enormous numbers of protesters took to the streets in a rejection of the Lukashenka regime's use of violence (Bekus 2021, 7; Paulovich 2021, 42; Nikolayenko 2022). Belarusians held nearly daily marches and solidarity chains of varying sizes across the country: on August 16, about two hundred thousand protestors in Minsk demanded Lukashenka's resignation. Over subsequent weeks, protests occurred regularly across the country, with increasing numbers – by October, the “March of Pride,” held on October 11, and the “People's Ultimatum,” held on October 25 both saw over a hundred thousand protesters in Minsk (Bekus 2021, 13). When Lukashenka gave a speech at a Minsk tractor factory on August 17, he was interrupted by shouts of “Go away!” (*Ukhodi*) (Herszenhorn 2020); workers at state television resigned en masse; videos of police officers tossing their uniforms into the trash spread on the internet (*BBC* 2020). On August 14, the Minister of Internal Affairs issued an apology for police attacks on protesters (*BelTA* 2020).

Yet the regime survived. Tsikhanouskaya was forced to campaign against the Lukashenka regime from exile. While she was able to meet with foreign leaders and testify before the United Nations Security Council and the United States Congress, she had little influence over events in her home country. Other allies of the opposition were either forced out of the country or arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. In the face of intense repression, protesters adopted a “flash-mob” style strategy to avoid detention, organizing smaller and shorter protests planned through social media (*RFE/RL* 2021a).

Low intensity coercion continued apace. Foreign journalists were deported, while Belarusian independent opposition outlets were shut down, including the country's oldest newspaper, *Nasha Niva*, and the largest independent news site in the country, *Tut.by*. Andrey Alyksandrau, a BelaPAN journalist, was charged with high treason for allegedly helping anti-Lukashenka protesters pay fines for participating in the August 2020 protests (*RFE/RL* 2021b). By the end of 2020, ten journalists were imprisoned in Belarus for their reporting (CPJ, n.d.), with more subject to regular harassment, raids on their offices and homes, and detention.

Protesters were often treated harshly. Reports of torture, the refusal of medical treatment, rape and humiliation were widespread in the first months of the protests. These harsh conditions led prisoners to desperate measures; after addressing a Minsk courtroom about the treatment he expected upon his return to prison, activist Stepan Latypau stabbed himself in the neck with a pen inside the prisoners' cage (Williams 2021). Activists would rather face death than the torture chambers in Belarusian prisons.

Simultaneously, despite initial ambivalence, Putin threw his support behind Lukashenka. At the end of August 2020, Russian TV presenters replaced striking Belarusian state TV anchors (Way 2020, 26). As integration talks between the two countries continued, Belarus received a number of loans and military consignments from the Russian regime (*RFE/RL* 2021c). By early 2021, large-scale protests became increasingly impossible to hold, and were limited to small gatherings of the most dedicated protesters.

The record of Belarusian failure contrasts sharply with neighboring Ukraine, where opposition has had an enduring record of success. Opposition candidates have beat incumbents in four elections – in 1994, 2004, 2010, and 2019. In addition, mass protests contributed to the ouster of executives four different times. In 1990, student protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Vitalii Masol. In 1993, striking miners forced an early Presidential election and the defeat of President Kravchuk. In 2004 and 2014, mass protests led to the removal of Viktor Yanukovich.

Why the Opposition Failed

What explains the divergent fates of opposition protests in Belarus and Ukraine? Observers have offered a variety of explanations for the failure of opposition in Belarus. First, Olena Nikolayenko (2015, 474; 483), among others, has suggested that general satisfaction with living standards explains greater authoritarian stability in Belarus compared to other cases. Indeed, gas and other subsidies from Russia contributed to relatively high growth rates during Lukashenka's tenure (Aslund 2002, 182; Karol 2006). While clearly part of any understanding of Lukashenka's longevity, this approach does not explain why Lukashenka survived periods of economic decline and rising public dissatisfaction in both 2011 and 2020. Thus, in 2011, tensions with Russia contributed to a steep decline in wages while surveys suggested that a vast majority felt that the economy was in crisis (Marin 2012, 20, 22). Lukashenka's approval rating dropped from 53% in December 2010 to 21% in September 2011.⁷ Yet, Lukashenka experienced no serious threat to his rule. Furthermore, the regime survived the 2020 crisis despite the fact that public dissatisfaction appeared to be high. It is also worth noting that protests in Ukraine have succeeded even, as in the run-up to 2004, when the economy experienced significant growth.⁸

Other accounts trace opposition failure to cultural factors, such as a "collectivist," "patriarchal" consciousness that has supposedly led Belarusians to favor order over freedom relative to their counterparts in Ukraine (Leonov 2003, 18; Karbalevich 2010, 196). While it is hard to conclusively disprove that a Belarusian "patriarchal culture" – somehow conceived – might explain the durability of authoritarianism, there is little evidence that Belarusians as a whole are less supportive of democracy than their counterparts in Ukraine or other parts of the former Soviet Union. In fact, data from the 1990s suggested that support for a "strong leader" rather than pluralist democracy was lower in Belarus compared to other post-Soviet cases including the Baltic states (Haerpfer 2003, 97; see also Haerpfer 2005, 177). In the mid-2000s, available survey evidence suggested that 65–70% of Belarusians supported ending harassment of opposition and introduction of free and fair elections.⁹

We argue instead that protests in Belarus were not successful because the costs of opposition were much higher than in Ukraine. At the most proximate level, the 2020 revolution failed because the opposition was unable to effectively pressure the government in a sustained manner. Mark Beissinger (2022) has recently argued that successful revolutions are characterized by "sustained mass siege" of the government. Urban revolutionaries gain victory by surrounding or blockading key public spaces for sustained periods of time in order to attract widespread attention and make it impossible for the incumbent to ignore protests. Mass siege forces governments to accede to opposition demands or engage in risky, high-intensity coercion that may lead to elite and popular backlash. Examples include Ukraine in 2004 and 2014 as well as Serbia in 2000 and Egypt in 2011.

Indeed, the case of neighboring Ukraine provides the most obvious contrast with Belarus – with four electoral turnovers and four cases of mass protest leading to the ouster of top executives. The Ukrainian opposition, unlike its Belarusian counterpart, has repeatedly been able to occupy the center of the capital for significant periods of time – blocking traffic and generating significant domestic and international attention. In 1990, 2004, and 2013–2014, governments' unwillingness or incapacity to clear tent cities in the capital provoked regime crisis and splits at the top that resulted in incumbent turnover.

By contrast, Belarusian protesters have historically been unable to generate a mass siege of the government. In 2001, the main opposition Presidential candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk, an ex-Communist Party official who sought Putin's support, resisted calls by activists to occupy October square in Minsk after his loss to Lukashenka (Nikolayenko 2015, 487). Following the 2006 elections, tents were erected in October Square; however, the tent city was tiny, did not block traffic, and was easily cleared by riot police within a few days (de Vogel 2022, 12; Way, personal observation, March 19, 2006). Following the 2010 election crackdown, opposition began a flash mob protest campaign known as the "Silent Protests" (de Vogel 2022, 13). These protests had no

intention of occupying public spaces – rather, they focused on silent dissent against the Lukashenka regime.

In the first few weeks of the 2020 protest movement, protesters gathered in the central squares of their cities but were quickly pushed out and chased away by riot police (Abdurasulov 2020). Protesters were thus forced to follow an episodic protest repertoire, moving from location to location on an ad hoc basis, organizing initial protest plans over Telegram channels and marching through urban districts rather than occupying central parts of the city. The government was never forced to clear an established protest encampment as in Ukraine and had a much easier time wearing the opposition down.

What accounts for the differences in Belarusian and Ukrainian opposition capacity to generate a mass siege of the government? Certainly, Belarusian activists were well aware of the ways in which sieges in Ukraine led to the overthrow of autocrats. So it is unlikely that tactical choices by opposition leaders were key.

We argue instead that two factors were important. First, and most directly, Lukashenka in the 1990s was able to construct an authoritarian system in which protest activity was far more costly than in Ukraine. Within a few years after gaining power in 1994, he successfully sidelined parliament, constructed a powerful coercive apparatus, and concentrated economic resources in his hands to a greater degree than in Ukraine. As a result, the government in Belarus has had an easier time punishing opposition and depriving it of resources than in Ukraine.

But why was Lukashenka able to build an authoritarian state in the first place? While a variety of contingent factors – including Lukashenka's particular brand of aggressive leadership – likely contributed to his success, the weakness of Belarusian identity was also key. Weak Belarusian nationalism has frequently been linked to the failure of democracy.¹⁰ Yet, the mechanism is not always clear. Thus, in the classic literature on democratization, weak national identity is said to undermine democracy because it opens the way for ethnic or religious strife – which are almost entirely absent in post-Soviet Belarus.¹¹ Instead, we focus on the role of national identity as a tool for popular mobilization (Beissinger 2002, 76–79). Weak nationalism in Belarus resulted in less significant popular resistance to autocratic measures than in Ukraine (see also Eke and Kuzio 2000). The relative weakness of anti-Russian Belarusian nationalism deprived opposition of institutional support and a cohort of opposition cadres ready to engage in risky protest activity.

Oligarchs, Nationalism, and Successful Siege in Ukraine

To understand the opposition's failure in Belarus, it helps to compare regime dynamics in Ukraine where weak government control of the economy and relatively strong nationalism helped foster intense political competition for decades. Like Lukashenka, Ukraine's second President, Leonid Kuchma expanded the police and increased funding for the security services after coming to power in 1994.¹² However, in contrast to Lukashenka (see below), authoritarian state power was undermined in the 1990s by Kuchma's move away from state ownership over the economy – which plunged from 90% in 1992 to 40% in 2000 (EBRD 2000; Puglisi 2003).

The dominance of the private sector arguably gave the population greater autonomy from government pressure than in Belarus. Citizens in most parts of the country were able to participate in opposition activities without fear of losing their job or being kicked out of university. Privatization also led to the emergence of a class of semi-independent oligarchs, who exchanged support for the President for access to rents (Puglisi 2003, 837). This system conferred to Kuchma rents and property to buy support as well as access to state sanctions to punish opposition (Darden 2008). At the same time, these figures maintained sufficient independence to defect to opposition when incumbents appeared vulnerable. For example, Kuchma's ally, Petro Poroshenko, defected to the opposition in the early 2000s. During the 2004 Orange Revolution, oligarchic contributions helped to pay both for the opposition election campaign and protests following the government's attempt to steal the election (Way 2015, 69).

Opposition was also bolstered by a powerful anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism that emerged in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the area of Galicia in Western Ukraine (contemporary Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk) under Austrian control. Austrian authorities actively promoted the expansion of mass schooling in the Ukrainian language – a measure that Keith Darden shows created an extremely durable and passionate support for Ukrainian nationalism that was framed in opposition to both Poland and Russia (Darden 2010, 101–102; see also Szporluk 1979, 78, 88). By contrast, Ukrainian nationalism was historically weaker elsewhere where literacy and mass schooling first emerged under Russian tutelage (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006). Thus, Eastern and Southern Ukraine, incorporated into Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries, was historically much more integrated into Russia, attained mass literacy under Soviet rule, and possessed a relatively weak sense of Ukrainian identity (Darden 2010).

Given that central power was often held by Russophile political leaders, the opposition was able to tap into Ukrainian nationalism to generate significant challenges to autocratic rule. For one, the strength of nationalist sentiment in certain regions allowed opposition to seize control over local power structures that, in turn, provided safe spaces for opposition to mobilize support. Thus, in the spring of 1990, the democratic nationalist leader Viacheslav Chornovil took power in the Lviv Oblast in Western Ukraine. Opposition control over a critical part of the country provided an obstacle to authoritarian state building that was absent in Belarus. Nationalists' control over key institutions in the former area of Galicia provided opposition with important mobilizational resources. In 2004, police units from the Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast in Western Ukraine escorted thousands of demonstrators to Kyiv following the attempt by Viktor Yanukovich to steal the Presidential election (Krushelnycky 2006, 306). Similarly, the head of an agricultural firm in Ternopil told one of the authors that he had sent 88 of his employees by bus to Southern Ukraine to observe the voting on the opposition's behalf and provided logistical support for employees to protest in Kyiv. During the Euromaidan protests nine years later, the heads of universities in Lviv and elsewhere in Galicia supported students protesting in the capital (KHRPG 2013; *Kyiv Post* 2013). Universities in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and elsewhere were shut so students could attend the protests. The Catholic University in Lviv as well as Kyiv Mohyla University attended the protests as institutions (Kvit 2014). Such support afforded students both significant freedom from reprisal and often means of transport to the protests.

Simultaneously, the combination of Russophile autocrats and powerful anti-Russian nationalism meant that opposition could be framed not just as a battle for political power of one group of elites against another but as a fight for national survival. Russophile incumbents were seen by many activists in Western Ukraine (as well as in Kyiv) as presenting existential threats to Ukraine's identity as a European country (Way 2015, chapter 3). Framed in such terms, the fight against incumbent power was for many something worth dying for.

Partly as a result, citizens from Galicia and Western Ukraine more broadly were frequently overrepresented in protests in both 2004 and 2013–2014. According to survey data collected by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 37% of respondents in Western Ukraine (including half of those in Lviv) protested in favor of the opposition in late 2004 as compared to just 3% in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (Way 2011, 147; also Stepanenko 2005, 613; Beissinger 2013). Although the provinces of Galicia made up just 10% of Ukraine's population, they accounted for 36% of all pro-Yushchenko protesters – more than two times the share of protesters (14%) from Kyiv, where the main demonstrations took place (Way 2011, 147; also Beissinger 2013, 586–587). According to Beissinger (2013, 587), a full 90% of Orange revolutionaries came from either Western or Central Ukraine. While protesters' views on economic policy and democracy were quite diverse, they were strongly united on questions of Ukrainian national identity and language (Beissinger 2013, 587).

A similar pattern emerged nine years later. At first in December 2013, about half of the protesters in the Euromaidan came from the capital. However, by late January, western Ukrainians (representing 20% of the population) accounted for roughly half of the protesters in Kyiv (FDI 2014a). Certainly, as Olga Onuch (2014, 46, 48) has noted, demonstrations occurred *throughout* Ukraine –

including in the southern and eastern cities of Kharkiv, Odesa, and Dnipropetrovsk (Dnipro). However, a disproportionate share of protests was concentrated in Western Ukraine (CEDOS 2014). Just over half of western Ukrainians participated in the protests as compared to 17% of central Ukrainians and 2–4% of southern and eastern Ukrainians (FDI 2014b).

Overall, political competition in Ukraine was heavily shaped by divisions over national identity that dominated national politics – especially before the Russian invasion of 2014. Strong regional divisions helped to generate competing and relatively equal blocks of Russophile and Ukrainophile voters and frequent democratic turnovers. Indeed, all five Presidential electoral turnovers have involved transfers either from more Ukrainophile to more Russophile politicians (1994, 2010, and, in a different way, 2019¹³) or vice versa (2004 and 2014). Regionally polarized electorates in Ukraine hampered efforts by either side to monopolize control.¹⁴

In sum, the dispersal of economic resources and a relatively powerful Ukrainian nationalism provided opposition with significant resources as well as dedicated cadres to mount repeated and serious challenges to incumbent power in Ukraine.

The Sources of Durable Authoritarianism Under Lukashenka

By contrast, opposition in Belarus has faced much more difficult conditions. Centralized government control over the economy and relatively weak Belarusian nationalism – in addition to powerful security forces – have raised the costs of opposition activity and deprived opposition of critical support and protection.

Opposition in Belarus has most directly been undermined by Lukashenka's construction of a relatively powerful coercive apparatus and centralized economic control. The former head of a minor collective farm in the 1980s, Lukashenka came to power in 1994 as an outsider with few ties to the central power structures. His first actions as President were to secure control over the state. He toured numerous locales to pressure key local state officials into resigning in favor of other officials deemed more loyal to the new President (*Narodnaia Hazeta*, November 29, 1994, 1). He also began to infiltrate key central ministries, purged the leadership of the armed forces (*Krasnaya Zvezda*, August 17, 1994), and established a Security Council headed by his close associate Viktor Sheiman. Sheiman brought in a significant number of outsiders into the Belarusian Security forces (BKGB) with greater loyalty to Lukashenka (*Izvestiia*, February 15, 1995).

Lukashenka also increased the country's coercive capacity. In the first two years Lukashenka was in office, the share of government expenditures spent on security services doubled and became one of the biggest items in the budget (Karbalevich 2010, 393; *Izvestiia*, January 24, 1997; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, October 4, 2000). The Ministry of Internal Affairs grew to over 120,000 officers. As a result, Belarus became “one of the most militarized countries in the world” (Karbalevich 2010, 393; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, November 8, 2000; Neliupšienė and Beržiūnas 2013–2014, 206). Within the Ministry, separate police forces handle criminal law, public security, and anti-terrorism efforts. A number of these forces have been present in the repression of protest movements, including the OMON (the nation's riot police force), the Almaz anti-terrorism unit, the Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption (GUBOPik), the Internal Troops (a paramilitary gendarmerie force), and regional police affiliates.

Lukashenka has sought to control the security forces through a variety of mechanisms. First, the constitution gives the President direct control. The President has the right to appoint and dismiss Government Ministers, the Secretary of State of the Security Council, and the high command of the Armed Forces. (Konstitutsiia Respubliki Belarus' 1996, 84.7; 84.27–84.29). Belarusian military and police personnel swear allegiance not to the Republic of Belarus, but rather to Lukashenka directly (Burger and Minchuk 2006, 34).

Second, Lukashenka has sought to reduce autonomy by frequently rotating heads of security (Neliupšienė and Beržiūnas 2013–2014, 214; Nikolayenko 2015, 471). This is especially evident in times of crisis. Between August 2020 and February 2021, Lukashenka installed three different heads

of the Security Council of Belarus: Andrei Ravkov, previously the Minister of Defense of Belarus, Valery Vakulchik, previously the Chairman of the Investigative Committee of Belarus, and Alexander Volfovich, previously the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus.

Finally, like other post-Soviet leaders, Lukashenka has relied on the collection of *kompromat* to keep leaders of the security services in line (Darden 2008). ByPol, an organization founded by former members of Belarusian law enforcement, revealed that the government has been secretly wiretapping high-ranking members of law enforcement agencies (Starikovich 2021).

In turn, the security services have been central to Lukashenka's efforts to hold onto power. Following a large-scale crackdown on protest activity in 2010, the number of protest events in Belarus decreased from an average of 19.5 per year between 2000 and 2010 to 10.1 events per year from 2011 to 2019 (de Vogel 2022, 10). Protesters in 2020 were met with extreme, indiscriminate violence on the part of the security services, with one detainee stating that Belarusian police openly enjoyed beating protesters, using violence as a form of entertainment (Rozhanskiy, Chizova, and Scollon 2020). By February 2021, 2,300 people were targeted with criminal cases for participating in the protests (Viasna 2021).

While physical coercion clearly played a role in the suppression of the 2020 protests, it is less obvious that coercive capacity can account for the differences in political competition between Belarus and Ukraine. As discussed above, President Kuchma also built a relatively powerful police force and relied on blackmail and other tools to preserve cohesion in the upper elite (Darden 2008). While it is impossible to know for sure, the cohesion of the Belarusian security forces in 2020 can likely be traced to the fact that protesters failed to present as serious a threat to incumbent power as they did in Ukraine.

Instead, differences in the degree of government economic control provide a more promising explanation for these differences. Lukashenka's centralization of economic power has given the government powerful, nonviolent tools to punish opposition – making it substantially more costly to oppose the regime than in Ukraine. In contrast to many post-Soviet leaders, Lukashenka chose not to engage in large scale privatization in the 1990s, but instead rebuilt a highly centralized system of economic control that had collapsed under Gorbachev. Upon taking power, Lukashenka renationalized significant parts of the economy (Karbalevich 2010, 461–462; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, April 1, 2005). More than two decades after the collapse of Communism, the private sector in Belarus still accounted for just a third of GDP; while estimates from 1999 suggested that under 20% of the population was employed in the private sector – a degree of state control matched only by Turkmenistan in the former Soviet Union (EBRD n.d.).¹⁵

Government control over private and public enterprises was enhanced by agencies such as the Committee for Government Control (KGK), which provided a critical tool to control the economy. Appointed by the President, the KGK was responsible for auditing and collecting fines from a vast array of government agencies, private enterprises, opposition NGOs, and individual politicians (*Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, November 10, 2000; July 20, 2001; October 6, 2006). Lukashenka's subordinates possessed significant power over nominally private companies. From 1998 until 2008, the government instituted a “golden share” rule that gave the government significant control over enterprises in which it had *any* ownership share – rules that in 2004 were spread to all *previously* government-owned enterprises (Karbalevich 2010, 475; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, March 4, 2008). Government officials were able to dismiss heads of even private companies (Matsuzato 2004, 254; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, July 7, 2005; *Belorusskaia Delovaia Gazeta*, August 3, 2009).

Lukashenka's power over the economy was further enhanced by the creation in 1994 of a mammoth network of commercial enterprises and funds under his direct control – the Presidential Business Administration (UDP). Benefitting from significant tax and customs privileges, the UDP quickly became the largest commercial company in Belarus (Karbalevich 2010, 301, 299; also, Feduta 2005, 401; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, January 23, 2010). The UDP maintained a vast number of hotels and other state properties throughout the country and became the “biggest

landlord in the country” leasing space to thousands of commercial enterprises (*Izvestiia*, February 27, 1996; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, August 19, 2003).¹⁶

The UDP has been able to use its economic power to squeeze civil society and opposition groups leasing its ubiquitous properties (*Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, April 24, 2008). By dramatically increasing rent in the mid and late 2000s, the government made it nearly impossible for many groups to operate even in the absence of overt repression.

Direct government control over the economy also prevented the emergence of semi-independent oligarchs that provided critical support for opposition in Ukraine (Karbalevich 2010, 664). Instead, most wealthy individuals in Belarus have been directly employed by the state.¹⁷ Lukashenka never created a group of “oligarchs” with sufficient economic autonomy to defect to the opposition. As a result, Lukashenka had an easier time maintaining a cohesive ruling elite. In fact, commercial actors have faced a uniquely precarious existence under Lukashenka. Lukashenka has threatened private businesses with sanctions for their involvement in “politics” (*Belsat 2021a*). In 2001 alone, over 20,000 persons, including 400 enterprise directors, were charged with “economic crimes.” Roughly 8,500 entrepreneurs and enterprise directors – including heads of some of the country’s largest and most profitable companies – sat in jail in 2003 (*Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, June 10, 2003). A fifth of the prison population in Belarus in the mid-2000s reportedly consisted of former heads of state and private enterprises (*Charter 97 2006*).

During the 2020 crisis, Lukashenka continued to pursue businesses supporting opposition. Companies that expressed solidarity with the protest movement or participated in the nationwide strike on October 26, 2020 were targeted by Belarusian authorities with 90-day suspensions of business (*Belsat 2020a*) and inspections (*Belsat 2020b*). Employees of the IT Company PandaDoc were charged with economic crimes after the company’s founders financially supported the protest movement (*Belsat 2020c*), while Henadz Kireikau, the owner of a chain of grocery stores, was arrested due to the political activities of his store managers (*Belsat 2021b*). The treatment of enterprise directors, combined with near constant turnover and arrests of major government officials suspected to be working with opposition (*Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, December 4, 2001), made it nearly impossible for an even quasi-independent business class to emerge that might provide opposition with resources to challenge Lukashenka.

Finally, opposition has likely been weakened by the government’s control over employment. In 1999, a system of short-term contracts was introduced that allowed Lukashenka to target and punish individual activists – dramatically raising the costs of opposition (ITUC n.d.). The dominance of state employment and the contract system has meant that “individuals risk [ed] their livelihood” for opposition activity and forced many activists to work outside the formal sector (Rabagliati 2012). As of 2008, it was estimated that a thousand activists had been fired for opposition political activity (*Radyio Svaboda 2008*; *Belorusskaia delovaia gazeta*, June 29, 2001).

While some workers were able to engage in protest in August 2020, bureaucratic repression was quickly levied against them the following month (Artiukh 2021, 54). In November 2020, Belaruskali, a state-owned enterprise, dismissed 49 employees for their participation in strikes (Batalov 2020). Teachers and university professors were also punished for their support of the protests. Many were threatened with the non-renewal of their teaching contracts, or simply fired outright (Nevedomskaia 2021). As a result, professors hesitated to express solidarity with the protests out of fear of being fired or losing their university-provided housing (*Charter 97 2020*). This bureaucratic pressure continued into the fall, particularly as protests shrunk in size and worker participation became more sporadic (Artiukh 2021, 59).

Thus, one simple but powerful reason for the divergent fates of opposition in Belarus and Ukraine is that the Belarusian government has had far greater authoritarian control over society. As a result, opposition activity has been much more costly in Belarus than in Ukraine. While ordinary Belarusians initially overcame their fears of government reprisals, Lukashenka’s coercive and economic systems eventually demobilized all but the most dedicated activists (Marin 2020).

At the same time, authoritarian state building provides only a partial explanation for Belarusian opposition weakness. First, Ukrainian opposition in 2013–2014 remained powerful in the face of widespread repression that was arguably comparable to what occurred in Belarus. Furthermore, this explanation does not explain *why* Lukashenka was so easily able to construct a fully authoritarian system, while Kuchma and Yanukovich were not. It is not immediately clear that Lukashenka was a more autocratic leader than Ukraine's President Kuchma and Victor Yanukovich, who were linked to a range of repressive activities, including the beheading of a journalist in 2001 (Kuchma) and the massacre of protesters in 2014 (Yanukovich). Both leaders might also have been responsible for the poisoning of Yushchenko in 2004.

Lukashenka's successful imposition of authoritarian control can partially be explained by Belarus's weak national identity. Such weakness can be traced to the history of Belarusian literacy. According to Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006, 97), Belarusians gained initial literacy in the Russian language with a school curriculum that taught Russian and orthodox unity. As a result, in contrast to Ukraine, anti-Russian nationalism did not have strong support prior to the creation of the Soviet Union (Guthier 1977, 38; Wilson 2011, 79). Russophile attitudes have been far more pervasive than a Belarusian national identity centred around the rejection of Russian imperialism, which has been limited to a small minority, centered mostly in the capital (Wilson 2011, 125, 139).

The weakness of Belarusian identity helps to explain why, in contrast to Ukraine, anti-Russian Belarusian nationalists were not able to gain a majority in any significant part of the country. While anti-Russian Belarusian nationalists garnered greater support in the capital and on the border with Poland, they never managed to garner a majority in these places.¹⁸ As a result, opposition failed to take control over local institutions that provided critical support to protesters in Ukraine in the early 1990s. Belarusian activists have lacked any kind of stable base of operations equivalent to Galicia in Ukraine (Wilson 2011, 147).

Certainly, the collapse of the Soviet Union witnessed the emergence of a Belarusian nationalist movement, the anti-Russian Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), led by Zenon Pazniak. However, the BPF gained fewer seats than its counterpart (*Rukh*) in Ukraine in the 1990 republican legislative elections (8% compared to about 25%) (*Narodnaia Hazeta*, January 26, 1991, 2). Then, in the 1995 parliamentary elections – before Lukashenka had been able to consolidate authoritarian control – the BPF failed to win *any* seats. As a result, the nationalists were completely sidelined as a major contender for power by the mid-1990s (Wilson 2011, 151).

There is evidence that such weakness directly facilitated Lukashenka's successful authoritarian state building. Specifically, weak support for the BPF deprived Belarusian opposition of a motivated group of leaders in parliament willing to engage in risky behavior necessary to generate regime crisis when Lukashenka sought to monopolize political power. Thus in 1996, Lukashenka moved to shut down parliament and imposed a hyper Presidential regime. In part because there were no radical BPF deputies in the legislature, the parliamentary leadership responded in a relatively docile manner – refraining from large scale protest. While some called for more radical action, most deputies – former members of the Communist nomenklatura – remained passive (Anatolii Lebedko, interview with Way, July 12, 2004; Wilson 2011, 179). Part of the problem was that, in contrast to Ukraine, the opposition's challenge failed to tap into any ideological or other “deep basis of conflict” (Vladimir Novosiad, interview with Way, July 8, 2004). Instead, the opposition's fight with Lukashenka appeared to many to be a relatively inconsequential squabble among elites, which elicited little popular interest.

While it is impossible to know whether a strong presence of the nationalist BPF in parliament or a framing of the conflict as a fight for national survival could have effectively halted Lukashenka's efforts to monopolize power, the absence of nationalists certainly weakened the legislature's resistance. As a result, Lukashenka was able to completely sideline parliament and rule in a fully authoritarian manner after 1996. Far weaker than in Ukraine, the parliament in Belarus included almost no genuine opposition and remained a powerless rubber stamp throughout Lukashenka's

first decades in power. While not totally absent, opposition parties were weak and failed to generate a serious challenge to Lukashenka's power until 2020.

The weakness of anti-Russian nationalism deprived the opposition of critical resources to challenge incumbent power. In contrast to protests in Ukraine in 2004 and 2013–2014, the demonstrations in Belarus were not regularly fed by busloads of protesters from other parts of the country willing or able to camp out permanently in the center of the city. For example, while numerous institutions (university administrations, local police, private firms) in Kyiv and Western Ukraine actively supported opposition efforts, student activists in Belarus were left unprotected. Thus, after the Belarusian Student Association organized school strikes and a large student-led protest on September 1, 2020, students were expelled from university. Lukashenka's government responded with an "unprecedented" level of harassment and persecution. Over four hundred students were detained (Amnesty International, 2021). Thus, while it is impossible to directly observe the impact of weaker Belarusian nationalism, the contrast with Ukraine suggests that weaker identity undermined opposition efforts to overthrow Lukashenka. With greater institutional and regionally concentrated support, the Belarusian opposition might have been able to overcome the wave of repression that occurred in the fall of 2020 – just as the Ukrainian opposition overcame repression in 2013–2014.

Conclusion

Belarusian protests in 2020 were among the largest in Belarusian history. Yet they were ultimately unable to topple the regime. While some accounts trace the failure of democratic opposition to "patriarchal" Belarusian political culture, we suggest that the opposition was much more directly hampered by a dearth of resources and the fact that it confronted an autocrat with greater capacity to impose costs on dissident activity. Due in part to the country's relatively weak national identity, the opposition was never able to secure control over key public institutions as in Ukraine. As a result, the supporters of Tsikhanouskaya did not have any safe spaces to organize and draw on logistical support critical to mount a serious challenge. Simultaneously, Lukashenka's more centralized control over the economy and direct control over a large coercive apparatus allowed him to severely punish regime opponents in a way that his counterparts in Ukraine have not. Belarus has failed to democratize – not because Belarusians love freedom less than Ukrainians – but because challenging the regime required greater sacrifice.¹⁹

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Notes

- 1 Belarus witnessed significant demonstrations during the late Perestroika era: 15,000–20,000 in 1988; about 40,000 in 1989; and 40,000–100,000 in 1991. For estimates, see Benitsevich (2020). De Vogel (2022) estimates that total protest turnout between 2011 and 2019 was under 70,000.
- 2 On the importance of siege in revolutions, see Beissinger (2022).
- 3 This term was used by Lukashenka to describe his victory in 2001 (Birch 2001).
- 4 See ODIHR (2001; 2006; 2010; 2015).
- 5 Such protests included one against the prospects of a Russian-Belarusian union in April 1996 and following elections in 2006 and 2010 (Benitsevich 2020).
- 6 Following their coverage of the 2020 election, Belarusian authorities blocked access to a number of opposition websites, including *Tut.by*. While the website is no longer available, a number of *Tut.by*'s articles are available through internet archives.
- 7 "Belarusian Opposition in 'Status Quo' Survival Mode," *Belarus Digest*, February 12, 2012.
- 8 World Bank World Development Indicators.

- 9 Poll cited in US Embassy Cable, June 14, 2007.
- 10 See for example, Eke and Kuzio (2000); Rudling (2008).
- 11 See Rustow (1970, 350–351); Lijphart (1977, 1); Glazer (2010, 5). Rudling (2008, 55) suggests that Belarusians lack strong “identification with national institutions.” But it is not clear why this should undermine democracy. Indeed, as Mark Beissinger (2013) has shown, even supporters of the Orange Revolution were not unified in supporting democratic institutions.
- 12 Harasymiw (2002, 185, 200); *Nezavisimost'*, August 17, 1994, 1, 2; *Nezavisimost'*, February 10, 1995, 5.
- 13 By 2019, the Russian invasion meant that Ukrainian politicians stopped running on closer ties to the Russian government. However, Zelensky, a Russophone from Central Ukraine, campaigned for a more moderate approach to issues of Ukrainian language and memory politics. See Nahaylo (2020).
- 14 One reviewer raised the question of whether splits in identity might weaken opposition by undermining opposition unity, a factor seen as important in the success of liberalizing elections (Howard and Roessler 2006). In fact, while the Ukrainian electorate was clearly divided at least until 2014, these divisions did *not* prevent politicians from moving into opposition and thus did not seem to reduce opposition unity by any significant amount.
- 15 In 2004, the government owned each of the country’s 14 most profitable companies (US Embassy Cable 2006a).
- 16 In the late 1990s, UDP had 13,000 employees. (*Russkii Telegraf*, February 5, 1998).
- 17 Thus, at least 41 of top 50 “oligarchs” were state officials or worked for state companies (US Embassy Cable 2006b).
- 18 In the 1994 presidential elections, Pazniak’s support was a bit higher in Grodno on the Polish border but did not come close to reaching 50%.
- 19 Indeed, preferences for democracy in Belarus appeared to be *higher* than in Ukraine. See Haerpfer (2005, 177).

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